

**Contesting “Mitteleuropa,” the Middle European Idea in German
Political Thought between Liberalism and Nationalism, 1880-1919**

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This dissertation by James Q. Wang is accepted by the Department
of History as satisfying the requirement for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy.

Date: July 27, 2021



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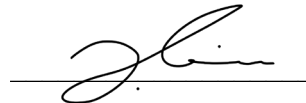
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Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to my committee members, Omer Bartov, Holly Case, and Benjamin Hein for their support in helping me finish this dissertation during particularly troubling and difficult times. I am especially thankful for the mentorship and advice of my main adviser, Omer Bartov. In my many years at Brown University and throughout my research time abroad, he has always been responsive, supportive, and quick to offer a much-needed encouragement. I was, and still am, awed by his command of the field, from which I have learned tremendously over the years – not only about the past, but also crucial lessons on how to live in the present and ways to think about the future. He is an ideal adviser, a person of true compassion, and a gifted teacher; I feel incredibly grateful for having had the opportunity to study with him. I would also like to heartily thank Holly Case whose guiding mentorship and inspiring intellect have shaped me since my undergraduate days in Cornell. Our conversations have profoundly shaped my intellectual development. Benjamin Hein very kindly agreed to come on as a reader for this dissertation even though I came to him for assistance very late in the writing process. For this, and for his insightful questions and always-helpful feedback, I am sincerely grateful. A special thanks as well to Mary Gluck. Although the circumstances of the pandemic have made it impossible for her to continue on my committee, I am very thankful for her supervision, feedback, and support in the early stages of my writing and research. From her I have learned much about the field of Habsburg history and developed a greater appreciation for the nuances of Central European history. Ethan Pollock deserves a heartfelt thanks for his guidance through Russian and Soviet history as well as for his pedagogical advice. A heartfelt thanks as well to Isabel Hull at Cornell, who first encouraged and fostered my interest in German history.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the many institutions and funding bodies who have made my research and writing possible. Apart from the generous help of the History Department and Graduate School, I have also received grants from Brown's Joukowsky Institute, the Watson Institute for International Studies, and the Center for Judaic Studies. Similarly, I am grateful for the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for their dissertation research grant and for their generous support for research on all subjects Germany-related. Historians are nothing without archives and the archivists in the German State Archives deserve a special mention for their immense help and patience with me over the many months of consultation.

I would lastly like to thank my friends and family who have supported me through the better part of the last decade. My friends in the History Department, Harry Merritt, Ann Daly, Heather Sanford, Julia Gettle, Dan McDonald, Diego Luis, Simeon Simeonov, Emily Roche, Aaron Jacobs, Juan Betancourt, Fernando Norat, Brooke Grasberger, Stacey Murrell, and Jorge Rosario-Rosario have made the oftentimes lonely endeavor of doctoral study less daunting. I am also grateful to Morris Karp, Pablo a Marca, and Alessandro Moghrabi for introducing me to the Europe beyond *Mitteleuropa*. My years spent with these friends at Brown have been some of the most of my life. My wife, Grazia, has helped me through the most difficult period of my project. Her patience, love, and care were an indispensable source of comfort over the past two years. I have always found great pleasure, solace, and inspiration from our conversations. Finally, my parents have always cheered me on, despite their own reservations about my obsession with history and with Central Europe. They have sacrificed much for the sake of my education, and I am incredibly grateful to them.

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Introduction

Between the 1880s and 1914 several different Mitteleuropa concepts were developed by German thinkers. As discussed in chapter one, many German thinkers in the Reich saw the idea of Mitteleuropa as an extension of the project of German reunification, tracing a continuity from the Zollverein of the 1840s which paved the economic groundwork for eventual political unification. With the signing of the armistice, many of the earlier Austria-German proponents of Mitteleuropa shifted their emphasis towards the explicitly political goal of Anschluss. They effectively reiterated Kaiser Wilhelm's 1918 argument that whatever the fate of Central Europe, the first step for Germany (even in defeat) was to establish a union with Austria, which would serve as a future axis around which plans for remaking Mitteleuropa can be realized. Radicalized by the wartime experiences of blockade and privation, Mitteleuropa in the 1920s and 30s briefly became the exclusive purview of German political geographers, many of whom had themselves fought at the front and experienced the trauma of defeat. For academic geographers like Alfred Hettner and Richard Bitterling, Mitteleuropa was first and foremost a matter of economic, organizational, and military importance – its survival as a concept in German political and right-wing academic circles a cautionary tale of sorts to remind revanchists of Germany's failure in the First World War.¹ As such, the concept's resurgent popularity under the Nazis by the late-1930s seems to have been almost a foregone conclusion.

Yet even if the discourse of Mitteleuropa had become effectively monopolized by the Nazis by the end of the 1930s, the path from the Mitteleuropa discussed before and during the First World War to the Second World War was neither direct nor singular. At its heart,

¹ Alfred Hettner, *Mitteleuropa: Ihre Geographie, Geschichte und Wesen*, (Heidelberg, 1925); Richard Bitterling, *Mitteleuropa und Deutschtum*, (Berlin, 1924).

Mitteleuropa reflected a broadly German idea of Europeanization and was thus a distinctively German answer (or answers) to perhaps the central political question in twentieth century Europe – as Tony Judt phrased it, “how should Europe make itself?”² Decades of historical research has now shown that the history of Europeanization is significantly more varied than a triumphalist narrative of liberal Europe turning away from its nationalist past to heroically forge the European Union of the present. As John Christian Bailey has argued, the history of Europeanization is foremost a recounting of a “European spatial idea” and the coming to terms of a common self-consciousness stemming from the cohabitation of that space. Thus the myriad precedents to the present European project, no matter how problematic, must all be taken into consideration. Indeed, the difficult assimilation of the countries of East-Central Europe into the European Union after 1989 as well as the more recent rise of populist and nationalist forces in Europe and America has given further impetus to understanding the European project from a more illiberal historical perspective.

Within German history, Mitteleuropa is thus significant as an avowedly non-Western and oftentimes illiberal version of Europeanism. Its conception within German political and economic thinking expressed the contradictory desires of pre-Imperial, Imperial and post-Imperial Germany, whose leaders combined a desire for unity, bigger markets and economic cooperation with an opposition to integration in favor of national autonomy. Moreover, the beginning of German thinking on Mitteleuropa coincided with the genesis of the European idea more generally at the turn of the century. As historians like Victoria de Grazia and Vanessa Conze have argued, the idea that some form of European market integration was necessary to compete with the economic “super blocs” of Britain, America, and potentially Russia was not

² Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), p. 13.

unique to Germany; in many ways, the pace of globalization in the decades leading up to 1914 had made this the advent of the European idea appear almost inevitable in hindsight.³ Yet nowhere else in Europe was the debate over Europeanization historically more fraught with anxiety over the nation's political destiny as in Germany. In the decades before 1914 and during the First World War, *Mitteleuropa*, as a German attempt at Europeanism, ultimately became an attempt to negotiate the near-irreconcilable tensions between economic integration and national sovereignty, ethnic pluralism and security, democracy and authoritarianism.

In a foreshadowing of interwar Austrian economic thought, the precedents of *Mitteleuropäische* ideas could be found in German-Austrian advocates in the early-nineteenth century who proposed a series of German, Swiss and Italian federations that would reconcile the demands of political nationalism with the economic rationale for transnational economic formations. Similar to all subsequent *Mitteleuropa* proposals, such arguments were prompted by fears of American and Russian economic and political domination expressed as early even as 1843 in the influential *Catholic Historische und politischen Blätter* (HPB) and in 1859 in Julius Frobel's *Amerika, Europa und die politische Gesichtspunkt der Gegenwart*. The HPB's editor argued that Prussia and Austria should unify, in order to provide a *Mittelstellung* between East and West, while Frobel, along with, for instance, the French economic liberal G. von Molinari, championed a central Europe that would extend to France and indeed face the threat from the extra-European West under French leadership.⁴

³ Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth Century Europe*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Vanessa Conze, *Europa der Deutschen: Ideen von Europa in Deutschland zwischen Reichstradition und Westorientierung* (1920-1970), (München, 2005).

⁴ Peter Stirk, 'The Idea of *Mitteleuropa*' in Stirk, *Mitteleuropa*, p. 1; P. Kriiger, 'Europabewusstsein in Deutschland in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts' in Hudemann, Kaebler and Schwabe, *Europa im Blick der Historiker*, pp. 33-34.

As will be discussed in chapter one, such visions of an integrated central Europe continued to win the allegiance of intellectuals and politicians until the First World War and beyond, despite the economic realities of the early twentieth century making the US and Canada a larger market for Germany by 1914 than the Habsburg Empire and the rest of the Balkans combined. Indeed, the *Mitteleuropäische Wirtschaftsverein* was founded in 1904 and included some of Kaiser Wilhelm's favorite intellectuals. Furthermore, when Bethmann-Hollweg drafted his war-aims programme his fourth point envisaged "a central European economic association through common customs treaties to include France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Austria-Hungary, Poland and perhaps Italy, Sweden and Norway." 'This association' would 'not have any common constitutional supreme authority and all its members would be formally equal, but in practice would be under German leadership and must stabilize Germany's economic dominance over *Mitteleuropa*.'⁵ This tension between economic "rationalization" and cooperation between the wartime Central Powers on the one hand, and the desire for preserving German security on the other will be the main focus of Chapter two; it will cover the development of the *Mitteleuropa* in the first two years of the First World War and trace the opposition between economic cooperation and geopolitical security which proponents of *Mitteleuropa* struggled to navigate until Tsarist Russia's collapse in 1917.

Chapter three turns to the Allied blockade of Germany, privation on the home front, and widespread hunger in Central Europe as another major wartime exigency that decisively influenced the concept of *Mitteleuropa*. While historians have long noted the relationship between the so-called "Hunger Blockade" of the First World War and subsequent Nazi visions of an agrarian empire in Eastern Europe, this continuity becomes complicated when seen through

⁵ BA/SA Lichterfelde R43/2398 (Band I), 193.

the history of Mitteleuropa. While hunger at home did indeed feed the colonial fantasies of völkisch nationalists and militarists, it also strengthened the hand of pro-integrationists and liberals who argued that the fastest escape from the food shortage was cross-border integration of resource supply chains across East-Central Europe. Furthermore, the widespread suffering of soldiers and civilians alike across Central Europe made the political establishments of Germany and the Habsburg Empire more responsive to demands for domestic political reform, a major topic of chapter four. Focusing on the “Bread Peace” of Brest-Litovsk, chapter four shows that, by 1917, debate over Mitteleuropa and integration in East-Central Europe had become inextricably linked to the tense issue of political reform within Germany: ironically, both the left and center parties in Germany as well as the pro-annexationist military leadership had come to regard Mitteleuropa as a form of German expansion eastwards, which would in turn prompt political transformation domestically. While that logic is traditionally associated with the German far-right, German liberals and even moderate socialists embraced this conception of Mitteleuropa as a strategic expedient – a trojan horse for introducing political reforms within the Reich. The final chapter concludes with some observations regarding the legacy of Mitteleuropa in Germany and Europe after 1918. It shows that the concept had become racialized, even prior to the rise of Nazism in the late-1920s and traces its impact on Carl Schmitt’s influential idea of Grossraum in the 1930s. Ultimately, although the concept of Mitteleuropa had roots in German liberalism from the 19th century, the radicalizing experience of the First World War had shifted its political connotations into an almost exclusively nationalist and racist discourse.

Writing on the eve of German reunification in the summer of 1989, Timothy Garton Ash noted that “one of the major unresolved tensions in the contemporary debate about ‘Central Europe’ is the strain between the visions, proposals, and half-demands of Hungarian, Czech,

and... Polish intellectuals and political activists, on the one hand, and those of West German intellectuals and politicians on the other hand.”⁶ He rather succinctly summarized a perennial quandary in the history of the region. Central Europe encapsulates not just a large territory of diverse peoples, cultures, and histories but, historically, all the visions and proposals aiming to integrate the heart of continental Europe closer together has run against the dual dilemmas of disproportionate German power and the aspirations of the “small nations” who resist being drawn into a centralizing framework. For much of the first half of the twentieth century, Germans elites tended to regard Germany as the “natural” core around which a new Central European order would be built. In this context, Mitteleuropa offered the tempting prospect of both Europeanism while also enhancing German sovereign power, albeit at the cost of those very “small nations” that also share the same Central European space. In this regard, the story of Mitteleuropa is also a universal history of the difficulties in navigating the political and economic modernity that we still very much inhabit today.

⁶ Timothy Garton Ash, “Mitteleuropa?” *Daedalus*, Winter 1990, vol 119 (1), p. 1.

Chapter I

The Origins of Mitteleuropa

Liberalism and Economics between the German Empire and Austria-Hungary before the Great War

Mitteleuropa occupies a peculiar place in the history of Modern Germany. The connotations of the term are problematically ambiguous, at once belying a geographic area broader than just the zones of historically German settlement, while still remaining profoundly rooted in a uniquely German sense of identity. The notion of a culturally distinct "middle Europe" originated in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars as a German "proto-nationalist but above-all romantically conceived current" against the expansion of French and Russian power into Germany and Central Europe.⁷ Moreover, the political connotations of a German "near abroad" in Central Europe have also oscillated in the first half of the twentieth century between liberal visions for pan-European cooperation and subsequent understandings of Mitteleuropa as a German aspiration to become a continental *Grossmacht*. It must have been in the latter vein that the first West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer explicitly rejected the legacy of *Mitteleuropa* as a cultural and political project in the postwar period, famously proclaiming that "Asia begins at the Elbe." Indeed there is a certain irony inherent in Adenauer's seemingly blanket rejection of the Middle European idea given that West Germany's first chancellor regarded himself as inheriting the Christian-Democratic and broadly liberal political tradition which German National Liberals like Friedrich Naumann had championed during the course of the First World War. While Adenauer's pursuit of "Western integration" (*Westbindung*) at the cost of reconciliation with East European states reflected a clear strategic calculus in the context of the early Cold War, the chancellor appeared to have genuinely

⁷ Henry Cord Meyer, "Mitteleuropa in German Political Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (1946), p. 181.

believed that Central and Eastern Europe – popularly delineated as beginning on the eastern banks of the Elbe River – represented a historical tradition and experience at odds with the then ongoing effort to reconstruct West Germany along liberal and democratic lines. In the aftermath of the Third Reich’s collapse and German defeat in two World Wars, Adenauer’s apocryphal muttering of “Asia!” upon every crossing of the Elbe reflected a deep-rooted mistrust among many German liberals towards the geographic heart of Europe, which supposedly contained not only the lingering historical residues of authoritarian Prussian militarism and its supposed tradition of “an Asiatic obedience” to state authority, but also the disastrous allure of colonial empire in Eastern Europe.⁸

In linking political ideology with a historically derived conception of space and territoriality, Adenauer’s geopolitical thinking in the postwar period fits comfortably within a longer German intellectual tradition that regarded political ideology and nationalism as inseparable from geography.⁹ While this is to an extent true for all national movements, scholars of German nationalism have also emphasized the remarkable intensity with which German politicians have attributed differing political orientations to distinctive notions of geographic space throughout Modern German history.¹⁰ Since at least the French Revolution, competing geographical visions for Germans’ orientation fluctuated between Western Europe and “the world” as opposed to turning eastwards and southwards towards the continent; as a recurrent leitmotif of Modern German history, this geographic salient repeatedly intersected in the past two centuries with the discourse of German nationalism and debates concerning the nature of the German state. Thus, from 1806 until 1918, this contested spatiality manifested first as the struggle between French revolutionary democracy versus Prussian autocracy before mutating into the

⁸ Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik: Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit*, (Munich: C.H. Beck Vrlg., 2012), pp. 37-39.

⁹ German nationalism at the intersection of geography and politics is succinctly summarized by Alon Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁰ More recent works on this subject include F. B. Schenk, "Mental Maps: Die Konstruktion von geographischen Räumen in Europa seit der Aufklärung," in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, J.28, H. 3 (2002), and Hans Dietrich Schulz's earlier "Deutschlands 'natürliche' Grenzen. 'Mittellage' und 'Mitteleuropa' in der Diskussion der Geographen und Nationalismus seit dem Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, J.15, H.2 (1989).

Grossdeutsch versus *Kleindeutsch* debates over national unification and culminating in the divergent visions of first imperial *Weltpolitik* (“World Politics”) and the contestation over what *Mitteleuropa* would actually look like after 1914.

Originally framed as an irredentist nationalist endeavor, the struggle for a “German” *Mitteleuropa* represented a continuation of the unresolved tensions surrounding the mid-nineteenth century “German Question,” namely between the incompleteness of Bismarck's *kleindeutsch* solution and the persistent temptation for a Greater Germany encompassing all ethnic Germans.¹¹ Yet, in the context of pre-1914 global imperial competition and economic globalization, and above all during the years of the First World War, *Mitteleuropa* in the German political lexicon assumed the role of an ambiguous semantic catchall that reflected deeper differences in opinion over Germany's role vis-à-vis Europe and the world. Tellingly, between 1914 and 1918, *Mitteleuropa* was invoked by groups as different as the Liberals and Social Democrats in Germany and Austria-Hungary as an oppositional term to both Russian autocracy and unfettered American capitalism, by the völkisch Pan-Germans as a geographic zone for colonial settlement, and by an assortment of wartime Allied propagandistic organs “revealing” supposed German intentions for wide-ranging annexation from the North Sea to Baghdad.¹² Whether framed in terms of customs union and economic coordination, völkisch racial fantasy, Realpolitik strategic vision, or conservative-militarist bastion, the idea of an unfulfilled “middle-Europe” which gained prominent traction in the first decades of the twentieth century was, from the outset, torn between competing

¹¹ John Boyer, “Some Reflections on the Problem of Austria, Germany, and Mitteleuropa,” *Central European History*, vol. 22, No. 3/4, (Dec. 1989), p. 303. Woodruff Smith also discusses the influence of “middle Europe” as ethnic political geography on National Socialist ideology; Woodruff Smith, *Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 31-33.

¹² For more on *Mitteleuropa* as oppositional semantics in historical memory, see especially Julian Paenke ed., *Gegenwart der Vergangenheit: die politische Aktualität historischer Erinnerungen in Mitteleuropa*, (Nomos Verlag: Baden-Baden, 2007).

impulses - between outright domination versus limited hegemony, economic planning versus expropriation, liberal parliamentarism versus authoritarian militarism.

Mitteleuropa between Berlin and Vienna: Austro-German Economic Engagement until 1914 and the Economic Limits of Mitteleuropa

As Imperial Germany's only major ally by the beginning of the twentieth century, Austria-Hungary was the sine qua non in German thinking regarding coordinated Central European economies. The two decades prior to the outbreak of war saw the Habsburg territories become increasingly dependent on German capital investment for infrastructure development as well as for shoring up a healthy balance of payments, while German financiers and industrialists came to regard Austria-Hungary as both an avenue for expansion into the Near-East as well as a space for "safe" investment. An overview of German prewar investment highlights Austria-Hungary's peculiar role in German foreign investment. In 1895, by absolute terms, Austria ranked second only to the United States as the chief *state* destination for German investment with some 2.8 billion Reichsmark tied up in projects and enterprises within Hapsburg territories, versus 3.1 billion in the United States.¹³ By 1914, the pattern of German foreign investment had clearly shifted towards a greater emphasis on overseas ventures. Here the most spectacular growth was in Latin America, from 3.1 to 3.8 billion Reichsmark, and North America, which saw total German capital rise to 3.7 billion Reichsmark: in contrast, German holdings in the Dual Monarchy remained stable, slowing increasing to just 3.0 billion Reichsmark in the same period.¹⁴

The chief significance of the Austro-German investment relationship lay rather in the changing nature of German economic engagement. Until the 1880s, the most profitable German investment in the area

¹³ BA/SA Lichterfelde N2032, 11,12.

¹⁴ Ibid.

was with the development of rail infrastructure in the relatively underdeveloped Transleithania.¹⁵ Despite the more modest returns in comparison with overseas ventures in Latin America and increasingly in the Ottoman Empire, the rapid expansion of east-west transit in foodstuffs from Hungary to Austria as well as the increase in the north-south export of German finished manufacture to Transleithania and the Balkans was sufficient to cover the collapsing cost of overland freight costs and continued to post positive returns until the first years of the 1890s.¹⁶ This, combined with the political ties of the Dual Alliance, its geographic proximity, the relatively impartial legal structures within the Dual Monarchy, and above all Germany's relative head-start in industrialization, established "Habsburg Middle Europe" as a "safe" zone for capital investment. Representative of this pattern, of the five major German banking conglomerates - the *Disconto-Gesellschaft*, *Darmstädter Bank*, *Berliner-Handelgesellschaft*, *Dresdner Bank*, and *Deutsche Bank*, all either directly owned significant shares (defined as in excess of twenty percent of total foreign investment assets including in partnership with separate industries) in Austrian development ventures or otherwise entered into partnerships with the larger Austrian financial establishments to acquire substantial interests in newer investment projects.¹⁷

The period between 1880 and 1914 saw a series of attempts at a closer economic union between the Germany and Austria-Hungary. During this period, the primary impetus for a clear political and economic coordination of the two economies came from the Austro-Hungarian side.¹⁸ Nationalist economic circles (primarily in Austrian Cisleithania) as well as the Austro-Hungarian foreign ministry considered the potentially negative effect of German economic penetration on industrial development in the Dual Monarchy as offset by the chiefly political benefits of economic coordination in "opening up"

¹⁵ Georg Hardach, *Deutschland in der Weltwirtschaft 1870-1970: Eine Einführung in die Sozial und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1977).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁷ Stolper, *German Economy 1870 to the Present*, pp. 33-34. For example, in addition to its direct holdings, Deutsche Bank in 1899 partnered with an Austrian bank to acquire controlling interest in the *Betriebsgesellschaft für Orientalische Eisenbahnen*.

¹⁸ Meyer, *Mitteleuropa*, pp. 58-59.

the lower Danubian region.¹⁹ Against the backdrop of still lingering anxieties in both Austria and Germany over a re-strengthening of protectionist measures, several Austrian economists along with the politicians Eduard Plener and Reinhardt Pernerstorfer petitioned the Austrian Chamber of Commerce in 1885, arguing customs unions with Germany as a means of maintaining Cisleithania's industrial edge over Hungary (as a preliminary blow in favor of positive renegotiation of the Ausgleich in 1887).²⁰ The same impetus for closer economic union with Germany was in play in Hungary as well. As early as 1880 the Hungarian politician and businessman Guido von Bausnern petitioned Bismarck in favor of customs union, claiming that, "the only lasting solution to the economic difficulties arising between the two halves of the Danubian monarchy... lay in a customs union with Germany," which would even out the unequal pattern of economic development between the Trans- and Cisleithania.²¹ The overt political undertones implicit in these aspirations for customs union evidenced that the contours of an economically grounded conception of Mitteleuropa had emerged.

In the neo-mercantilist atmosphere of increasing protectionism, German and pro-German economists in both the Reich and Austria-Hungary also resorted to arguments in favor of Middle European economics as a basis for economic autarky. Echoing Walther Rathenau's wartime suggestions for closer industrial coordination between the two allies, the pro-German Magyar economist and investor Gez Lukács in 1900 framed the case for Middle European economic cooperation as a "natural" response to the increasing consolidation of the world market into major enclosed trading blocs:

The last fifty years has seen the world coalesce into a few enormous economic units [i.e. Britain, America, and increasingly Russia]. It is easy to see that, as Hungary and Austria complement each other perfectly in economic union, so then Germany and Austria-Hungary should seek closer

¹⁹ Max-Stephan Schulze, "Origins of Catch-Up Failure: Comparative Growth in the Hapsburg Empire, 1870-1910," *European Review of Economic History*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2007), p. 191.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.

²¹ Heinrich Hoffmann ed., *Fürst v. Bismarck: Quellen und Gespräche vol. i*, (Stuttgart, 1913), pp. 124-125.

bonds that would strengthen each other...[especially because] The Balkans are a natural outlet for the commerce of Vienna and Berlin, and there they should lay aside their competition and stand together against other nations. Perhaps the existence of a common enemy will be needed to bind Germany and Austria-Hungary economically more firmly to each other... In a not too distant future the actions of other states may force us more closely together than the most enthusiastic protagonists of the idea of a Middle European customs union have ever dreamed.²²

As Lukács further elaborated, this Austro-German nucleus for Mitteleuropa already possessed the potential for self-sufficiency given that the extensive grain-producing regions of Hungary could sustain the booming industrial populations of Austria and Germany. Furthermore, exploiting the perceived German drive towards the Near-East, he argued that Austro-Hungarian political weight would enable the "complete opening up" of the relatively undeveloped markets in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, thereby "firmly establishing Middle Europe beyond Anglo-dominance... and detaching Bulgaria and Romania from [Russia]."²³

Despite the emergence of a "Middle European" idea in Germany and Austria-Hungary in the first decade of the twentieth century, it was nonetheless contrary to both the actual pattern of (especially) German economic development before 1914, and lacked sufficient political will in both Vienna and Berlin to become a truly viable option.²⁴ As we have seen, despite the significant role played by German industry and finance in the economic development of the Dual Monarchy, as a destination for German capital export, Austria-Hungary remained at best a secondary alternative - initially a "low revenue credit safe" and increasingly after 1890, a junior partner for driving further east towards more lucrative

²² Geza Lukács as cited in A. Kohut, *Die handelspolitische Interessengemeinschaft zwischen dem deutschen Reich und Österreich-Ungarn*, (Munich: Das neue Europa, 1917), p. 14.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁴ Hardach, *German Political Economy*, p. 21.

opportunities in the Ottoman Empire.²⁵ But the collapse of land transit revenues (i.e. railroad freight fares) on account of the commensurate rise of overseas shipping as by far the cheapest alternative further undercut the attractiveness of any decisive German economic turn towards Central Europe.²⁶

Indeed, the first blows to railroad investment began in the late 1880s with a series of defaults on several major development projects in first Hungary.²⁷ The opening up of oil fields in Austrian Galicia and the lucrative possibility of developing new Romanian oil at the turn of the century partially offset these losses and accounted for the overall stability in German investments in East-Central Europe.²⁸ Even so, the general trend in German capital movement before the outbreak of war (and despite the ratcheting up of international tensions) was still away from Middle Europe: of the sum total of around twenty billion marks Germany invested abroad in 1900, the clear bulk went overseas to America and Germany's colonies in Asia and Africa (amounting to over sixty percent) whereas the Dual Monarchy and the East European countries accounted for only a fifth of total investment.²⁹ By 1914, whereas investment in Austria-Hungary had essentially flat-lined, German capital exports continued to expand towards the United States and Latin America, following previous trends of favorable investment return.³⁰

The economic writing on the wall was thus relatively clear. Short of a major political crisis, that is to say war, cutting off existing German avenues of foreign investment, the most profitable, and hence the natural pattern of German foreign investment was increasingly overseas. The primary effect of this pattern of German investment was rather a broadening of the horizons of political imagination. From the

²⁵ Stolper, *The German Economy 1870 to the Present*, p. 36.

²⁶ Alexander Basch, *The Danube Basin and the German Economic Sphere*, (New York: Macmillan, 1953), pp. 7-10.

²⁷ Karl Born, *Geld und Banken im 19 und 20 Jahrhundert*, (Stuttgart, 1976), pp. 171-172,

²⁸ Alison Fleig Frank, *Oil Empire: Vision of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 49-50.

²⁹ Stolper, *Germany Economy*, p. 33. Figures taken from *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das deutsch Reich*, vol. I, 1880-1914.

³⁰ Hardach, *The Political Economy of Germany in the Twentieth Century*, p.7.

German perspective, despite the comparatively limited extent of its investments in *Mitteleuropa*, the patterns of its engagement - particularly with regards to Austria-Hungary - nevertheless raised the political possibility of economic reorientation towards the continental hinterland as an escape from the geo-political security dilemma posed by economic globalization.

The Liberal: Friedrich Naumann's Mitteleuropa and the Annexation Debate

From German unification in 1871 until the outbreak of the First World War, a major strand of German liberal discourse conceived of domestic political issues and broader European political geography as fundamentally interrelated, with the sphere of the external geopolitics accommodating veiled aspirations for domestic political reform. Indeed, although Friedrich Naumann is most famous among contemporary historians as the author of the *Mitteleuropa* program, he was also highly influential in Wilhelmine Germany as a social theorist whose political thinking comprised the first attempt by a liberal politician to reconcile previously narrow middle-class politics with the emerging reality of mass social-democracy. I argue that Naumann's programmatic geopolitical treatise urging Imperial Germany to adopt a cooperative spirit vis-à-vis its Central European neighbors in fact derived from his earlier attempts to engineer a political framework for reconciling elite politics with political-economic modernization; in turn, Naumann's vision for a German sphere of influence in Middle Europe reflected wider liberal dissatisfaction with the repressive state of domestic German politics during the war. In short, liberal German politicians in the Wilhelmine period ultimately projected their anxieties stemming from socio-economic modernization and globalization outwards onto an imaginary of a future Middle European union led by Germany.³¹ The broader pattern of this engagement – the displacement of German domestic

³¹ For example Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871-1918*, (Berg: New York, 1997) and Fritz Fischer's seminal *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegzielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914-1918*, (Droste Verlag: Hamburg, 1961).

dysfunctionality outwards - while reminiscent of the older Bielefeld-style historiography also demonstrates that certain conceptions of *Mitteleuropa* were borne from Germany's liberal political traditions as opposed to simply an expression of conservative frustrations or narrow German national self-interest.

The career of Friedrich Naumann (1860-1919) is particularly paradigmatic. Born into a theological family (his father was a Lutheran minister) on the Saxon border with Bohemia in 1860, Naumann would subsequently enjoy a political career in the German Reichstag, having successfully stood for election in a district in Württemberg in 1907. In his often seemingly contradictory political opinions, Naumann like his contemporary Max Weber, embodied the political culture of the educated National Liberal middle class. While a vehement supporter of German imperialism and the trappings of *Weltpolitik*, Naumann was nevertheless also critical of the limited Monarchism of the Wilhelmine political establishment and campaigned for an increased role for the national parliament.³² Naumann became the leader of the National-Social Association, a centrist-liberal lobbying group in 1896 and in 1908 emerged as a leading figure in the German Democratic Party, a spiritual precursor to the postwar Christian Democratic movement. However, he is perhaps most famous both within Germany and abroad, for his long 1915 essay "*Mitteleuropa*," which many historians have regarded as a thinly-masked effort at legitimating German annexationist aims at the height of the First World War.³³

Naumann's conception of *Mitteleuropa* that subsequently coalesced during the First World War to become the most widely read non-governmental manifesto on the subject, likely emerged in the prewar period from his long-standing anxieties over the perceived erosion of German "cultural distinctiveness" in

³² Julian Paenke, "Einleitung," in Julian Paenke ed., *Gegenwart der Vergangenheit: die politische Aktualität historischer Erinnerungen in Mitteleuropa*, (Nomos Verlag: Baden-Baden, 2007), p 3.

³³ See for example Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980); D. Diiding, *Der Nationalsozialer Verein 1896-1903* (München 1972).

the context of economic globalization.³⁴ Like his lifelong friend and liberal associate Max Weber, Naumann harbored what can be considered representative “National Liberal” fears regarding the “polinisation” of German agricultural labor; writing to Weber in 1905, Naumann noted that the cross-border mobility of Polish peasants and the relative economic impoverishment in Polish lands was leading to a “veritable flood of Poles” that threatened to extinguish the “Germanness” (*deutsche Kulturboden*) of Prussia.³⁵ While such anxieties were not unusual in late Wilhelmine Germany, Naumann did not resort to the rhetoric of right-wing *völkisch* nationalism when seeking a political solution. Rather, in a 1905 political pamphlet distributed among liberal circles, Naumann recognized that the free movement of labor, like the political ascendancy of Social-Democracy, was an “irreversible reality of current German national life.”³⁶ These largely conciliatory remarks comprise an early indication of Naumann’s subsequently characteristic political project to bridge the gap between the conservative and the modern by developing a liberal German nationalism adapted to its industrial and capitalist environment.

As one of Naumann’s associates, Helmuth von Gerlach, noted in 1907 (after Naumann’s successful election to the Reichstag), “He [Naumann] was never one to suppose a final accomplishment (*fertiger*) but rather saw in the ‘ever developing’ reality (*werdende Wirklichkeit*) the opportunity to accomplish change.”³⁷ As a pragmatist, Naumann’s political thinking highlights the recognition by a prominent liberal that the modern German nation constituted a singular historically-rooted cultural unit on the one hand and a complex plurality riven by socio-economic cleavages on the other, and as such, required both “time and space” to reconcile its internal contradictions. Naumann’s novel theoretical response to this dilemma of modernization was to define the national state as a large corporate enterprise

³⁴ In contrast, Bethmann-Hollweg’s infamous September Memorandum advocated for sweeping annexations in France and the Low Countries in conjunction with economic union as a narrow means of consolidating German power on the continent.

³⁵ Friederich Naumann, “polnischen Feldarbeit und die Politik des Landwirtes,” cited from Theodor Heuss ed., *Friederich Naumann: Schriften und Gespräche*, (Stuttgart: Wunderlich, 1949), p. 103.

³⁶ Friederich Naumann, *Die Politik der Gegenwart*, (Berlin, 1905), pp. 23-24.

³⁷ NDWP *Freiheitkämpfe* (Berlin 1907), in H. Gerlach Stiftung, p12.

(*Grossbetrieb*). The large enterprise, the *Grossbetrieb*, according to Naumann, epitomizes modern times and, moreover, serves as “the model for national reform.”³⁸ In the decade preceding the First World War, Naumann observed the pioneering welfare practices of major German industrial firms including Siemens and Krupp, concluding that the efficient and rational economic *Grossbetrieb* represented “the most desirable synthesis of... the historic-cultural attributes of the German national idea with the... [Socialists’] concern for the individual and his personality.”³⁹ In this context Naumann’s politics of the “National Social” sought to legitimate divergence, plurality, and a measure of political equality within the German nation by invoking the success of the *Grossbetriebe* in mediating disputes between labor and capital, and thereby also tacitly acknowledging the political aspirations of socialists and others that were regarded by conservatives and most liberals as insignificant, irrelevant or even alien to the definition of the German nation. While decades removed from the National Socialists of the interwar period, Naumann’s efforts to seek a “third path” through rapid socio-political and economic modernization resembles that of subsequent fascist thought, especially in his emphasis on corporatist solutions which would reappear in Italy.⁴⁰

With regards to German nationalism, Naumann’s 'National Social' ideology is of particular interest given its receptiveness to change and that German nationalism of the time generally asserted the immutability of essentialist “national” characteristics. For Naumann, state, nation and economy change at the same time, modernize, create new definitions of nationalism and in turn, reshape the national state. Naumann's belief in this process is manifest throughout his writings and contrasts with the fashionable '*Kulturpessimismus*' as was the case with Nietzsche and Spengler in the Second Reich. In his book *Demokratie und Kaisertum* (1906), Naumann devotes a whole chapter to the concept of nation, likening it

³⁸ BA/SA N3001 AMfch 16, “*Die Hilfe, Gotteshilfe, Selbsthilfe, Staatshilfe, Bruederhilfe* (1910).”

³⁹ BA/SA N3001 AMfch 16 “*Zum Volkswirtschaft*” (1910) slide 3

⁴⁰ Ernst Nolte, *The Three Faces of Fascism: Action Francaise, Italian Fascism, National Socialism*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1966).

to “a chameleon changing color along the path of development.”⁴¹ He argues that, “From an originally cultural concept, nation changed into a racial concept and ... into a mass democratic concept.”⁴² Furthermore, he theorized that each stage of national development also corresponded to a parallel telos of technological advance, culminating in the “the age of communication (*Verkehr*),” and “the age of the machine.” This essentially optimistic nomenclature re-conceptualized nationalism away from the Romantic and anti-modern discourse of early twentieth century racial nationalists and instead embraced the pluralistic reality of industrial Germany as a realization of German nationalism.

In this regard, Naumann’s sympathies with regards to the cultural distinctiveness and nuances of independent nations placed him firmly in the liberal camp of the wartime debate in Germany regarding how Mitteleuropa was to be constituted and against the growing cacophony of intellectuals and industrialists advocating annexation. Although the German state had tried to ban public discussion of war aims in October 1914 over fears it might upset the *Burgfrieden*, conservative and nationalist pressure groups almost immediately began lobbying the government and the chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, for territorial annexations and greater German market penetration in Austria-Hungary.⁴³ Already in these first months of the war, the extreme nationalist Pan-Germans agitated for the creation of an extensive colonial empire extending into Russia and “the final dismissal (*Auflösung*) of Belgium as an independent state.”⁴⁴ Similarly, conservative intellectuals and leading industrialists representing the steel, armaments, and agricultural sectors also demanded sweeping annexation. The “Petition of the Six Economic Associations” was drafted by a combination of middle-class, agricultural, and industrial clubs and circulated on May 20, 1915. Arguing from the perspective of naked national interest (and greed), they

⁴¹ Friedrich Naumann, *Demokratie und Kaisertum* (Berlin, 1906), p. 157.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴³ Konrad Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor: Bethmann Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 192.

⁴⁴ Steffen Bruendel, *Volksgemeinschaft oder Volkstaat. Die “Ideen von 1914” und die Neuordnung Deutschlands im Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003), pp. 77-78.

asserted that “our actual experiences in this war prove that our military successes, particularly in a long war, and their further exploitation depend to a large extent upon the economic strength and ability of our people.” Therefore, the economic associations insisted that “economic demands and even annexation must be viewed in the light of the urgent necessity for the greatest possible increase of our national strength and also from a military standpoint.”⁴⁵

As Herbert Hagenluecke has noted, in the first year of the war, German intellectuals and industrialists overwhelmingly endorsed *Mitteleuropa* as an annexationist project. Indeed, two months after the six economic associations circulated their petition, 1,347 of Germany’s leading businessmen, economists, and leading figures of the professoriate signed onto another similar petition endorsing territorial revision in Germany’s favor “from France to the Vistula.”⁴⁶ The liberal counter-petition was organized by the famed economic historian Hans Delbrück but ultimately attracted only 141 signatures, including Naumann’s.⁴⁷ The Delbrück petition presciently warned of the dangers inherent in occupying large territories against “the wishes and aspirations of independent peoples,” although it was ultimately German military setbacks and the specter of a parliamentary revolt by the Social Democrats that likely discouraged Bethmann-Hollweg from an annexationist program.⁴⁸ In this context, Friedrich Naumann’s October 1915 publication of the *Mitteleuropa* pamphlet received significant public interest and tacit government endorsement as an attractive compromise which offered economic gains while simultaneously eschewing the political costs of outright conquest and annexations.

⁴⁵ “Petition of the Six Economic Associations,” 20 May 1915 (doc. 4), in Hans Feldman ed., *German Imperialism*, pp. 16-22.

⁴⁶ Heinz Hagenluecke, *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei. Die nationale Rechte am Ende des Kaiserreiches*, (Duesseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1996), pp. 51-54.

⁴⁷ As cited in W.C. Thompson’s “The September Program: Reflections on the Evidence,” *Central European History* 11(4), (December, 1978), pp. 353-355.

⁴⁸ As argued by Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I*, (New York: Basic Books, 2014), p.263.

While it is tempting to read Naumann's *Mitteleuropa* as a thinly veiled and cynical German attempt at asserting dominance over both Austria-Hungary as well as newly conquered territories to the east, Naumann himself seemed to earnestly believe that economic integration was the necessary precursor to closer political union and therefore, lasting peace. In this regard, his earlier writings suggest that the economic history of German unification in the nineteenth century could serve as a model for a similar project across Central Europe. In his 1909 article, "The Transformation of the German Nation." Naumann's non-conformist narrative of the Reich's creation claims that, "The 1870 unification of the separate German states was necessarily preceded by the merging of the syndicates of the regional business enterprises ... only when this momentous transformation was accomplished was a political solution found that we called the German Reich (*vollzog sich die Syndikatsbildung der Territorialgeschaefte... die wir deutsches Reich nennen*)."⁴⁹ In terms echoed by his contemporaries in business and economics (as will be discussed subsequently), the history of the Second Reich was recast in terms of the expansion of "state business" and the "national auxiliary economy for private production"; the German Reich appeared as the outcome of a unifying economic development, as a framework for "national production" and as a pivot of international exchange economy (*Austauschwirtschaft*). Naumann went so far in this piece as to propose that the rational bonus system pioneered by German industry be used as an example for rewards in the state bureaucracy, with the state being analogous to employer and the civil servant as employee.

According to Naumann, "the world-significant question of German unification... was settled at the level of world-economics" and, as such, there was no contradiction between industrial society and German nationalism because "*Deutschtum* ("Germandom") is industrialization!"⁵⁰ Given the centrality of an essentially liberal understanding of economics in Naumann's notion of the nation-state, I argue that notions of ethnic exclusiveness or historical determinism were correspondingly weakened. Indeed, one

⁴⁹ Friedrich Naumann, *Die Verwandlung des deutschen Volkes: Geschichte und Wirtschaftspolitik*, (1909).

⁵⁰ Friedrich Naumann, *Die neudeutsche Wirtschaftspolitik*, p. 17

can regard Naumann's idea of a cooperative and economically-rooted *Mitteleuropa* during the First World War as a continuation of his likening of the national state to the corporate firm. It was no coincidence then that Naumann articulated Germany's hypothetical future role in Central Europe explicitly as a "chief firm manager" (*Hauptbetriebsbenutzer*).⁵¹

As reactions to Naumann within Germany indicate, his Middle European idea was a liberal alternative to a number of annexationist programs advocated by conservative and extreme-nationalist interest groups. As such it attracted prominent progressive liberal supporters of a cooperative vision of Central European economic coordination as well as vehement critics. The liberal historian Hermann Oncken praised Naumann's Middle European idea as "the most correct and at the moment most necessary frame of mind to persuade other peoples of the fundamental right of our cause."⁵² In contrast, a number of Reich-German nationalists harshly questioned his support for the German war effort more generally. As the pan-German nationalist Herman Losch asserted, "You [Naumann] say softly, fawningly and with all the indecision in the world what ought to be stated firmly with all the conviction you have at your disposal... We are engaged in a struggle for the future of the German nation and culture, yet you preach to those [nationalities] who by their own misguided rationality will listen to nothing more than force. In this war Germany alone will triumph or we shall all perish as one Volk."⁵³

The intellectual origins of Naumann's *Mitteleuropa* reflected his earlier efforts to reconcile liberalism with mass-socialism and industrial modernity. Broadly speaking, we can see Naumann's wartime vision of a cooperative economic community headed by Germany as the displacement of the major thrusts of his prewar political thinking onto a contested geographic space destabilized by conflict. The central themes of Naumann's *Mitteleuropa* program – the centrality of political-economy, the

⁵¹ Naumann, *Mitteleuropa*, p. 31.

⁵² Hermann Oncken, "Das alte und das neue Europa," (Berlin, 1909).

⁵³ Karl Eichhorn, *Mitteleuropa - Eine Stellungnahme zu Naumanns Buch*, (Leipzig: Dodier, 1916), "Gespräche H. Losch," p. 15.

entwining of economics with nationalist narrative, anxieties regarding the “crisis” of economic modernization, and ultimately the displacement of domestic German concerns outwards – were remarkably echoed by German economists throughout the Wilhelmine period and into the first years of the war.

Between Mitteleuropa and the World

Confronted with the tightening of the Allied blockade on Germany after 1914 and growing material shortages, Naumann’s publication of *Mitteleuropa* in 1915 should be read first and foremost as a projection of his earlier thinking regarding domestic German politics onto the wartime economic crisis.⁵⁴ His idea of a German-led “Middle Europe” was hence predominantly an effort at economic coordination rooted in the liberal “National Social” tradition as opposed to a geo-political vision of German continental empire. Thus, when Naumann addressed the possibility of outright German annexation in Eastern Europe after 1915, he rejected that option on an economic basis – claiming that the “economic integration and forced cultural assimilation” would constitute an unacceptable and unnecessary drain on state resources. Repeating an earlier argument, in a March 1916 debate in the Reichstag over the desirability of German annexation of Poland he maintained that annexationism smacked of “racial-political fantasy and contradictory to economic reality”:

"Everyone knows that such a course [annexation] cannot be followed without serious political and financial repercussions... Do we really have the ability to colonize Slavic lands as successfully as our forefathers did centuries ago? When one hears these Pan-German debates on the Polish Question or reads about the hurried revision of maps, one wonders what concrete

⁵⁴ A more substantive discussion of the Allied blockade and its significance on German politics can be found in Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War* (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 2014).

benefits could actually be gained from pushing the frontiers of the Reich eastwards... One must come to the conclusion that, with our growing population, we Germans have nothing to search for in Slavic lands but to secure favorable agricultural policies for the sake of maintaining our current level of industrial output, and to that end, why push for a colonial fantasy when a simple trade-deal can be negotiated?"⁵⁵

Naumann's conception of Mitteleuropa chiefly as an economic zone under wider German political leadership emerges perhaps most clearly through his wartime correspondence with Walther Rathenau, the influential director of the electrical conglomerate AEG and head of the wartime Armaments Department. In fact, as early as 1913, Rathenau had suggested that some form of Central European economic association could provide the answer to Anglo-American economic competition. Walther Rathenau's subsequent 1915 lecture, "the Organisation of the Supply of Raw Materials" ("*Die Organisation der Rohstoffversorgung*"), directly cited Naumann's *Mitteleuropa* as the basis of his own conception of Mitteleuropa as "the only possible basis for German economic self-sufficiency" as forced by wartime exigency. Delivered before the patriotic German Society and only three months after the publication of Naumann's *Mitteleuropa*, Rathenau made the case that Germany's "enclosed geographic borders of the three seas," the easily-secured Baltic, the Mediterranean, and the North Sea - although constraining Germany's access to the wider world – also rendered *Mitteleuropa* a "besieged fortress" inaccessible to Britain: given the "low supply of raw materials and foodstuffs," every effort must be made to maximize efficiency, which entailed close economic management and coordination between the allied economies of Germany and Austria-Hungary.⁵⁶

In terms of concrete political-economic coordination, Rathenau during his tenure at the head of the War Raw Materials Department (*Kriegsrohstoffabteilung*) saw clearly several advantages of a

⁵⁵ BA/SA N2906, 242, "Gespräch Naumanns (Mär/12,16).

⁵⁶ Walter Rathenau, *Die Organisation der Rohstoffversorgung: Vortrag, gehalten in der Deutschen Gesellschaft am 20 Dezember 1915*.

consolidated *Mitteleuropa*. As he outlined in a letter to Naumann dated July 1916, Rathenau claimed that a total union in industrial coordination with Austria-Hungary would “maximize the productivity of a large area and secure the optimal regional division of labor and production... thereby securing the material basis for the fatherland’s continued struggle for at least three years.”⁵⁷ Naumann’s response is quite telling. It centered on the rather shrewd observation that the most significant obstacle towards realizing a Middle European economic zone lay in the escalating mutual distrust between Austria-Hungary and Germany. “It seems that in spite of your most sincere efforts in [Prague] and Vienna, our allies continue to fear their descent into unavoidable subjugation by the Reich... every effort should be made to convince them otherwise,”⁵⁸ he wrote. Naumann's ideals for *Mitteleuropa* in part reflected frustrations over these differences. Writing in response to pan-German agitation in early 1916 for direct de jure German leadership over the Central Powers, Naumann stressed the imperative of cooperation in the economic interests of war planning:

"With all the necessary respect for Viennese policy, we are at last developing a sense of responsibility for *Mitteleuropa* as a whole. The *grossdeutsch* ideology of past years is reawakening in a new form. For long it seemed as though the Danubian lands were of no significance to us, but now we are becoming aware of the interrelationship of the future of our own Volk to the many developments in regions from the Baltic to Adriatic Seas. The diplomats will need to work out the technical details of this new *grossdeutsch* policy; the people already feel it and are taking strength from the promise [of a shared future]... Let us reject theorizing and seize upon reality, the possibility of a common policy [with Austria-Hungary] to protect the German people and culture in all *Mitteleuropa*."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ BA/SA N3001/15 AMfch, Korrespondenz bsttl. 3, “Naumann/Rathenau 1916,” folio 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Friederich Naumann, *Patria: Bücher für Kultur und Freiheit*, (Berlin, 1916), pp. 6-7.

It is perhaps surprising that Naumann's vision of Mitteleuropa as a project of economic coordination attracted the most support from Austrian German economists, especially given that the Dual Monarchy arguably had the most to lose in accepting German economic hegemony of East-Central Europe. Yet, as the Austrian historian and proponent of Mitteleuropa Heinrich Friedjung argued, closer union with Germany also offered significant rewards, particularly for ethnic Germans within the political calculus of the multi-ethnic Habsburg Monarchy.⁶⁰ He envisaged Germany's expanded role within the Monarchy as a "heavy stone holding together the centrifugal elements in our Monarchy" while the customs union itself would allow Austria to finally do away with the burdensome decennial negotiations with its Transleithanian counterpart.⁶¹

The receptiveness of self-professed Austrian patriots like Friedjung to Naumann's Mitteleuropa program was predicated on decades of earlier German efforts to draw the lands of the Dual Monarchy into its economic orbit. Of particular relevance were three wider trends in the German economy that subsequently framed both the broad thrusts and practical limits to German ambitions for forging a more unified economic space in Central Europe in the last decades of the Kaiserreich. First was the late-nineteenth century global shift from free trade towards what many historians have called "neo-mercantilism."⁶² This development is central to the nature of German economic reactions to the increasing pace of economic globalization, to which German industry was particularly sensitive, as the "neo-mercantilist" turn shaped German political-economic visions for economic coordination in its European "near-abroad." Second was the Austro-German economic relationship. By straddling the lines between unfulfilled nationalist ambition, strategic cooperation, and economic interest, German economic penetration into the territories of the Dual Monarchy paradoxically strengthened the Dual Alliance before 1914, while also setting the stage for reimagining a post-Habsburg Central Europe during the war. Third

⁶⁰ Heinrich Friedjung, *Denkschrift aus Deutschösterreich*, (Vienna: Handellmann Vrlg., 1915), especially pp. 29-31.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

⁶² Franz Wurm, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft in Deutschland, 1848-1948*, (Opladen: Leske Vrlg., 1969); the turn from free-trade liberalism to neo-mercantilist protectionism by the 1880s.

was the impact of Germany's eastern conquests in the final years of the war and the stresses of domestic socio-economic tensions during wartime that radicalized the role of Mitteleuropa in intra-German political discourse.

In line with classic nineteenth century liberal economic thought and building upon the 1833 Zollverein treaty, subsequent economic development within the German territories first centered on clearing away obstacles to the free movement of peoples and goods among the various constituent states. In the period between the adoption of the customs union (*Zollverein*) on January 1st, 1834 in the then German Confederation (minus Austria) and the resignation of Bismarck's free-trade oriented secretary of state, Rudolf von Delbrück, in 1876, the general pattern of German political-economic management both domestically and with regards to foreign markets was essentially characterized by free trade.⁶³ The creation of the Zollverein was followed in 1847 by the adoption of the General German Negotiable Instruments Law (*Allgemeine deutsche Wechselordnung*) throughout the Confederation, which drastically simplified tariff regulations concerning manufactured goods.⁶⁴ Closer commercial coordination, particularly regarding legal regulations for investment and banking practice, was achieved in 1865 with the General German Commercial Code; finally with the founding of the Reich in 1871, the adoption of a comprehensive set of "unified Reich trade regulations" guaranteed complete freedom of movement for all individuals and goods within the boundaries of the German Empire.⁶⁵ As the culminating piece of nearly a half century of intra-German efforts for economic consolidation, the 1871 economic legislations effectively united Germany into a single economic unit at the final expense of the Austrian economy,

⁶³ Hans-Joachim Braun, *German Economy in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Routledge books, 1990), p. 17.

⁶⁴ Gustav Stolper, *German Economy, 1870-1940, Issues and Trends*, (New York: Reynal-Hitchcock, 1940), pp.7-8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10. and in Angus Maddison, *Economic Growth in the West: Comparative Experience in Europe and North America*, (New York: 1964), p. 42.

which had previously been more closely intertwined with that of southern Germany in comparison to north-south German trade.⁶⁶

With regard to monetary control and the advent of central banking in the Reich, early efforts under the liberal minister Delbrück and the economist Ludwig Bamberger sought to integrate Germany into a closer economic relationship with Britain and Western Europe.⁶⁷ As the German economic historian Gustav Stolper has noted, this economic policy had a further political edge by strengthening the hand of free-trade liberals against conservative agrarian interests.⁶⁸ In practical terms, this period of free-market "western orientation" proceeded in three phases - the regulation of gold minting on a national level in 1871, the adoption of the gold standard in 1873, and the creation of the central Reichsbank for monetary control and inter-bank coordination in 1875.⁶⁹ As was the case with subsequent protectionist measures following the onset of global recession in 1877, Bismarck and Bamberger originally intended for the promotion of free trade (through the adoption of the British-led gold standard) to stimulate industrial growth. As a common rate of exchange was held by economists to stimulate global economic exchange, following Britain onto the gold standard was envisioned as stimulating German participation in the global economy.

Similarly, the inception of the Reichsbank was a response to the expansion of Germany's industrial sector, the beginnings of the so-called "second industrial revolution."⁷⁰ As major German banks were "planned primarily as institutions for the financing of industry, not as sources of current business

⁶⁶ Volker Berghahn, *Imperial Germany 1871-1914, Economy, Society, Culture and Politics*, (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1994), p. 23.

⁶⁷ Fritz Terhalle, *Handbuch der Finanzwissenschaft*, vol. I, *Geschichte der öffentlichen Finanzwirtschaft vom Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Schlusse des zweiten Weltkrieges*, (Tübingen, 1952), in particular pp. 57-60.

⁶⁸ Gustav Stolper, *The German Economy 1870 to the Present*, trans. Toni Stolper, (New York: Harcourt, 1967), p. 17.

⁶⁹ Angus Maddison, *Economic Growth in the West: Comparative Experience in Europe and North America*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 42.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

credits," (as in the Anglo-American model), German banking establishments likewise derived the bulk of their deposits from the largely industrial ventures they funded.⁷¹ Accordingly, the incentive in the German banking-finance sector was for an efficient coordination and backing by a central state-backed bank. As has been widely recognized by German economic historians, this pattern of development stimulated a mirroring effect in both finance and industry; as increasingly larger, more consolidated banks were required to shoulder industrial enterprises, the industrial sector likewise responded by moving towards consolidation into conglomerate industries. In short, industrial growth stimulated greater banking concentration, which in turn further incentivized industrial concentration.⁷² In the context of Hapsburg-controlled Middle Europe, this mode of mobilizing large quantities of capital combined with the efficient "cartel organization" of German industrial conglomerates facilitated German economic penetration in regions of relative underdevelopment, such as the oilfields of Austrian Galicia.⁷³

The pace of German industrial growth between unification and the eve of war was impressive. Using the key measurements of coal, iron, and steel output as well as railroad mileage (the classic benchmarks for industrialization and hence national power in the early twentieth century), the German economy made enormous strides in this period. Between 1880 and 1913, the Reich's coal production increased over five-fold, from 34.5 million metric tons to over 191 million; iron ore extraction similarly leapt from 5.3 million tons to 28.7, leading to a spectacular jump in steel output from 1.6 million tons to 14.8 million by 1910.⁷⁴ In terms of the pace of railroad construction, between 1885 and 1915, Germany nearly doubled its total length of track laid down, from 37,650 kilometers in 1885 to 62,410 kilometers

⁷¹ Stolper, *The German Economy 1870 to the Present*, pp. 26-28.

⁷² Karl Hardach, *The Political Economy of Germany in the Twentieth Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 5 and 13.

⁷³ Alison Frank, *Oil Empire: Visions of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 200); Sven Arnd, *Deutschlands Wirtschaftspolitik in Österreich-Ungarn* (Berlin: 1980), pp. 178-192.

⁷⁴ Figures taken from *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich, 1880-1915*.

after the first year of war.⁷⁵ The capital returns from German manufacturing exports and, particularly in the context of Central Europe, from its profits on rail and shipping served to keep Germany's net balance of payments and capital outflow in check.⁷⁶

While the impressive pace of German industrial expansion testified to its rapid emergence as a world economic power, the period from roughly 1880 until the eve of the war also witnessed increasing unease within German industrial circles over the strain on the country's sources of raw material. To use Fischer's succinct summary: "as the volume of Germany's [industrial] production grew, the narrowness of the basis of her raw materials market became increasingly apparent and as she penetrated more deeply into world markets, this narrowness became increasingly irksome."⁷⁷ Such broader global economic trends were already well recognized when Leo von Caprivi succeeded Bismarck as Reich Chancellor in 1890. Despite a brief flirtation with a reconciliatory tariff policy in 1891-92, the adoption of the McKinley tariff act in the United States followed by significant increases in French and Russian duties shrunk German export shares in those major markets.⁷⁸ Recent revisionist historical literature has argued that the "tariff pains" of this first wave of economic globalization in fact worked to spur German industry (particularly in the chemicals sector) towards greater market specialization and innovation, and all the while intensifying the pace of social modernization; the picture painted by historians such as Niels Petersson of Wilhelmine Germany is hence that of a relative success - even the "preeminent globalization

⁷⁵ Ibid.,

⁷⁶ Allan Mitchell argues that German overland freight carriers enjoyed a distinctive advantage over French competition in developing east-west rail networks through Hapsburg lands at the turn, thereby exploiting both Germany's geographical advantage in the center of continental transit networks as well as the relative underdevelopment of the Austro-Hungarian rail industry to reap significant profits; Allan Mitchell, *Great Train Race: Railways and the Franco-German rivalry, 1815-1914*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), pp. 67-68.

⁷⁷ Fritz Fischer, *Germany's War Aims in the First World War* (originally published in German as *Griff nach der Weltmacht*), (Dusseldorf: Druckerei GmbH, 1967), p. 16.

⁷⁸ Terhalle, *Handbuch der Finanzwissenschaft*, vol. I, *Geschichte der öffentlichen Finanzwirtschaft vom Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Schlusse des zweiten Weltkrieges*, pp. 81-82.

For a recent perspective on the effect of the McKinley tariff on German political and economic discourse, see in particular Niels Petersson, "Das Kaiserreich im Prozessen ökonomischer Globalisierung," in Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871-1914* (Goettingen, 2004), p. 67.

power" *Globalisierungsvormacht*).⁷⁹ Regardless of possible longer-term structural benefits to the German export industry, the undeniable immediate political reaction from the Caprivi government and by his successors was to acquire new markets for German export as well as to secure raw materials.

From this impulse, greater economic penetration and consolidation of Mitteleuropa appeared as the increasingly desirable alternative to the woes of globalization. Yet, despite its theorized potential as an escape-hatch from the political anxieties of German economic engagement overseas, the idea of a German dominated Mitteleuropa before 1914 never fulfilled this promise as a viable economic alternative. This may have been due in large part to reluctance by the Austro-Hungarian leadership, and in particular thanks to the Hungarian Minister President István Tisza's personal unwillingness to do anything which might upset the balance within post-Ausgleich Austria-Hungary. Indeed, Tisza's initial reaction to Naumann's *Mitteleuropa* publication in 1915 was outright dismissal, denouncing it as a veiled "vassal state offer" that would simultaneously strengthen the hand of the Germans in the Dual Monarchy.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, the persistence of this potentiality into the First World War constituted a key parameter in German political-economic planning for Middle European economic coordination. The notion that an economically-consolidated Central Europe could resolve from the conundrum of the pressures of globalization derived from a longer trajectory of German liberal economic thinking. Parallel to Friedrich Naumann's application of his earlier liberal social theories to wartime questions of territoriality and annexation, the concept of an economic Mitteleuropa represented the natural culmination of earlier liberal economic thinking grounded in the historical experience of German unification. Just as the Zollverein and later banking regulations had established the basis for political unity, which accommodated diverse regional political traditions, leading economists and financiers of the Wilhelmine period saw German investment and economic coordination with the regional economies of Central Europe as a logical next

⁷⁹ Niels Petersson, "Das Kaiserreich im Prozessen ökonomischer Globalisierung," in Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871-1914* (Goettingen, 2004), p. 67.

⁸⁰ Achim Müller, *Zwischen Annäherung und Abgrenzung. Österreich-Ungarn und die Diskussion um Mitteleuropa im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Marburg: Tectum Vrlg., 2001), pp.195-196.

step in the creation of an expanded economic block which would allow the Reich to compete at the level of "world economics and world power."⁸¹

Here, the conception of Mitteleuropa as a German escape from the dilemmas of economic globalization runs into two historiographical controversies. First is the idea that German economic penetration into Central Europe was constitutive of a wider "Near-Eastern policy," which aimed to first economically and then politically co-opt the Habsburg and East European "Danubian sphere" (*Donaukraftfeld*) as a launch pad for further expansion into the Middle East.⁸² To quote from Phillip Dehn's contemporary comment on the Berlin-Baghdad Railroad, "it [the Baghdad rail] was to offer an exit for the land-locked Reich along the path of least resistance, and accordingly became a symbol of the future highway of a German Weltpolitik."⁸³ The more recent variant of this Weltpolitik interpretation stems from Fritz Fischer's argument regarding the relationship between "German" *Mitteleuropa* and overseas Weltpolitik. Fischer considers the primary impact of the "neo-mercantilist" turn on German domestic political economy as strengthening the domination over economy and society by the conservative elite. In his narrative, Germany's economic explosion coupled with the politicization of global trade along national lines pushed the major industrialists into a close alliance with the authoritarian state and agrarian Junkers.⁸⁴ Thus, under the new "patriotic" dominance of industry and finance by state-backed conglomerates (e.g. Thyssen and Krupp), the economic sphere - particularly with regards to export markets and foreign investments - became highly charged arenas of nationalist agitation and policy making.

⁸¹ Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, p. 173.

⁸² Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa in German Thought and Action 1815-1945*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955), p. 57.

⁸³ Paul Dehn, *Deutschland und Orient in ihren wirtschaftlichen Beziehungen* (Munich: Speyer Vrlg., 1900), p. 40.

⁸⁴ Fischer, *Germany's War Aims*, pp. 15-18.

Secondly, in contrast to the notion of *Mitteleuropa* as the first stepping-stone into the potential riches of the Near East, Fischer and the allied historical literature stress that a greatly *expanded* Middle European zone encompassed the Hapsburg territories, Russian Poland, Belgium, the Scandinavian countries, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and potentially even France.⁸⁵ As several "representative" conversations between Walther Rathenau and the Kaiser are intended to demonstrate, "an economic unification of the continent as a defensive measure against the American reprisals policy of [high tariffs] was desired in all quarters... while the voluntary model of the Zollverein was preferred, its unlikelihood necessitated the pursuit of a German-dominated 'Mitteleuropa' on Europe's next battlefields."⁸⁶ Indeed, in his *World Power or Decline*, Fischer explicitly and provocatively rejects the counterargument that Germany's continental policy in Middle Europe, particularly with regards to schemes for customs union, in the lead-up to war was at all a "reaction to contingent circumstances" but rather "a consistent commitment to the pursuit of world power."⁸⁷

The continuity of expansionism posited by both Fischer and the *Donaukraftfeld* position largely ignored the reality that German state-policy concerning *Mitteleuropa* in the prewar period was essentially shaped by precisely the possibilities opened up by largely independent initiatives on the part of German finance and industry. This was especially true with regards to joint Austro-German investment in both Hapsburg territories as well as in the relatively young states of Romania and Bulgaria. However, the notion that prewar German *Mitteleuropapolitik* was pursued by a monolithic German state against weaker regional neighbors is flawed. On close examination, as this chapter has argued, the signal impact, and intention, of German economic interaction in *Mitteleuropa* was the crafting of closer political-economic linkages with Austria-Hungary. This development proceeded in two phases. From 1871 until the turn of the century, the German finance sector generally regarded joint ventures between major German finance

⁸⁵ As outlined in Fritz Fischer, *Weltmacht oder Niedergang*, (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1965); cited from his first thesis, "World Policy and War Policy" (*Weltpolitik und Kriegspolitik*), p. 8.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-59.

conglomerates and Austrian industrialists as a politically safer option for foreign investment, particularly given the fear that the United States (the largest avenue for German overseas investment before 1914) might push for the creation of a closed North American trade-zone.⁸⁸ The result was an intertwining in joint ownership and cooperative development. Following the rapid intensification of German overseas trade by the late 1890s, overall German investment in Austria-Hungary largely stagnated; however a number of Austro-German firms continued to plough ahead in investment and development in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The enthusiasm behind many of these ventures came not from German initiative but rather on the part of Austro-Hungarian pro-Mitteuropa integrationists.

⁸⁸ Andreas Etges, *Wirtschaftsnationalismus: USA und Deutschland im Vergleich 1815-1914*, (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1999), p. 117.

Chapter II

War and Mitteleuropa - the Search for 'Security for All Time'

When the First World War began, idealistic slogans had run out across both Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Leaders, politicians, clergymen, academics and newspapers had mobilized their peoples for a struggle against first criminal regicide, and then a perceived perfidious international conspiracy. Great principles were at stake. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had taken up arms to preserve its 'honor' and 'rights' in the words of its esteemed Emperor. Germans were fighting 'for the fruits of our peaceful industry, for the inheritance of a great past, and for the future of our Volk.'⁸⁹ War enthusiasm was also buoyed by the early course of the war. In East Prussia and Galicia, the brutality and barbarism of the Russian invaders had exposed the bloody threat posed to European civilization by the Tsar's 'Asiatic empire' for many in Central Europe. In the west, selfish English materialism and perverse French individualism challenged what German intellectuals claimed to be the purer, heroic, communality of their own culture.⁹⁰ Above all, leaders in Germany and Austria-Hungary were careful to publicly emphasize that the war was 'purely defensive.' 'We are not incited by lust for conquest,' the Kaiser had proclaimed at the war's outset. 'We are inspired by the unyielding determination to keep for ourselves and all future generations the place which God has given us.'⁹¹

⁸⁹ Franz Josef, "To my People," in *Neue Freie Presse*. Nr. 17931 (30 July 1914), pp. 7-8; Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg's speech in the Reichstag (August 4, 1914), *New York Times Current History: The European War from the Beginning to March 1915. Who began the War, and Why?*, Vol I, 1915 (New York: 1915), pp. 221-222.

⁹⁰ Andrea Orzoff, "The Empire Without Qualities: Newspapers and the Outbreak of War in 1914, in T.R.E. Paddock ed., *A Call to Arms: Propaganda, Public Opinion, and Newspapers in the Great War*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 166.

⁹¹ Kaiser Wilhelm II, "Address in Berlin Palace White Room," (August 4, 1914), *New York Times Current History*, Vol. I, 1915 (New York: 1915).

How far did the Central Powers' official aims fit this rhetoric of an honorable and defensive war (at least in the first two years of the conflict)? For what, after all, were their men fighting and dying for? German leaders conspicuously entered the conflict with no firm goals, but their army's rapid advance through Belgium and into northern France soon focused the Reich's military, economic, and political elite on the possible fruits of victory. Already in 9th September 1914, the Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg approved the first highly secret but provisional war aims program. Written by his principle assistant, Kurt Reizler, this document stated boldly that 'the general aim of the war' was 'security for the German Reich in the west and in the east for all imaginable time.'⁹² This disarmingly simple yet grandiose war aim was to remain the basis of German policy throughout the rest of hostilities. While it was fundamentally defensive in conception, the intention to achieve everlasting security was extraordinarily ambitious (to the point of being unrealistic). When combined with a military-strategic world view that regarded security as a zero-sum game to be won through domination at the expense of cooperation, this facet of German wartime strategy soon slit into outright aggression.⁹³ To secure Germany for 'all imaginable time' could not, even in Bethmann Hollweg's mind and certainly not for the more hawkish elites within the military, merely entail a return to the unstable status quo of the last antebellum years. Instead it required permanent control of invasion routes, the subjugation of dangerous neighbors, and crucially, the re-shaping of Europe's continental economies so as to guarantee Germany's ability to compete globally with the United States and the British Empire: 'France must be so weakened as to make her revival as a great power

⁹² BA/SA, R43/2398 (Band I, II Kr. 1), pp. 77-79.

⁹³ Fritz Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen*, pp. 170-171.

impossible for all time. Russia must be thrust as far as possible from Germany's eastern frontier and her domination over the non-Russian vassal people's broken.'⁹⁴

The September memorandum was a list of maximum demands to be imposed if the German army succeeded decisively in defeating the French in the west. Two broad themes pervade the document. First was the issue of security. France was to be eternally exposed to the threat of invasion through possible border adjustments in the Vosges, the seizure of the Belfort fortresses, and the razing of France's other frontier defenses. French military potential would be eliminated by a war indemnity 'high enough to prevent her from spending any considerable sums on armaments in the next 15-20 years.' Belgium was to be 'reduced to a vassal state' and, like France, made vulnerable by the confiscation of the fortress and city of Liege that the German army had initially found so difficult to capture a month earlier at the war's outbreak. The memorandum was intent on establishing, along with the enduring security of the Reich's western border, a base for continuing war against its most formidable enemy, Britain. From the German perspective, the maritime power's "perfidious" influence on the continent could be at least partially negated through the occupation of Belgium's naval ports. The taking of the French coast from Dunkirk to Boulogne, possibly annexed to the newly submissive Belgian state, would enable the Kaiser to station the vaunted German high seas fleet directly opposite Dover, permanently threatening the British south coast.⁹⁵

The second great preoccupation in the September memorandum and the one that would set the tone for Germany's subsequent efforts at realizing a new Mitteleuropa alignment in East-

⁹⁴ Von Bethmann Hollweg, "Memorandum – Provisional Notes on the Direction of Our Policy on the Conclusion of Peace," September 9, 1914, in Gregory Feldman ed., *German Imperialism, 1914-1918: The Development of a Historical Debate* (London: 1972), pp. 125-126.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Central Europe was economic. While it paid lip service to the peacetime imperial goals of seeking ‘a continuous Central African colonial empire,’ the focus had already shifted in the early months of the war.⁹⁶ Indeed, the memorandum decisively broke with Germany’s colonial past in re-shifting focus from the Reich’s overseas possessions to formal and informal economic expansion in Europe. Germany planned to take a series of valuable economic assets from their humbled enemies. The Longwy-Briey mines, which yielded as much as 81 percent of French iron ore had already been occupied by German armies in September and were to be permanently annexed to Germany. Avariciously, the Chancellor’s memorandum also envisaged the permanent seizure of the premier commercial entrepot of Antwerp. A German-owned corridor would run from the city south-east to Liege. However, the keystone of the new economic order envisaged in the September program and which would persist in German imaginaries of the postwar continental order for the duration of the war was in laying the foundation for a genuine economic union. In line with prewar German ambitions for a continent-wide Zollverein, this new economic order would entail a steady expansion of a ‘central European economic association through common customs treaties, to include France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Austria-Hungary, Poland, and perhaps Italy, Sweden and Norway.’⁹⁷ Herein lay the contours of Germany’s wartime Mitteleuropa project. As previously discussed, the idea was hardly new yet the exigencies of war lent Bethmann-Hollweg’s vision a new urgency.

Proposals for closer European economic integration had circulated within Germany and Austria-Hungary for decades prior to the outbreak of war. Walther Rathenau, the director of the

⁹⁶ Philip Theiner, “‘Mitteleuropa’: Plaene in Whilhelminischen Deutschland,’ in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Sonderheft* 10 (1984), pp. 128-136.

⁹⁷ David Stevenson, “The First World War and European Integration,” *The International History Review*, 34(4) (December 2012), pp. 842-846.

giant German electrical firm A.E.G., had suggested as recently as 1913 that an economic association might calm western European antagonism and counter American competition.⁹⁸ However, the wartime scheme proposed by the German Chancellor possessed a much more ruthless edge. Indeed, while the pan-European idealism that informed the Mitteleuropa vision did not disappear, it now co-existed with explicitly nationalist German rhetoric. The economic association would be ‘under German leadership and must stabilize Germany’s economic dominance over Mitteleuropa.’⁹⁹ The economic union would guarantee German goods unfettered access to European markets in any future peace, regardless of residual war antagonism. Moreover, the Mitteleuropa project was also envisaged as a weapon against Britain. As Riezler explained in a subsequent memorandum, the association of ‘continental powers’ would establish a ‘European blockade’ gaining time for the Germans to ‘grow militarily and economically to an equal footing with the British Empire’ and perhaps to even ultimately stoke revolution in British India and Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰

The September program enunciated overarching German aspirations for security and economic hegemony at the war’s outbreak, and while a Belgian vassal state continued to occupy a central role in both, official war aims evolved throughout hostilities. Bethmann Hollweg’s priorities shifted with the fortunes of war and he was far from the sole arbiter of aims within the German government. The Kaiser, quite notably, had wanted in early September 1914 to annex Belgium outright, whereas the German Foreign Minister, Gottlieb von Jagow wished to see it

⁹⁸ Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s War Aims*, pp. 98-106.

⁹⁹ Hans Hagenlücke, *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei. Die nationale Rechte am Ende des Kaiserreiches* (Düsseldorf, 1997), pp. 49-72.

¹⁰⁰ BA/SA, R43/2398a, (Band II), 126-127.

partitioned with the Netherlands.¹⁰¹ The German public too had their own ideas. Although discussion of war aims was banned from mid-October 1914 on the grounds that it could upset Germany's Burgfrieden (the much idealized and vaunted "Fortress Peace" on the home front), conservatives in the Reichstag and major business interests pressured the government for extensive annexations almost immediately. Bethmann Hollweg himself was barely exaggerating when he complained of a 'greedy nationalism that wants to annex half the world.'¹⁰² This coming from the Chancellor who aspired to deliver Germany 'security for all time.'

The Reich's most extreme nationalists, the tiny but disproportionately influential Pan German Association, as well as its industrialists, many among its intellectual elite, and the military leadership, demanded huge swathes of territory in annexations. The 'Petition of the Six Economic Associations,' submitted by middle-class, agricultural and industrial clubs on May 20th, 1915, was only the most notorious of numerous appeals for outright conquest. It advocated in the west the total subordination of Belgium, the annexation of the French coast as far as the Somme, extensive border adjustments, the Briey iron ore mines and the coal mines in the Nord and Pas-de-Calais departments. Economic assets were to be transferred directly into German hands. Similarly ambitious aims were formulated for the east, along with a demand for a large colonial empire. Placing a fig leaf over its naked avarice, the petition argued that only the weakening of the Reich's enemies, not treaties, could secure a permanent peace in Europe. The petitioners also justified their demands by making a connection that was to become increasingly important in driving expansionist goals in an ever more total war: 'Our actual experiences in this

¹⁰¹ Stefan Bruendal, *Volksgemeinschaft oder Volksstaat, "Die Ideen von 1914" und die Neuordnung Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Droste Vrlg., Berlin, 2003), pp. 77-78.

¹⁰² Susanne Miller, *Burgfrieden und Klassenkampf, die Deutsche Sozial Demokratie im Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Dusseldorf, 1974), pp. 75-132.

war prove,' the petition argued, 'that our military successes, particularly in a long war, and their further exploitation depend to a large extent upon the economic strength and ability of our people.' Economic demands, the six associations insisted, 'must be viewed in the light of the urgent necessity for the greatest possible increase of our national strength, as well as from a military standpoint.'¹⁰³

Germany's intellectuals, as well as businessmen and landowners, overwhelmingly supported large-scale annexation. Seven weeks after the six economic associations submitted their petition, a similar appeal signed by 1,347 intellectuals, including many of the country's most highly esteemed professors in the fields of history, economics, philosophy, and the natural sciences was submitted to the Chancellor.¹⁰⁴ A counter-petition organized by the historian Hans Delbrueck, which cautioned against the annexation of independent peoples, was supported by only 141 liberals.¹⁰⁵ A so-called "War Aims Majority" desirous of expansion also dominated the Reichstag, although the bourgeois parties of which it was composed differed in their views of how much should be taken: the more progressive liberals in the Reichstag sought territorial additions to strengthen Germany's security, but most deputies in parties further on the right actively campaigned for extensive economic gains.¹⁰⁶ Only the Social Democrats (SPD) stood outside this annexationist consensus. The party remained officially committed to an interpretation of the war as a struggle for narrow defensive goals.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ BA/SA, R43/2398 (Band I), 191-200 (Kr. I).

¹⁰⁴ Feldman, "German Imperialism," pp. 16-22.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Bruendal, *Volksgemeinschaft oder Volkstaat*, pp. 81-83.

¹⁰⁷ Volker Berghain, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914*, (1974), pp. 178-184. The idea that the moderate and conservative wing of the SPD acted out of both nationalist ideology as well as political calculations premised on

Von Bethmann Hollweg's recognition that most working-class Germans would not willingly die or labor for a war of conquest did in fact act as a major deterrence from the Reich government's open commitment to annexationist aims. The SPD's deputies, despite the official party line, were ultimately a less effective check. The dominant center and right wings of the Social Democrats prioritized the 'patriotic' goal of preserving the Burgfrieden consensus at seemingly all costs in the first year of the war and as such avoided openly confronting annexationist propagandists. Only in August of 1915 did the SPD agree on its own list of war aims. These rejected annexations and demanded the restoration of an independent Belgium, but they also displayed a patriotic commitment with the preservation of national territory, categorically opposing French claims to Alsace-Lorraine. The patriotic, moderate attitude of the SPD was summarized by its Reichstag faction chairman, Philipp Scheidemann in an October 1916 address to the Reichstag: 'What is French should stay French, what is Belgian should stay Belgian, and what is German should stay German.'¹⁰⁸ Yet crucially, while most SPD parliamentarians firmly advocated the status quo ante bellum in the west, the SPD on the whole was as eager as the German liberal and conservative parties to see a radical change in eastern Europe. For many in the SPD's centrist leadership, the war in the east was a struggle to liberate the subject peoples and working-class Russians alike from Tsarist oppression, the great enemy of all socialists.¹⁰⁹

a speedy German victory has been around since Dieter Groh's, "The 'Unpatriotic Socialists' and the State, in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1.4 (1966), pp. 151-177.

¹⁰⁸ Konrad Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor: Bethmann Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany*, (Beck Vrlg., Munich, 1973), pp. 204-205.

¹⁰⁹ In the SPD's leftist minority, there was mounting frustration and alienation at the refusal of the party leadership to demand from the government an explicit promise of no annexation as a precondition for support. By December of 1914, Karl Liebknecht was the first Reichstag deputy to break with the Burgfrieden and vote against further war credits. By the end of 1915, Liebknecht was joined by nearly a third of SPD party deputies, a development which ultimately split the SPD by 1917.

Along with very limited Socialist parliamentary pressure, strategic consideration also acted as some small restraint on official German war aims. Leftist Social Democrats would have indeed been surprised, given the antagonist relationship between the army and the SPD before the war, that their greatest ally against annexations was the Chief of the General Staff, General Erich von Falkenhayn. In November 1914, after Moltke's defeat on the Marne and his own failure to restore Germany's strategic initiative with a breakthrough in Flanders (the so-called race to the sea), a worried Falkenhayn had warned Bethmann Hollweg that the army could not beat the whole Entente alliance.¹¹⁰ He advised that a separate peace be concluded with France or, preferably Russia, so that resources could be focused on defeating Germany's 'true' enemy, Britain. To entice Russia into negotiations. Falkenhayn stressed the necessity of relinquishing annexationist hopes in the east and to only ask for limited reparations. From France, he likewise wished for no more than compensations and the destruction of its Belfort fortress. Although these were the most moderate aims advocated by the military during the war, they ultimately led to nowhere in terms of shaping German wartime imaginaries of the postwar or in terms of occupation policy during the conflict. This was due to two major reasons. Firstly, Britain, France, and Russia had already agreed at the start of September 1914 not to conclude peace separately. Perhaps even more crucially for shaping German visions of a new Mitteleuropa, Falkenhayn's strategic assessment was almost universally regarded within the Reich by military leaders and civilians alike as too pessimistic. Popular passions for war were already inflamed after the July days in 1914 and the German public was largely unwilling at this early juncture to contemplate a return to the status quo with no changes whatsoever.

¹¹⁰ BA/SA, R43/2398, (Band I) "Akten Falkenhayn," Kr. 2, 4-5.

Bethmann Hollweg was, by contemporary standards a moderate annexationist. To keep the SPD firmly in favor of the war effort, the Chancellor and the German Foreign Ministry continually stressed the defensive purpose of the war, while insisting that ‘defense is no feeble goal exhausting itself in the maintenance of the status quo.’ At the same time, Bethmann Hollweg was, like other German nationalists, determined to create a ‘strong and untouchable Germany.’ The retention of the valuable French mines at Briey was a constant in his privately espoused war aims.¹¹¹ However, the core of his vision, and the only point in the September program that he considered non-negotiable, was the Mitteleuropa project of an economic association in Central Europe.¹¹² Informal domination was to be achieved through customs treaties and, in some cases, military pacts with the ‘second and third tier states’ of Eastern Europe and the Balkans: a ‘United States of Europe’ under German control would, in the longer term, offer the opportunity to compete with the world’s other great economic blocs – the United States and the British and Russian Empires. Moreover, for proponents of Mitteleuropa, the economic consolidation of continental Europe under German aegis would allow for the neutralization of Belgium as an invasion channel, without having to directly annex the country, or alternatively, force Germany to dilute its ethnic homogeneity in the east through direct incorporation of Slavic areas. In this regard, Bethmann Hollweg’s preference for the ‘Mitteleuropa alternative’ reflected his consistent political modus operandi in the Reichstag of negotiating ‘diagonal paths’ of compromise between the polarized German right and left.¹¹³ Mitteleuropa as a domestic German political expediency offered substantial national economic

¹¹¹ Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, p. 209.

¹¹² BA/SA R43/2401c, (Band II), Kr. 2, 1A, 37-50.

¹¹³ As argued by W.C. Thompson in “The September Program, Reflections on the Evidence,” *Central European History* 11(4) (December, 1978), p. 353.

and political gain the satisfy nationalists and the bourgeois parties while the SPD could be satisfied that Germany was not waging a war of conquest in the east but rather waging a war of liberation against the Tsarist yoke.¹¹⁴ Finally, as the pattern of German economic penetration into the Dual Monarchy prior to 1914 had already suggested, Mitteleuropa was attractive as a means to suborn not only the Reich's continental opponents but also Germany's allies. The customs federation with Austria-Hungary would ultimately become the centerpiece of the broader Mitteleuropa plan.

Although developed behind the Reich Chancery's closed doors, the Mitteleuropa ideal received considerable publicity. In Germany, Friedrich Naumann popularized the concept with his eponymous bestseller, selling over 100,000 copies in under a month in October 1915.¹¹⁵ However, it was among Austrian German nationalists that the idea won greatest support. For them, the attraction of a closer bond with German was that it would improve their position against Austria's other nationalities and strengthen the Habsburg Empire. The historian Heinrich Friedjung, who formulated the most influential Austrian version of the Mitteleuropa plan, envisaged Germany acting 'like a heavy stone holding together the centrifugal elements in our Monarchy... at once bolstering our state from within while also enabling us the position to conduct our commerce on a fair and equitable basis with the global empires of the world.'¹¹⁶ For many Habsburg patriots, a customs union with the Monarchy's powerful northern ally would also abolish the tiresome decennial negotiations with Hungary that had been in place since the 1867 *Ausgleich* while closer military cooperation and agreements would undermine the

¹¹⁴ Miller, *Burgfrieden und Klassenkampf*, pp. 139-140.

¹¹⁵ Friedrich Naumann, "Mitteleuropa" (1915).

¹¹⁶ As cited in R.W. Kapp, "Divided Loyalties: The German Reich and Austria-Hungary in Austro-German Discussion of War Aims, 1914-1916," *Central European History*, 17(2/3), (June 1984), pp. 124-126.

Magyars' ability to hold the Monarchy hostage from its withholding of funds from the Common Army.¹¹⁷ In a series of conferences held throughout late 1915 and early 1916, Austrian Mitteleuropa enthusiasts headed by Friedjung further articulated a sweeping scheme for the reorganization and expansion of the Monarchy. The Empire would be enlarged through the annexation of Serbia, thereby ridding Austria-Hungary of its existential threat from the south, as well as the incorporation of formerly Russian-ruled Poland. The newly expanded Habsburg Polish lands would be granted its own parliament for internal affairs – similar to the dual compromise with Hungary – which would in turn leave the Germans to rule over the Czechs in Austrian Cisleithania (the Czechs having been deprived of their Galician Polish allies in the Viennese parliament).¹¹⁸

Both the German Chancellor and the Friedrich Naumann, the great popularizer of Mitteleuropa in Germany were impressed by the Austrian plan. For Bethmann Hollweg, the Austrian Mitteleuropa vision presented a solution to the dilemma of what to do with the Polish territory seized from Russian in 1914 and 1915.¹¹⁹ Bethmann Hollweg's original vision of Mitteleuropa had been conceived in September 1914 as a means of dominating Western Europe and combatting Britain. By late 1915, in the wake of both German military successes on the Eastern Front and the seeming enthusiasm of the German and Austrian public with the Mitteleuropa project, Bethmann Hollweg's vision developed into an even more ambitious scheme, with the center piece of the proposed Mitteleuropa economic union shifting decisively

¹¹⁷For more see, Manfred Rachsteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers: Österreich-Ungarn und der Erste Weltkrieg*, (Styria Vrlg., 2000), 312-315.

¹¹⁸ R.W. Kapp, "Bethmann Hollweg, Austria-Hungary and Mitteleuropa," *Austrian History Yearbook* 19 (1983), pp. 229-236.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

eastwards and hinging on an Austro-German customs union.¹²⁰ On 10 and 11 November 1915, Bethmann Hollweg, with the approval of the Kaiser and Germany's military establishment, presented to Baron Istvan Burian, the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister, a thirty-year customs alliance resting on preferential tariffs as a precondition for allowing the Tsar's Polish territories to come under Habsburg control.¹²¹

Yet despite the Mitteleuropa plan's potential in aiding Bethmann Hollweg to maneuver between Germany's pro-annexationist elites and its defense-minded working classes, the effort invested in the project had yielded no concrete results by the start of 1916. Within the German government itself, there were growing doubts about the economics of what many considered to be first and foremost a political project. For example, in a series of memo exchanges with Walther Rathenau, the Reich's Interior Minister, Clemens von Delbrueck, believed it unlikely that the Reichstag would ultimately support a customs union on such a large scale.¹²² Moreover, there were concerns that German agriculture could not compete without tariffs against cheaper Habsburg imports and worries that the signing of even a diluted version of customs agreement, in the form of a most-preferential trade agreement, would provoke retaliatory measures from other neutral powers.¹²³ Austro-Hungarian leaders were likewise reluctant to commit. In particular, Tisza, the Minister President of Hungary, was suspicious of the Mitteleuropa project and explicitly condemned both Naumann's book and its Austrian supporters as "Hungary's backdoor

¹²⁰ From Andrea Müller, *Zwischen Annäherung und Abrenzung. Oesterreich-Ungarn und die Diskussion um Mitteleuropa im Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Marburg, 2001), pp. 195-196.

¹²¹ BA/SA R 901/69763 (Nr 2/183), 201,202.

¹²² This exchange of notes on Mitteleuropa cited from Stefan Verosta, "Documents on The German Concept of Mitteleuropa, 1916-1918, and its Contemporary Critics," in Robert.A. Kann, B.K. Kiraly, and Peter Fichtner eds., *The Habsburg Empires in World War I: Essays on the Intellectual, Military, Political and Economic Aspects of the Habsburg War Effort* (University of Colorado Press: Boulder, 1977), pp. 209-214.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

saboteurs selling a cleverly concealed vassal state offer (Vasallenstaats Angebot).” Perhaps more crucially, the Emperor Franz Josef himself stringently refused any limitations on his power imposed from Germany.¹²⁴ In this context, Burian’s response to Bethmann Hollweg’s proposal in November 1915 was superficially positive, but careful to stress that closer economic ties should not impinge on the Monarchy’s sovereignty; it warned of likely problems and was intentionally vague about when negotiations might begin.¹²⁵ In any case, Austria and Hungary’s own decennial economic agreement remained a bitter source of contention between the two halves of the Monarchy. General Magyar intransigence and Hungary’s insistence on a reduction in their contribution to the Dual Monarchy’s common budget caused a long delay in returning to talks with the Germans. Only in October 1918 were the outlines of a tariff and trade deal agreed upon, but war ended less than a month afterwards before the draft legislation could be put before the German, Austrian, and Hungarian parliaments.¹²⁶ Yet as a result of Hungarian stalling and the difficulties in negotiating a comprehensive customs agreement with a nominal ally, German proponents of Mitteleuropa had, by 1916 shifted their attention further east, in an ambitious effort to reshape the economic and geopolitical contours of eastern Europe newly wrested from Tsarist Russia.

As a key facet of German ambitions in creating a Mitteleuropa, the Reich’s war aims in western and central Europe were extensive but not limitless. The Reich government did covet French economic resources, in particular the Briey mines, as well as a desire to see Belgium neutralized as a possible invasion avenue into Germany’s industrial heartland of the Ruhr.

¹²⁴ “Eric Baier diplomatic memorandum to ‘Grosses Hauptquartier from Vienna,” BA/SA R43/2464 (Band II), 52.

¹²⁵ “Diskussionen um Wirtschaftliche Sovereänität und Unterbringungsorte -bis November 1916,” in KA Vienna: MSKM (1916), 88-91/1.

¹²⁶ Stevenson, “First World War and European Integration,” pp. 848-851.

Nevertheless, the two key proponents of Mitteleuropa – Germany’s leading statesman in the early wartime years, Bethmann Hollweg and the intellectual and spokesperson of the bourgeois and liberal circles, Friedrich Naumann – both saw cooperation and indirect German control as the centerpiece of the project to consolidate continental Europe economically. This early Mitteleuropa policy premised on compromise and cooperation over outright domination tempered the desire of radical nationalists and segments of the military elite for absolute security and outright economic domination. Moreover, both German and Austrian supporters of this early vision of Mitteleuropa favored cooperation and indirect control as a means of avoiding the absorption of large numbers of resentful foreigners into the German Reich (Austrian German nationalists likewise had little desire to see Germany ‘Habsburgized’ like the Monarchy). Domestically, the Mitteleuropa plan espoused by Naumann and Bethmann Hollweg permitted the Reich government to balance precariously between the rabid demands of the political right for extensive conquest and the willingness of the left and wider public to fight only a war of defense. However, as the fortunes of war decisively shifted in Germany’s favor in the east in 1916, different calculations regarding the Mitteleuropa project prevailed. There German strategists, increasingly military men, imagined much more radical plans. From the narrow economic-centered idea of Mitteleuropa, more sweeping visions involving annexation, settlement and population movements, and ultimately a reimagining of the complex multi-ethnic borderlands of the east emerged.

Eastern Fantasies?

Despite Nazi imperial ambitions during the Second World War, the land to the east was arguably not a natural site for German expansion in 1914. Imperialist energies in the pre-war period had been directed towards Africa and China. In their own eastern borderlands, a region that today is in Poland, German officials had felt themselves already on the defensive even prior to the outbreak of war in 1914.¹²⁷ In the provinces of Posen and west Prussia, areas in which Poles were an absolute majority, the German state had spent some 400 million marks since the mid-1880s settling ethnic Germans as well as introducing a series of assimilationist measures in the cause of strengthening Germandom. Yet as a number of studies have recently shown, despite the enormous expense and effort on the part of the Prussian state, these measure achieved little except to sharpen ethnic antagonism between Poles and Germans in this borderland.¹²⁸ The prospect of expanding eastwards into Russian-ruled Congress Poland and bringing in even more Poles into the Reich, as well as Orthodox Ostjuden acted as a deterrence on German expansionist energies in the Wilhelmine period.¹²⁹ Indeed, at the outset of the war, the Kaiser had hoped that, with German support, the Poles in Russian-ruled Poland might rise up in a war of national liberation against the Tsarist yoke and would subsequently be drawn into German orbit as a Polish satellite state.¹³⁰ However, no Polish insurrection occurred in 1914 and German strategists remained indecisive regarding the future of Eastern Europe. It would be the subsequent course of

¹²⁷ Phillipp Ther, "Deutsche Geschichte als imperial Geschichte," in *Das Kaiserreich Transnational* (Droste Vrlg.,: Berlin, 2010) , pp. 47-58.

¹²⁸ For example, W.W. Hagen's *Germans, Poles, and Jews: The Nationality Conflict in the Prussian East, 1772-1914* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 180-194. For a more recent long-term analysis, see e.g. Vejas G. Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2010), pp. 100-129.

¹²⁹ Ther, "Deutsche Geschichte," p. 60.

¹³⁰ Fischer, *Germany's War Aims*, pp. 137-141.

the war itself that pushed German policy in a radically new direction and ultimately re-defined Mitteleuropa along more explicitly imperial lines.

Initially, not only the negative experience of Germany in its own eastern borderlands but also international factors prompted the Reich's leaders to take a moderate attitude to the east. The Habsburg Foreign Minister in 1914, Count Leopold von Berchtold, had already staked out Austria-Hungary's claims on Polish territory and articulated these territorial aspirations quite early to his counterpart von Jagow in Berlin.¹³¹ On August 12, just three and half weeks after he and other Habsburg leaders guaranteed Tisza that there would be no substantial annexations, Berchtold began lobbying for the attachment of Congress Poland to Galicia. Neither Berchtold's Austro-Polish solution nor a satellite state were especially attractive options to German decision-makers, but they offered the most plausible means to realize the September program's aim of 'thrusting Russia back as far as possible.' However, everything remained in flux and in the autumn of 1914, after Falkenhayn privately announced that the combined Entente powers could not be beaten, the option of returning any land won in the east to Russia in return for a separate peace gained in appeal among moderates in the Reichstag: indeed, it was plausible at that juncture that Germany might end the war against Russia empty-handed.¹³²

In any case, German war planning in the east ultimately did come to embrace radical ideas of annexation and settlement. Yet, as the German willingness to concede land to Russia in 1914 as well as the remarkable flexibility of the Mitteleuropa project on the whole suggest, this transformation was not, as the Fischerian interpretation had stressed, because of an innate

¹³¹ Wilhelm Conze, *Polnische Nation und deutsche Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Graz: 1958), pp. 60-61.

¹³² Erich von Falkenhayn, *German General Headquarters and its Critical Decisions 1914-1916*, (Hutchinson Press: London, 1919).

aggression built into the fabric of the Reich's state and society; more recent scholars have assumed the German conquest and occupation of eastern Europe radicalized German policy vis-à-vis the east.¹³³ Building off of this newer literature, it is also necessary to stress that radicalization in German policy began even before Russia's Polish and Baltic borderlands were overrun in the summer of 1915. The initial drive was indeed defensive: the radicalization of the eastern plans came about in reaction to the traumatic defensive experience of beating off Russian invasion in East Prussia and Galicia.¹³⁴ The attack on East Prussia in the summer of 1914 prompted calls from right-wing intellectuals for annexations in the east as a defensive measure. By that December the government began seriously to consider the question. On December 6th, 1914 von Bethmann Hollweg asked the hero of Tannenberg, Paul von Hindenburg to propose adjustments to the frontier in order to better protect the Reich's vulnerable eastern provinces.¹³⁵ This request was made in the immediate aftermath of military crisis, after the Tsarist army had launched a second invasion in the east, while further to the south, Russian forces briefly reached the outskirts of Cracow before being thrown back. The possibility of a Russian attack on Germany's key industrial region of Silesia and even a further advance on Posen, the gateway to Berlin, seemed terrifyingly real at that moment. This narrowly averted mortal peril in turn focused minds on how Germany's eastern border could be secured in the future.¹³⁶

¹³³ See for example, Veja Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2000) and Annemarie Sammartino, *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East, 1914-1922* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2010). These arguments in turn also bear a striking structural resemblance to the w argument found in Omer Bartov's earlier works on the Eastern Front in World War II, stressing the front as a politically radicalizing space that re-shaped German soldiers and by extension, German society on the home front.

¹³⁴ Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel*, p. 87.

¹³⁵ Bethmann Hollweg, Letter to Hindenburg, BA/MA R43 2398c, 4II/ 127.

¹³⁶ Immanuel Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen, 1914-1918. Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Kriegszielpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg, 1960), pp 43 and 70-75.

In this context, it was no surprise that the first detailed, official plans for German annexations in the east were drawn up by the President of beleaguered East Prussia, Adolf von Batocki. His memorandum, 'On World Peace 1915, from an East Prussian,' completed on December 20th, 1914 and set to the Reich Chancery, illustrates how defensive fears rather than aggressive ambitions could drive radical actions, at least at this early juncture.¹³⁷ Von Batocki was convinced that the recent invasion had proven the need for a stronger frontier. His solution was to shift the border eastwards onto easily fortified river lines: the defensive strip that he envisaged was not large (approximately 36000 square kilometers or roughly two-thirds the area that Germany would forfeit to Poland, Lithuania, and the League of Nations at the war's end in 1918).¹³⁸ Rather, Batocki's plan was radical because of what it proposed to do with the 2.4 million inhabitants of the annexed territory. The majority, 1.3 million, were Poles, while the remainder comprised 300,000 Lithuanians, 230,000 Jews, 130,000 Germans and 40,000 Russians. For Batocki, none of these people, except the small German minority, would be welcome additions to the Reich. Instead, he advocated a population exchange as the best means of ensuring regional stability. In a chilling portent of Europe's future, he argued that peoples of undesirable race should be expelled and their lands resettled with Russia's own ethnic subjects, who were simultaneously being deported by the Tsarist army from Russia's vulnerable western frontier deep into the Russian Empire.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ "Akt: Verteidigungs Ostpreussens" BA/SA R43/2398b (II Kr.2), 71-100.

¹³⁸ Kurt Wicker, 'Der Weltkrieg in Zahlen. Verlusteam Blut und Boden,' in W. Jost ed., *Was wir vom Weltkrieg nicht Wissen* (Leipzig, 1936), p. 521.

¹³⁹ Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 129-137.

For Batocki, the racialized solution (Voelkerloesung) had an alluring symmetry about it that obscured the immense individual suffering it would have caused. Batocki forestalled moral objections by insisting that the transfer could be carried out humanely. He argued that:

‘Man, even at his most home-loving, is attached less to the place than to the community of people who provide the truest sense of belonging and home... assuming that we can preserve intact the social cohesion and provided that villages and districts could be kept together, this transfer need entail no real hardship. Indeed, the people themselves might actually benefit in the future if they were sent to more fertile regions populated with their own countrymen and people of the same stock and culture.’¹⁴⁰

Batocki as an East Prussian and the President of the only German territory directly occupied by Tsarist forces during the war felt acutely vulnerable as a result of Russian intrusion while the experience of the invasions directly inspired the idea of moving populations that would become something of a sad norm in subsequent European history from the Greco-Turkish population swap to Hitler and Stalin’s policies in the same region 30 years later. Batocki also argued that the mass flight of East Prussians from the Russian army demonstrated that whole communities could be quickly shifted with little damage: ‘If in East Prussia in August 1914 far more than 100,000 inhabitants on wagons with horses and cattle could travel over land, with no possibility of any official organization, thirty to forty miles in one direction and just as much during the six-week-long return with no substantial damage to persons or livestock, that is proof that with the correct preparation large scale re-settlement is possible without harming the rural population.’ Moreover, he insisted that the urban population would be even easier to move given that city-dwellers typically owned far fewer large possessions (cattle, farming instruments, etc.) than their rural counterparts. Indeed, Batocki’s certainty was likely grounded on his own

¹⁴⁰ BA/HA R14, Kr. 2, 88.

administrative experience. In November he had organized a successful evacuation of 200,000 East Prussian civilians from the borders hundreds of kilometers into the interior of Germany (largely into Saxony, Brandenburg, and Hesse). The fact that these East Prussian refugees had been desperate to leave, whereas the population of hostile borderlands would likely resist being ousted of their homes and livelihoods towards unknown destinations, was passed over in Batocki's plan.

If the defense of East Prussia against Tsarist invasion in the summer and autumn of 1914 was the first impetus to new, extreme and racialized action, advance and conquest in the east from early summer of 1915 acted as a second impetus and further swelled the ambitions of the Central Powers. The joint German-Habsburg offensive at Gorlice-Tarnow at the beginning of May 1915 not only triggered a massive Russian military collapse in the south, liberating most of Galicia, but forced a general retreat of between 250 and 400 kilometers from previously Russian-ruled Congress Poland. On August 5th, 1915, Warsaw fell to German troops. To the north, Lithuania and Courland were in German hands by the autumn. The invaders' arrival in these recently conquered territories likely came as a relief to much of the population, especially Jews. The Russians had conducted a vicious scorched-earth retreat that involved the mass looting of foodstuffs and cattle while cities were stripped of all valuables and burned: in Poland alone, some 20 percent of all war-related damage throughout the entire conflict was inflicted by Russian forces in this short period.¹⁴¹ Even worse than material loss was the rounding up of military-aged men and people of ethnicities condemned as unreliable, who were forced into a miserable march eastwards with the retreating Tsarist army. In total, the Russian army pushee

¹⁴¹ Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I*, (University of Indiana Press: Bloomington, 1999), pp. 211-215.

some 3.3 million civilians with them in the catastrophic withdrawal with no preparations made to feed or quarter them.¹⁴² Russian scorched-earth policies provided a huge propaganda boost for the Central Powers. As letters sent home by German soldiers on the eastern front show, advancing into the deliberately devastated landscape and encountering desperate and dispossessed inhabitants, the Germans could be left in no doubt that they faced an evil empire.¹⁴³

The imaginations of German and Habsburg leaders were excited by the capture of this eastern territory. For Austria-Hungary, the conquest of Congress Poland offered its best chance finally to implement long-delayed and needed structural reform. In August 1915, as Warsaw fell, the Germans appeared to be leaning towards conceding the territory to their ally at the price of closer economic union and support for the Mitteleuropa project. In short, eastern expansion at last held the promise of realizing (at least in part) some vision of Mitteleuropa. While the problem of how to deal with Serbia once it was vanquished had prompted acrimonious debate, both Central Powers agreed that as soon as Russia entered the war that Congress Poland must be annexed. The question was how? Even more than other aspects of the Dual Monarchy's foreign policy, war aims were defined by the need to maintain a fragile domestic balance within the Empire. Schemes for replacing the Habsburg dualist structure with a Trialist one were proposed. The Finance Minister, Leon Bilinski, and the Polish Supreme National Committee wanted Galicia and Congress Poland to be fused as a new Habsburg state. Conrad von Hotzendorf, who was less enthused by annexation in Poland, imagined a different third state, this one constructed from Habsburg South Slav possessions tied to a newly annexed Serbia.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Liulevicius, *War Land*, p. 17.

¹⁴³ Reinhold Sieglerschmidt's letters from August 10, 14, 15 1915 accessed at www.europeana1914-1918.edu.

¹⁴⁴ Conrad v. Hotzendorf, "Briefings to General Staff," Vienna KA, S11/5, 150.

Both schemes were blocked by the Hungarian Minister President Tisza, whose priority was to preserve Magyar influence in a dualist framework. Instead, in August 1914, a classic Habsburg balancing act was adopted. In the spirit of Count Taaffe, a former Austrian Minister President who had described his job as keeping Franz Josef's fractious peoples in a state of 'well-tempered discontent,' a solution was agreed between the two halves of the Empire that would partially satisfy everybody while ultimately not wholly satiating anybody.¹⁴⁵ Austrian Poles would be united with their compatriots in Congress Poland, but at the cost of predominantly Ruthenian eastern Galicia, which would be removed from their control and joined with Bukovina and some Ukrainian territories annexed from Russia, satisfying Ruthenes' aspirations for their own Crownland. The Austrian Germans, including Minister President Stuerghk, welcomed the idea, for under the cover of giving Poles complete autonomy over domestic affairs in their new, more ethnically homogenous Crown-land, Polish deputies could be removed from Austria's Reichsrat, leaving Germans in an absolute majority position to dominate the restive Czechs. The Hungarians could also live the new structure. An enlarged but divided Galicia would have no claim to be a dualist state, and instead would occupy a sub-dualist position within Austria. To maintain balance between the two halves of the Monarchy, Hungary would also grow, absorbing the long-standing dilemma of what to do with this orphan territory, along with Austrian Dalmatia.¹⁴⁶

The disastrous performance of Habsburg armies in Galicia and Serbia during 1914 made these ambitions moot. Far from carving up conquered territories, Franz Josef's minister and diplomats spent the first months of 1915 fending off German calls to relinquish Austrian

¹⁴⁵ L. Hoebelt, 'Well-Tempered Discontent': Austrian Domestic Politics,' in Mark Cornwall ed., *The Last Years of Austria Hungary: A Multi-National Experiment in Early Twentieth-Century Europe* (Exeter, 2002), p. 48.

¹⁴⁶ Leslie, 'Antecedents,' pp. 311, 322, 371-373.

Trentino or part of Hungarian Transylvania.¹⁴⁷ However, by the summer of 1915, fresh eastern victories placed territorial gain and reform back on the Habsburg agenda. This was true not only in Austria, but also in Hungary, where the calls of the restless Croatian parliament for Croatia to be joined with Dalmatia and Bosnia Herzegovina added urgency. As Judson recently stressed, Tisza, despite his reputation for Magyar chauvinism, understood that South Slav aspirations must be partially met if they were to be neutralized and he gradually developed a dual strategy. The first arm of this strategy was to continue to oppose Serbia's annexation, which he feared would lead to a South Slav bloc threatening Hungary's privileged position with the Empire. Indeed, after Serbia was finally conquered with German help in the autumn of 1915, Tisza advocated Austria-Hungary's own border strip and population transfer, in which the population of north-west Serbia including Belgrade, would be replaced with loyal Magyars and Germans. Like the strip planned by the Germans in the north discussed earlier, which was intended for defense but had a secondary purpose of cutting Prussian Poles off from their eastern compatriots, Tisza's strip was intended to quash irredentist nationalism in the south by dividing Habsburg South Slavs from the remnants of Serbia.¹⁴⁸

Tisza also recognized that the advances in the east offered an opportunity to please the Croats. The second part of his strategy built on this insight and was intended to give some satisfaction to South Slav ambitions. In October 1915, he proposed in Vienna the transfer of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Dalmatia to Hungary, thereby linking Croats with their fellow Balkan compatriots. In the end, all of these schemes were contingent on German cooperation and agreement. In November 1915, determined to further Austrian German political control inside

¹⁴⁷ May, *Passing of the Hapsburg Monarchy*, pp. 175-176.

¹⁴⁸ Peter Judson, *The Habsburg Monarchy*, pp. 200-202.

the Dual Monarchy and, moreover, to strengthen the Reich's already burgeoning economic dominance over its southern ally, Bethmann Hollweg broke to Istvan Burian, the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister, the news that the issue of Poland and Serbia (and the extent to which Austria-Hungary could annex either) was still only on the table if Vienna first agreed to join the Mitteleuropa project.¹⁴⁹

Towards Ober Ost

Further north on the Eastern Front, Lithuania and Courland were marked from their occupation in the summer of 1915 as areas of unequivocally German expansion. The plans for these regions bore similarity to the population transfers and annexation envisaged for the neighboring Polish borderlands, but on a much larger scale; Ober Ost, as the militarized occupation state established in this region during the First World War was known, covered 108,808 square kilometers.¹⁵⁰ The project could, at least initially, also be presented in humanitarian terms, thanks to the Tsarist regime's brutal deportation of hundreds of thousands of Russian-subject ethnic Germans from the Baltics over the winter of 1914-1915. While the Reich government had never regarded the Volksdeutsche with much interest before the war, it now asserted a right, on the basis of shared ethnicity, to defend these 'tortured and persecuted countrymen,' and they immediately became central to Baltic colonization schemes.¹⁵¹ The Berlin University Professor of Agronomics and

¹⁴⁹ Mark Cornwall, 'The Habsburg Elite and the Southern Slav Question, 1914-1918,' in L. Hoebelt and T.G. Otte eds., *A Living Anachronism? European Diplomacy and the Habsburg Monarchy. Festschrift fuer Francis Roy Bridge zum 70. Geburtstag*, (Vienna, 2010), pp. 249-253.

¹⁵⁰ Liulevicius, *War Land*, p. 21.

¹⁵¹ Sammartino, *Impossible Border*, pp. 32-37. Quotation from Bethmann Hollweg's speech in the Reichstag on 5th April 1916.

Germany's foremost expert on settlement, Max Sering, set out in an influential report in the autumn of 1915 proposals for the annexation and Germanicization of the territory of Ober Ost. Courland, today in western Latvia, was judged easily assimilable because its large landowners and urban bourgeoisie were predominantly ethnic Germans.¹⁵² The other 90 percent of inhabitants were mostly illiterate Lett peasants; Sering concluded that with the right education and a sufficient influx of German settlers, who would be drawn from Russia's 1.8 million German subjects, it was feasible to thoroughly Germanize them within a generation. Lithuania, which was more densely populated and with its own proud history of statehood and culture, was regarded by Sering as a greater challenge. Nonetheless, if the native Polish aristocracy were deported, and with exemplary administration, he thought optimistically that Lithuanians might be won over to German rule.¹⁵³

Major General Erich Ludendorff, then the Chief of Staff on the Eastern Front, ruled Ober Ost as his own personal fiefdom. He shared Sering's conviction that the Baltic lands must be retained for its military and economic value. At the end of April 1916, Ludendorff began to prepare for colonization by ordering reports on the ethnicity and religion of the indigenous population, land ownership and soil quality.¹⁵⁴ His Social Darwinism and German supremacism, beliefs shared with the German far-right and the Pan-Germans especially, likely accounted in part for his actions. However, in the spring of 1915 Ludendorff had also rejected what he condemned as the 'exaggerated demands' circulating at home in a memorandum to Bethmann Hollweg. Besides the Briey mines, Liege, and modest reparations, Ludendorff argued for a far

¹⁵² Fischer, *Germany's Aims*, pp. 273-279.

¹⁵³ R.L. Nelson, 'From Manitoba to the Memel: Max Sering, Inner Colonization and the German East,' *Social History* 35(4), (2010), pp. 442-453.

¹⁵⁴ Liulevicius, *War Land*, p. 21.

more modest set of war aims than those laid out in Bethmann Hollweg's September Program, including only 'minor border corrections' in the east: like his archrival von Falkenhayn, Ludendorff at this juncture considered it imperative to first break apart the entente powers.¹⁵⁵ Not until October did he advocate the annexation and colonization of Courland and Lithuania. His change of opinion owed much to opportunism: with the Baltic now in German hands and Russia beaten back along the length of the Eastern Front, plans, not only fantasies, of conquest were now possible.

Moreover, not generally recognized, this shift from modest war aims to dreams of sweeping conquest and geopolitical revision in the east was also motivated in large part by Ludendorff's appreciation of the changing nature of war – one that intersected with proponents of the Mitteleuropa project, at least initially. Already in April 1915, his letters to von Moltke, now Chief of the Deputy General Staff in Berlin, evince a preoccupation with the Reich's food supply and future economic base for the waging of total war.¹⁵⁶ During 1915, as shortages drastically worsened, recognition dawned that the conflict was no longer just a limited military engagement but a total effort on the part of the entire society and economy that could last years. In short, war had become more of an all-out struggle for resources. Ludendorff was focused not only on winning total victory in this new type of conflict, but he also had an eye on the next war. First, he saw control and the ruthless extraction of resources as means to compete with the material superiority of the Entente: in this regard, Ober Ost became a brutal experiment in extreme exploitation. Second, in order for Germany to survive over the long term, Ludendorff regarded conquest as indispensable. The country must expand or perish. As he warned at the end

¹⁵⁵ BA/SA R43/2398c, IV/Kr. 2, 189.

¹⁵⁶ "Ludendorff's letter to Moltke" April 5, 1915, BA/SA, R43/2398c, 111-112.

of 1915, ‘we shall be reliant only on ourselves and on our power. Nothing else matter in this struggle of life and death!’¹⁵⁷

German plans for conquest and settlement advanced in subsequent years. Yet they also shared common logics with the more cooperative vision of Mitteleuropa in terms of consolidating an economic base for struggle against the great economic world powers of the age. Where the two visions clashed was over means. Unlike proponents of Mitteleuropa such as Naumann or even von Bethmann Hollweg, Ludendorff stressed direct conquest and exploitation over economic union and political coordination. To be sure, Ludendorff’s radical and explicitly racialized vision of German dominance on the continent attracted greater support among Germany’s far-right, especially the voelkisch Pan-Germans. Friedrich von Schwerin, a Pan-German official who was founder of the Society for the Furtherance of Inner Colonization and was brought in by the government to work on the project, considered Ober Ost as a panacea for the Reich’s domestic problems.¹⁵⁸ The settlement of ethnic Germans from Russia would “resolve once and for all the competition between Poles and Germans for possession of the Reich’s eastern borderlands.” It would also offer an agricultural counterweight to the growing industry of the Reich, with deferential peasants’ votes slowing the rise of social democracy that was so disturbing to Prussian conservatives.¹⁵⁹ The new territories, Schwerin argued, could even provide a stable baes for the fulfilment of German ambitions to be a truly world power. By July 13 1915, when a meeting was held at the Reich Chancery, the government was clearly set on annexation,

¹⁵⁷ Erich Zechlin, ‘Ludendorff im Jahre 1915. Unveroeffentlichte Briefe,’ *Historische Zeitschrift* 211 (2) (October 1970), p. 335.

¹⁵⁸ BA/SA, R43/2402a, 7/Kr.2, 74-79.

¹⁵⁹ Andreas Schwab, *Vom totalen Krieg zur deutschen Gotterkenntnis: Die Weltanschauung Erich Ludendorffs* (Bern, 2005), pp. 49-51.

and the occupation administration in Poland received an oral order to begin discreetly settling Russian Germans in the designated area and, where possible, move Jews and Poles out. Wholesale forced expulsion was not agreed upon, however, and in the war's middle years the overwhelmed civilian administration shied away from this idea, although military circles centered around Ludendorff himself, continued to plan for deportations and colonization in the Baltic.¹⁶⁰

These plans chillingly pointed the way towards the future Nazi occupation practices in the same region thirty years in the future. The new wartime focus of Germany's most ambitious expansionist aims was away from overseas towards eastern Europe, the preoccupation with racial reliability, the use of population statistics, and the readiness to consider radical options like forced expulsion and resettlement. In all these aspects, the most radical elements of German visions for occupation in Ober Ost as advocated by Ludendorff resembled ominous precursors of Hitler's Generalplan Ost. Indeed the Nazi plan of 1941 intended to cleanse Poland, the Baltic states and the western regions of the Soviet Union of 45 million Slavs and replace them with German settlers.¹⁶¹ Nonetheless, two outstanding divergences should be stressed. First, Imperial German designs for expansion in the east were not, unlike Generalplan Ost, genocidal. Indeed, as the war continued, civilian decision-makers' doubts about expulsion actually grew and even the more ruthless military leadership pronounced as unnecessary wholesale deportation.¹⁶² Second, the German plans appear unexceptional in the context of equally or often more radical and

¹⁶⁰ Geiss, *Polinische Grenzstreifen*, pp. 78-107.

¹⁶¹ Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London, 2006), pp. 466-476.

¹⁶² 'Memorandum of the Supreme Command on the Polish Border Strip, July 5, 1918,' in I. Feldman ed., *German Imperialism*, pp. 133-137.

advanced projects in contested borderlands by other imperial powers. Hungary's leader, Tisza, wanted a resettled border strip in northern Serbia while France had begun to remove suspect people from the thin area of Alsace-Lorraine that it captured in 1914. Indeed, between 1914 and 1915 France aggressively re-settled some 200,000 ethnic Germans from Alsace-Lorraine as a 'precautionary measure.'¹⁶³

German plans to reorganize populations – and unlike the schemes of other contemporary states, they remained largely only plans – were thus not unique but situated in the middle of a continuum of continental European barbarity. Nor were the Reich's more conventional schemes for annexation necessarily irrational or inflexible. For Bethmann Hollweg, no less than other German leaders, perpetual security meant continental hegemony, and the German government was under considerable pressure from conservative groups, whom it regarded as its natural supporters to make extensive territorial and material gains. The Chancellor's readiness to pursue large maximum aims was the source of moral outrage among German historians of the Fischerian interpretation in the 1960s, yet in the strategic context of 1915, this was only realistic policy, since return to the status quo antebellum was unacceptable to all the major belligerents at the time.¹⁶⁴ German and Habsburg leaders' pursuit of maximum war aims in 1915 may not have won them the moral high ground, but in the absence of any possibility of a separate peace, it cannot be dismissed as irrational fantasy or the prelude to Nazi genocidal aspirations. Both governments of the leading Central Powers regarded territorial gain as essential to shoring up their domestic political positions. In Germany's case, the outstanding contradiction that emerged in 1915 was the tension between two competing visions of achieving lasting security on the

¹⁶³ Tahra Zahra, 'The Minority Problem,' *Contemporary European History* 17(2) (May 2008), pp. 149-158.

¹⁶⁴ Fischer, *War Aims*, pp. 189-197.

continent while also establishing the material basis of Germany's future global power. The Mitteleuropa project advocated by the likes of Naumann and initially Bethmann Hollweg enjoyed key support amongst German liberals, leading business and industrial interests, and even the Social Democrats who conceived of Mitteleuropa on their own terms as an effort to liberate the oppressed of eastern Europe from the Tsar – the great enemy of the working class. As discussed earlier, in 1915, Austrian Germans (especially economists and liberals) also feted the Mitteleuropa alternative as a means of resolving the Dual Monarchy's domestic political deadlock. Crucially, the Mitteleuropa vision necessitated relatively minimal annexations, fostering a cooperative framework with Germany's co-belligerents, and accepting Austrian aspirations in Poland. Yet Germany's military successes in eastern Europe in 1915 and the establishment of Ober Ost also raised the contradictory specter of outright conquest and direct material exploitation as advocated by the likes of Ludendorff, von Schwerin and in Pan-German circles. Indeed, Ludendorff's advocacy for a land grab in Congress Poland effectively precluded Austria-Hungary's acceptance of a Mitteleuropa-style economic union for the near future. And as German military fortunes in the east continued to wax through the course of the war, this contest over realizing some vision of Mitteleuropa laid out before and in the early days of the war likewise intensified.

Chapter III

The Politics of Hunger and the Politics of Occupation

Germany and Austria in the Turnip Winter

Alongside mounting casualties and increasingly contentious debates over annexationist war aims, food shortages and hunger proved to be the major destabilizer of central European societies by 1916. The “turnip winter” of 1916-1917 proved, in hindsight, to have been a turning point; discontent and protests, even in the face of overwhelming censorship and repression, foreshadowed more massive, ubiquitous, violent, and more politicized unrest that ultimately brought down both the Hohenzollern and Habsburg empires in 1918. In the context of this dissertation, their importance makes it worthwhile to delve into the causes of these shortages and the responses of the authorities in the Central Powers. How did living conditions become so bad and what reasons did both rulers and the people ascribe to the causes of deprivation? Did the governments of Germany and Austria-Hungary recognize the threat that nutritional shortages posed, not just to the lives of their subject, but the very existence of their states? How effective were their countermeasures? Moreover, how did this evolving politics of starvation ultimately shape the politics of fashioning a new Mitteleuropa amidst total war and hunger?

Indeed, the first half of 1916 was a period of relative military crisis for the Central Powers. In the face of Germany’s failure to either cripple France or Russia in 1915 (despite hubristic assurances from military leaders to their societies that the war would be over in the “second year”) and the tightening of the Allied naval blockade, Germany embarked on an

unprecedented mobilization effort.¹⁶⁵ The coming to power of Paul von Hindenburg as head of Germany's OHL (Oberste Heeresleitung or Supreme Army Command) in the second half of 1916 brought a new radicalism and ruthlessness to how Germany waged war. Society was to be remobilized for the army. Hindenburg and Ludendorff recognized the urgent need for new weapons and war machines from the home front. The first Battle of the Somme had demonstrated just how far the Reich lagged behind in terms of war production compared to the Entente powers.¹⁶⁶ For central European civilians, no less than for their soldiers, the year 1916 was grim. Home and front were intimately connected and the impact of the bloody struggles on the eastern and western fronts inevitably reverberated well beyond the battlefield. With seven million German and almost five million Austro-Hungarian men in garrisons or at the front, nearly every family had somebody to fret about. As casualties mounted – the total military dead of German and the Dual Monarchy since the start of the war exceeded one million during the course of 1916 – so did the mourners in the homeland.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, these societies were not only desperately sad, anxious and stressed, but they were also becoming ever more exhausted and impoverished. As Alexander Watson has recently stressed, the Central Powers had definitively entered into a 'siege mentality' by 1916.¹⁶⁸ The channeling of resources to the military, the ever-tightening Entente blockade, soil exhaustion and bureaucratic bungling

¹⁶⁵ Germany's economic responses to Allied blockade are discussed at length in S. Broadberry and M. Harrison eds., *The Economics of World War I*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2005).

¹⁶⁶ For a comparison of industrial mobilization among the major combatants, see Michael Geyer, *Deutsche Rüstungspolitik 1860-1980*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), especially pp. 178-185.

¹⁶⁷ Gratz and Schueller, *Wirtschaftliche Zusammenbruch*, p. 151.

¹⁶⁸ Alexander Watson, *The Fortress: The Great Siege of Przemyśl*, (New York: Basic Books, 2020), p. 318.

wrought terrible hardship on the home front. Above all, 1916 at the home front was a year defined by food shortage.

People living in German and Austro-Hungarian towns, and especially in the major metropolises, faced a miserable struggle to find food after the closing of the Allied blockade by the winter of 1915. The millions of letters sent back and forth from the front revealed that even ever tightening censorship could not mask the reality from the soldiers in the trenches of increasingly severe privation across Central European towns, cities, and villages. Anna Kohnstern's letters to her soldier-son Albert offer a window into the troubles that she and other citizens of Hamburg, then the Reich's second-largest city, endured. In March 1916 she wrote him that queues of 600 or 800 people would form outside shops whenever consignments of butter were delivered. Her April letters made clear that the home front was becoming a consumer battlefield: in a scramble to buy meat, she recounted, two women had been killed and sixteen hospitalized in the ensuing frantic stampede.¹⁶⁹ Both butter and meat had been scarce and expensive for much of 1915.¹⁷⁰ What made 1916 worse was that grain from the last harvest had been consumed already before the year began and potatoes started to run out in the spring. The family lost weight; Anna especially, as she continually skimmed off part of her inadequate ration so as to send extra food to her son in the field.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Albert Hartmuth, letters from his mother Anna, 13 March, 12 and 29 April 1916 from Volker Ullrich ed., *Vom Augusterlebnis zur Novemberrevolution. Beitrage zur Sozialgeschichte Hamburgs und Norddeutschlands im Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Bremen, 1999), pp. 40-61.

¹⁷⁰ Martin. S. Schoulze, 'Austria-Hungary's Economy in World War I,' in S. Broadberry and M. Harrison eds., *The Economics of World War I*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 81.

¹⁷¹ Albert Hartmuth, letters from his mother Anna and sister Trudi, 15 November and 1st December 1916 from Volker Ullrich ed., *Vom Augusterlebnis zur Novemberrevolution. Beitrage zur Sozialgeschichte Hamburgs und Norddeutschlands im Ersten Weltkrieg*.

The summer brought Hamburg's first major hunger riots, in which thousands of working-class women and youths shouted for bread, looted bakeries and fought police. When a cold, wet autumn created the conditions for a fungus to destroy half of the annual potato crop, a terribly difficult winter, the worst in nutritional terms that Germany experienced during the war, was unavoidable. As Anna told Albert despairingly in November, 'shopping for food is becoming even worse. One is underway the entire day and still gets nothing.'¹⁷² She and her five daughters closed off most of their lodgings and huddled in one room in order to save on heating fuel, which was also scarce and expensive. Like other families across central Europe, the Kohnsterns subsisted that winter on turnips (typically used as cattle fodder which the German and Austro-Hungarian states forced farmers to surrender to avert wholesale famine in the cities). In a remarkable lapse from postal German censorship, Anna's letters became openly desperate: "It isn't going to be possible to get through winter... it is high time that the war was ended or it will be the death of us all."

Millions in towns and cities across Germany and Austria-Hungary shared the Kohnsterns' plight. The search for scarce essentials such as soap, fuel, clothing and, above all, food increasingly dominated civilians' lives. The Berlin *Tageblatt* newspaper reported as early as May 1916 on how cityscapes had altered as shopping, once so simple, had become a cut-throat competition with one's neighbors:

Whoever in these cool spring nights is willing to take a walk through the streets of the city will, already before midnight, see figures loaded up with all sorts of household equipment creeping here and there in front of the market halls, at times also in front of the various warehouses and grocery stores. At first there are only a few but with the chime of midnight the groups swell to crowds... women for the most part. At first, they huddle on the steps of the surrounding shops and on iron railings. Soon however one of

¹⁷² Ibid.

them comes and puts down a straw sack next to the entrance, on which she makes herself comfortable. That is the signal for a general movement. Behind the lucky owner of the straw sack, a second woman sets up a deckchair. Close next to her a less demanding lady takes up position on a simple wickerwork chair, which she has brought God knows how far from her apartment... between and behind the lucky ones are other lines extending in every direction with rows of five to eight people next to each... mostly other women but in modest numbers also men, and even children. Through the rows spreads a lively chatter... in time the chatter ceases. The woman with the straw sack lies down for a short nap. The woman with the deckchair follows her example. The others stand there apathetically, some sleep standing and the moonlight makes their faces appear even sallow. The Police appear and walk up and down morosely. The morning dawn breaks. New crowds arrive... and at last the selling begins. And the result: to each a pitiful half or, if one has special luck, a whole pound of meat, lard or butter for half of the buyers, while the others must leave with nothing.¹⁷³

Berliners were not alone in experiencing such extremes of wartime deprivation. The same shortage crisis played out across cities and towns in central Europe. Indeed, the Viennese suffered perhaps the most. In the spring of 1917, a quarter of a million people, approximately 12 percent of the city's population, daily stood in one of almost 800 queues around the city.¹⁷⁴ More than one-fifth of these shoppers departed empty-handed, their strength wasted with nothing to show for their efforts. In some working-class districts, lines formed outside bakeries already shortly after 10 p.m. Anyone who arrived after 3 in the morning was unlikely to get to the front before the flour on sale was exhausted.

As Maureen Healy notes in her social history of wartime Vienna, the successful shopper needed not only to know where the next irregular food delivery would arrive and come early

¹⁷³ Berlinger Tageblatt, May 19, 1916, cited abridged in Alan Skalweit, *Die deutsche Kriegsernährungswirtschaft* (Stuttgart, 1927), pp. 200-202.

¹⁷⁴ Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in the Habsburg Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 75-76.

enough to reach the front of the line before the limited supplies ran out.¹⁷⁵ Although official controls kept down the price of some staple products, rapid wartime inflation nevertheless challenged the consumers' ability to purchase foodstuffs. Indeed, historians have long noted that the disastrous hyperinflation of the early Weimar years actually originated in the Reich's wartime monetary policies, which reflected efforts by the German state to provide some degree of official subsidies for starving civilians.¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, food prices in German cities were already one and a half times their peace-time level at the end of 1915.¹⁷⁷ The new shortages prompted a sudden spurt of further inflation, bringing prices in the spring of 1916 to double the pre-war level, where they remained until early 1917.¹⁷⁸ In Austria, which lacked the financial means to sustain a total war, inflation spiraled even further: internal memos from the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture estimate the cost of basic foodstuffs in Cisleithania was likely three times by the end of 1915 as its prewar levels, a figure which then jumped a staggering six-fold by December 1916.¹⁷⁹

While earnings in Germany and the Habsburg Monarchy also increased with the early inflation, they still could hardly keep up with the rapidly rising costs. In Germany, the real wages of most male and female manual workers were worth seventy-five percent of their peacetime

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁷⁶ For example Richard J. Evans., *The Coming of the Third Reich*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2003), especially pp. 57-59. The subject of the antecedents to Weimar Germany's inflationary monetary policies is also discussed in Detlev Peukert's *The Weimar Republic*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

¹⁷⁷ Figure cited from Peter Heumos, "Kartoffeln hier oder es gibt eine Revolution," in H. Mommsen, D. Kovac, J. Malir, and M. Marek eds., *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Beziehungen zwischen Tschechen, Slowaken und Deutschen*, (Essen, 2001), p. 272.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Mark Grandner, *Kooperative Gewerkschaftspolitik in der Kriegswirtschaft: Die freien Gewerkschaften Oesterreichs im ersten Weltkrieg*, (Vienna, 1992), pp. 97-99 and 197.

value by March, and only around 60 percent by September 1916. Even in crucial war industries like munitions, metallurgy, chemicals, and electrics, where pay was much better than the average, workers' real wages still fell by around six percent for women and over twenty percent for men.¹⁸⁰ Workers in Austria fared significantly worse than their counterparts in Germany, not only because of higher price inflation, but also because they were subject to more compulsion than the proletariat of wartime Germany. Austrian factories producing for the Habsburg armed forces operated under the *Kriegsleistungsgesetz* or "War Service Act" of 1912, which suspended workers' rights to resign or collectively protest in wartime. Thus, in the metals industry, which in Germany offered some of the highest and most durable wages, all but the most skilled Austrian workers saw their real earnings drop below half of the prewar levels already by March 1916.¹⁸¹ As Walther Rathenau noted in a 1916 report to the Reich Ministry of Armaments (a department he would go on to head), the geographic distribution of Austrian industry lent a further nationalist dimension to festering labor unrest in the Habsburg lands: Bohemia, the industrial heartland of Habsburg Cisleithania and the center of its arms manufacturing suffered disproportionately from inflation and tightening control over workers' rights. Indeed, by the end of 1916, workers' real wages in Bohemia were a meagre 30 percent of their prewar value.¹⁸² Rathenau presciently noted that Austrian authorities must "make efforts to either soothe the national aspirations" of Czech workers or offer them something "as workers per se" lest Austria's core industrial region explode into open resistance against the war effort.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Figures cited from Koeka, *Facing Total War*, pp. 84-89.

¹⁸¹ Mai, *Kriegswirtschaft*, pp. 396-397.

¹⁸² Walther Rathenau, Bericht zum Reichsrüstungskommission, 13 March, 1916, BA/SA R13-I.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

Privation and discontent were by no means limited to the industrial proletariat in the wartime Central Powers. White-collar workers were in even greater trouble. German salaries had been cut during the war's first eighteen months. Subsequently, office workers accrued raises and more allowances, yet at the end of 1917, their nominal earnings were only eighteen percent higher than at the outbreak of hostilities, whereas workers in factories not producing for the war had been given raises of approximately forty percent in the same period, and many of those in the war industries had increased their nominal takings by well over one hundred percent, far too short to keep pace with the spiraling inflation: indeed, it is estimated that real earnings (adjusted for inflation) fell by as much as fifty percent for white collar workers in this period.¹⁸⁴ Coupled with the fact that the German middle classes differentiated themselves from the proletariat on the basis of having significant bank savings, the wartime inflation devastated the salaried German worker in a fashion that laid the groundwork for the subsequent "Panik im Mittelstand" in the Weimar Republic. Civil servants were no more protected than desk-bound administrators in private businesses; by 1917 their salaries had lost around half of their value.¹⁸⁵ Indeed, many white-collar employees earned less than munitions workers, a change experienced as a deep humiliation for many in Germany's traditional middle class and one with far reaching political consequences in the interwar period.¹⁸⁶

Despite the hardship, anxiety over the fate of loved ones at the front, hunger, and shortages, Central Europeans continued to fight against deprivation with whatever means they

¹⁸⁴ Mai, *Kriegswirtschaft*, p. 399.

¹⁸⁵ Roger Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 179.

¹⁸⁶ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, pp. 91-93. Thomas Childers suggested a very similar argument in *The Nazi Voter, The Social Foundations of Fascism in Germany, 1919-1933* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

had. Increasing earnings was one obvious strategy, since food was always available outside official channels to those who could pay directly with cash. In the Reich, contrary to what has long been assumed, there was no sudden rush of women taking their first job, and with it their first step towards emancipation, during the war.¹⁸⁷ As recent historical scholarship has shown, overall female employment remained at a level similar to that in peacetime. The key change was where women worked. Hundreds of thousands of German women left low-paid jobs in the textile industry, domestic service, and agriculture for better wages offered by state-subsidized war industries.¹⁸⁸ The same general pattern holds true for Austria-Hungary, albeit to a lesser extent due to the Monarchy's smaller industrial base. In Cisleithania, around forty percent of the total workforce employed in war industries' was female by 1916.¹⁸⁹ In the Magyar half, the number of women working in manufacturing industries increased by some sixty-five percent, to over 200,000 by May of 1916.¹⁹⁰ Many women simply took over their conscripted husbands' positions. By the Fall of 1915, a fifth of the total 14,000 female employees working for German tram companies, for example, were the spouses of drafted tram workers. For soldiers' wives with small children, domestic manual labor, like sewing sandbags or assembling gas masks, could provide a small but useful supplement to state support.¹⁹¹

Family members also worked together to ameliorate difficult conditions. In the war's early years, food had flowed from home to the front, but this trend partially reversed in 1916 as

¹⁸⁷ Ute Daniel, *The War from Within, German Women in the First World War*, (New York: Berg, 1997), pp. 38-49.

¹⁸⁸ See for example B.K. Kiraly and N.F. Dreislinger eds., *East European Society in World War I*, (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2020), p. 126.

¹⁸⁹ Grandner, *Kooperative Gewerkschaftspolitik*, pp. 147-148.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁹¹ J. Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism and Authority in Germany 1914-1918*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 146-152.

worried soldiers acquired by whatever means foodstuffs in the occupied territories and sent them to their families. Territorial advances made by German and Austro-Hungarian armies in 1916 also opened up large swathes of agricultural land in Eastern Europe for “foraging” by Central Powers soldiers. Anna Kohnstern, the housewife from Hamburg, was fortunate to have a brother serving in the military staging areas in Belgium who, after he came home on leave and saw how she was living, began to send her beans, butter, and meat.¹⁹² Her son Albert, who was fighting on the Eastern Front, routinely sent back smoked Baltic herring as well as some of his soldier’s wages. From the perspective of the Reich’s military leaders after 1916, the increasingly desperate material deprivations of the civilian population threatened to shatter the internal wartime solidarity within Germany. Despite official exhortations for ever greater sacrifice for *Volk und Vaterland*, the tightening effects of Allied blockade and intensified German efforts to mobilize prompted a switch to individual (or familial) preservation in the face of growing hunger. As a result, black marketing and “hamstering (Hamstern)” – the practice of traveling to the countryside to buy directly from farmers - became routine in both Germany and Austria.

While these strategies for coping with hunger are understandable, they nevertheless undermined the already strained supply system. An internal memo from September 1916 circulated to the staff of the state secretary of Wurttemberg about Stuttgart’s milk deliveries offers one rather striking illustration of how detrimental smuggling was for the official food supply. As a result of weekend “hamstring,” that month the city of Stuttgart received just one-sixth of the quantity of milk on Sundays and Mondays that it received on other days. When the city council subsequently altered the railway timetables to nearby farming regions the following

¹⁹² A. Hartmuth, letter from his mother, 14 May 1917 from Volker Ullrich ed., *Vom Augusterlebnis zur Novemberrevolution. Beitrage zur Sozialgeschichte Hamburgs und Norddeutschlands im Ersten Weltkrieg.*

month, Stuttgart's official supply system immediately received an additional 500 liters of milk.¹⁹³ Two years into the war, smuggling had become big business, carried out by chains of professional criminals. Black market food in relatively well-off southern Germany cost at least twice as much as its official price and four to five times as much as its peacetime price.¹⁹⁴

In Austria, where food shortages were extreme, the differences were even more stark: a young Friedrich Hayek who was serving with an Austrian artillery unit wrote home in 1917 that white flour, for example, was selling on the black market in western Galicia at nearly six times the official price, and more than fifteen times its peacetime price.¹⁹⁵ Austrian authorities, although they prosecuted hungry "hamsters" and professional smugglers under draconian wartime laws, were notoriously hypocritical in the eyes of hungry civilians for being just as guilty of disregarding official prices. The Habsburg War Ministry along with other central state offices employed their own "scouts" (Aufklärer) to scour the Viennese black market for coveted foodstuffs like undiluted white flour simply because there was no other way to obtain such products in sufficient quantities through official channels.¹⁹⁶ In Germany, big armament firms like Thyssen and Krupp undertook massive illegal food purchases with the connivance of military officials. This supplementary nutrition was then distributed in factory canteens or given to employer-owned "yellow unions" to keep workers fit and compliant, as was therefore, from the perspective of Germany's military government, beneficial for munitions production.¹⁹⁷ Yet

¹⁹³ Edward Tobin, "War and the Working Class," in *Central European History*, 18(3), 1986, pp. 275-298.

¹⁹⁴ L. Grebler and W. Winkler, *The Cost of the Great War to Germany and Austria Hungary*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), p.83.

¹⁹⁵ Cited from Rudolf Meerwarth, "Die Entwicklung der Bevölkerung in Deutschland während der Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit," in R. Meerwarth, A. Günther and W. Zimmermann eds., *Die Einwirkung des Krieges auf Bevölkerungsbewegung, Einkommen und Lebenshaltung in Deutschland*, (Berlin, 1932), p. 65.

¹⁹⁶ Daniel, *The War from Within*, p. 99.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-132.

its removal from the market still entailed greater hardship for everyone else. Indeed, the last two years of the war, from the end of 1916 to November 1918, Rathenau's Raw Materials Department in the German War Ministry estimated that between a third and a fifth of all German agricultural produce was sold through illegal channels, with Rathenau himself admitting after the war to the Berliner *Tageblatt* that any effort during the war to change this would have likely crashed the German economy completely.¹⁹⁸ The black market in Germany had become indispensable for the meeting the basic material needs of the German civilian population.

Regardless of what they did, be it "hamstring," working long hours of overtime for extra wages, or even gardening, central European civilians suffered terribly from food shortages. They lost weight, became weak, exhausted, and more vulnerable to sickness. The extent of Germany's wartime economic woes is illustrated by the fact that even soldiers – the best supplied section of the national population – were affected. A medical inspection of recruits at the depot of Infantry Regiment 46 in rural Posen, West Prussia found at the end of 1916 that, after just one month of training, some fifteen percent of recruits had lost weight, many by as much as seven kilos.¹⁹⁹ The inspection report noted that the primary cause was malnutrition, with soldiers receiving only about four-fifths the daily carbohydrate, half of the protein and a quarter of their fat ration: the army doctor who carried out the investigation warned of damage to the young soldiers' bodies and significant impact on military performance if the state did not increase rations in the long-

¹⁹⁸ W. Rathenau, Rede 2 Mai 1919, BA/SA R31 – II, 21-24.

¹⁹⁹ Investigation of men in Ersatzbataillon, Infanterie Regiment 46 in Jarotschin, end of 1916, BA/MA Freiburg, PH10II/73.

term while some young soldiers hoarding rations to send home to even more hungry loved ones was also partly to blame.²⁰⁰

The question of whether civilians in Central Europe actually starved was, and remains, a highly controversial topic. In the aftermath of the war, German authorities claimed that there had been 763,000 excess civilian deaths, a figure often cited by subsequent historians as evidence of the so-called Allied “Hunger blockade.”²⁰¹ More recent work since the publication of a massive study on German wartime agriculture by the historian Avner Offer has called that figure into doubt. Food was adequate, apart from during the notorious “turnip winter” of 1916 – 1917 and the final stretch of the war from the late summer of 1918 into the final German collapse in November.²⁰² In this vein, other scholars have suggested that people’s need for calories generally declined as they lost weight; they cite official state statistics for infant mortality in the Reich, which barely changed for most of the war, and in fact was slightly lower in certain years than it had been in peacetime, indicating that the health of German mothers was not seriously compromised.²⁰³ However, the poorest and the hungriest are not well represented in these wartime studies. Current scholarship still agrees that even if people were not actually starving, many central Europeans were dangerously malnourished, exposing them to diseases, like the influenza pandemic of 1918 which devastated Europe after the war. A recent study noted that the

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ The interwar German foreign ministry sought to publicize this argument via a network of historical publications in an effort to rebrand Imperial Germany as a victim of “English perfidy.” See for example *Volksgesundheit im Kriege*, 2 volumes (Berlin 1926), and K. Kelly, *Statistik der Gesundheitsverhältnisse der Bevölkerung nach dem Kriege*, (1923).

²⁰² Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

²⁰³ Skalweit, *Deutsche Kriegsnahrungswirtschaft*, pp. 10-12.

upward trend in German female deaths started in 1916, just as the food crisis became serious.²⁰⁴ Tuberculosis, pneumonia and other lung diseases were major killers, leading to a somewhat revised excess fatality figure of 424,000.²⁰⁵ A postwar report from a German doctors' association estimated lack of food to be the direct cause of around ten percent of total wartime deaths and a contributory factor to twenty to thirty percent of deaths. Germany teetered on the brink of starvation during the second half of the war while in the Habsburg lands, parts of Austria actually did go over the brink by late 1917. In this context of increasing shortages verging on famine, the newly conquered lands of eastern Europe seemed to offer one solution for the starving Central Powers.

Occupation as an End to Hunger?

The Germans' basic problem was that the Reich, even in peacetime, had not been self-sufficient in agricultural production. Within Europe, Russia, France, Italy, and Hungary had all been major exporters of grain before 1914 while Germany and the Austrian half of the Habsburg Empire were net importers, especially of fertilizer.²⁰⁶ On the eve of war in 1913, a quarter of the grain and two-fifths of the fats consumed by its people and animals had been imported.²⁰⁷ War further damaged this already inadequate agricultural base. Grain production, which had already fallen in 1914 and 1915 by eleven and fifteen percent from its 1913 levels

²⁰⁴ J. Roesle, "Die Geburts-und Sterblichkeitsverhaeltnisse," in Franz Bumm ed., *Deutschlands Gesundheitsverhaeltnisse unter dem Einfluss des Weltkrieges*, (Stuttgart: 1928)., pp. 54-59.

²⁰⁵ Memorandum from the Reich Health Office, May 1920, in BA/SA R49(I).

²⁰⁶ Grebler and Winkler, *The Cost of War*, p. 77.

²⁰⁷ Skalweit, *Deutsche Kriegsnahrungswirtschaft*, p. 21.

further plummeted by thirty-five percent in 1916 and by over forty percent by 1918.²⁰⁸ There were two chief causes. First was a shortage of labor. The army conscripted farmers and workers, removing the most skilled managers and the fittest men from the country's farms. By 1916, over a quarter of all German male rural laborers were under the age of 16 and nearly twenty percent over sixty. One third of the Reich's farm horses were also drafted. As one 1915 report from an army veterinarian in Northern France noted, these tough farm horses, already inured to hard labor on the farmstead, were ideal for hauling the army's guns and supplies, but their absence hindered farms from sowing and harvesting the land cultivated in peacetime.²⁰⁹ Indeed, by one estimate, despite the desperate food shortages in Germany by 1916, in the same period, total land under cultivation actually fell by almost fifteen percent due to crippling shortages of draft animals.²¹⁰

Second and even more important was the fertilizer shortage. The artificial fertilizers available to farmers, especially the nitrates that in peacetime had been mostly imported from abroad, fell by around two-thirds.²¹¹ The confiscation of horses and livestock by the army further exacerbated the fertilizer shortage since German farmers had only half the natural dung available in peacetime due to the loss in livestock as well as the decline in weight of the remaining animals. Germany's cattle declined by over a tenth, from just over eleven million in 1913 to nine million in 1918, and its pigs by more than half, from twenty-five million to just ten million in the

²⁰⁸ Albrecht Ritschl, "The Pity of Peace: Germany's Economy at War, 1914-1918 and Beyond," in S. Broadberry and M. Harrison eds., *The Economics of World War I*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 46.

²⁰⁹ Report on the Condition of Our Warhorses after One Year of War, BA/MA Freiburg, PH11(II).

²¹⁰ Zieman, *Front*, p. 100.

²¹¹ Grebler and Winkler, *The Cost of War*, p. 83-84.

same period.²¹² Adolf von Batocki, the President of the War Food Office established in May 1916, complained that poor feeding meant that the remaining domesticated animals in the Reich accounted for just over half the total peacetime mass of livestock, which in turn meant “fewer crops, leading to a vicious cycle of ever diminishing supplies.”²¹³

Austria-Hungary, a less industrialized society than Germany, had actually been self-sufficient in major foodstuffs before 1914. The fact that after 1916 the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy became at times dependent on the Reich for food aid initially seems baffling. Generally, historians have noted three main factors responsible for undermining the initial Habsburg advantage in agricultural production and contributing to its supply emergency. First, the foundations of economic disaster were laid in 1914 with the Russian invasions of Galicia and Bukovina. These Crownlands were extraordinarily important for Cisleithania, producing roughly half of the Austrian part of the Empire’s foodstuffs, rearing almost a third of its cattle and growing over a third of its wheat and around a half of its potatoes prior the war.²¹⁴ Both Galicia and Bukovina were devastated by the initial Russian onslaught, their populations displaced, draft animals taken, and farm and transportation infrastructure intentionally ransacked by Russian armies. These areas never fully recovered during the conflict. Statistics from the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture grimly noted that the 1917 yields of basic crops like wheat and barley amounted to just twenty-five and thirty-five percent, respectively, of their prewar yields.²¹⁵ Secondly, agriculture in the rest of the Habsburg Empire suffered similar problems to those experienced by farmers in Germany, ultimately not only making it impossible to replace Galician

²¹² Ibid., pp. 98-99.

²¹³ Von Batocki, Memorandum on the state of the Reich’s food supplies, in BA/SA R1506(I).

²¹⁴ Loewenfeld Russ, *Regelung der Volksernaehrung im Kriege*, (Vienna, 1925), pp. 21-23, p. 38.

²¹⁵ Gratz and Schüller, *Wirtschaftliche Zusammenbruch*, p. 145.

production, but actually resulting in an even larger food deficit. There was the same shortage of animal and human labor: the Imperial and Royal Army drafted some 814,000 horses, about a fifth of all those in the Empire, on the initial wave of mobilization in 1914, followed by hundreds of thousands more in the subsequent years of war.²¹⁶ The army also conscripted millions of men, predominantly peasants from the still largely rural Habsburg lands into the army depriving the rural economy of much needed labor. The dung and fertilizer needed to regenerate the soil were also in short supply as in Germany.

The third, and perhaps decisive, factor for why the deprivation in Habsburg Austria was so severe was the marked lack of solidarity and coordination between the two halves of the Empire. Hungarian agriculture was, throughout the war, less damaged ironically because it was so underdeveloped. Artificial fertilizers had received only limited use in Transleithania in peacetime such that their disappearance from the market in wartime impacted Hungary's food production less than those of the more modern, intensive farming methods employed in much of Austria and Germany.²¹⁷ That said, by 1916, many crop harvests in Hungary had also fallen to less than three quarters, and in areas of Croatia, to less than half of peacetime output.²¹⁸ Despite this, Hungary continued to produce large agricultural surpluses throughout the war, notwithstanding the relative backwardness of its farms, due largely to of its smaller population and the fertility of the Danubian basin. In peacetime, Hungary had furnished roughly ninety percent of Austria's total food imports.²¹⁹ In wartime, Austria had become even more dependent

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 100.

²¹⁷ Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 399.

²¹⁸ Loewenfeld Russ, *Regelung der Volksernaehrung im Kriege*, p. 30.

²¹⁹ Galantai, *Hungary*, p. 105.

on Magyar agriculture. Yet by mid-1916, Hungarian exports of key foodstuffs like wheat and meat to its Austrian partner had fallen to less than a third of prewar levels. Hungarian ministers insisted that this collapse in food shipment was to be offset by Hungary assuming sole responsibility for military provisioning by 1916. Despite these assurances, Hungarian contributions in provisions fell far short of supplying the entire joint Army, something which forced the Austrian War Ministry to further requisition millions of tons of grain from Austria's already starving civilian market.²²⁰

Hungary, as Austria's politicians and press constantly harped on, did not contribute its fair share to the Habsburg war effort. The Dualist system rendered Austria largely powerless to insist, a factor which had originally made Austria's economists and its military leadership very keen on the Mitteleuropa union proposed by Germany. However, as Germany stepped back from the proposal of a direct economic union with Austria by 1916 out of fear of alienating the Magyars, Hungarian Prime Minister Tisza not only refused to equalize rations across the Empire but also used Hungary's unusually strong position to its advantage in the decennial negotiations to renew the *Ausgleich* in 1917, effectively shackling Austria to its disadvantageous position for another decade.²²¹ Tisza's pursuit of narrow Magyar interests was, in hindsight, myopically obtuse given that it disregarded the fact that Hungary's fate was bound to the survival of its starving Austrian neighbor. Yet, as historians since the 1980s have argued, Hungarian intransigence was also the product of a deeper structural problem: Tisza's government lacked strong legitimacy due both to its highly restrictive franchise in the Hungarian legislature and to the fact that Tisza's own party only narrowly won a majority in 1910 through rampant corruption

²²⁰ Gratz and Schüller, *Wirtschaftliche Zusammenbruch*, pp. 120-121.

²²¹ Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, p. 421.

and intimidation.²²² Wartime appeals to the people to accept greater sacrifices inevitably provoked skepticism and unwelcome demands for a reciprocal increase in democratic representation and national autonomy. Already in the 1915 Spring session of parliament, Tisza had needed to slap down a proposal to enfranchise all front veterans over twenty years old, something the Minister President feared could open the door to universal suffrage. Thus maintaining the food supply in Hungary, despite its detriment to Austria, was essential for avoiding both popular unrest and calls for political reform.

Given the Central Powers' increasingly strained material circumstances, the Reich's leaders saw two ways out of the conundrum of blockade and slow starving out under siege. The first was an intensification of internal mobilization. Alternatively, Germany and Austria-Hungary could seek to relieve domestic pressures by acquiring resources from East-Central Europe. This latter strategy decisively shifted the discourse surrounding Mitteleuropa into the realm of extraction and outright domination, with further significant repercussions for Germany's domestic politics after 1917. The Central Powers had conquered extensive enemy territories in the first half of the war. By the end of 1916, they had overrun an area of over half a million square kilometers. The Reich's leaders anticipated that if the resources and populations of this vast area could be mobilized, it would great help to alleviate deprivation at home and bolster Germany's war economy.²²³ Twenty-one million foreign subjects, equivalent to a third of Germany's population, lived under the control of the Central Powers by the beginning of 1917.²²⁴ Similarly to Germany's subsequent occupation of Europe in the Second World War, the

²²² Oskar Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), pp. 186-187.

²²³ Figures from German propaganda poster, "Wer ist der Sieger?" from December 1916.

²²⁴ There were around six million people in occupied Belgium, three hundred thousand in Luxembourg, two and half million in North-Eastern France, six million in the north of Congress Poland (The "General Government Warsaw"),

Central Powers imposed a variety of occupation regimes on conquered territories. Belgium and Poland had one of the most confusing chains of command with a military Governor General answering solely to the Kaiser but nevertheless dependent on a civilian bureaucracy under the purview of the Reich Chancellor and was required to submit period reports to representatives of the Reichstag.²²⁵ Most other occupied areas were placed under exclusive army control. When the German army occupied the Baltics in 1915, Ludendorff and Hindenburg, then in command of German armies in the east, successfully resisted civilian interference and created their own military rump state, Ober Ost. Similarly, occupied North-Eastern France, was designated as a military occupation zone and was administered directly by German armies on the Western Front.²²⁶ By early 1917, with the conquest of half of Romania, a shortage of suitable personnel forced the Germans to install a military government in collaboration with local elites. Larger territories like southern Poland and Serbia were similarly administered by military governors.²²⁷

Typically, the first objective of the occupation regime established by the German armies was pacification. This was a condition for a second, central objective, economic exploitation. In turn, the antagonism that economic exploitation provoked among occupied inhabitants undermined Germany's third, longer-term aim, envisioned and pursued in many territories, namely to cement German or Habsburg influence or domination by wooing local elites and

nearly three million in Ober Ost, which comprised Courland, Lithuania, and Bialystock-Grodno. A further three and a half million Romanians were also ruled by a German puppet regime in newly conquered territories by 1917. Figures cited from *Statistische Handbuch Ersten Weltkrieges*, (Paderborn, 1979).

²²⁵ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, p. 173.

²²⁶ Lieveleviscius, *War Land*, pp. 103-104.

²²⁷ A. Bauerkaempfer and E. Julien, *Durchhalten! Krieg und Gesellschaft im Vergleich, 1914-1918* (Göttingen, 2010), p. 136.

permanently realigning their regional economies towards Germany instead of direct brutal extraction by soldiers on the ground.

The defining feature of the Central Powers' occupation regimes was their exploitative nature – itself the product of the widespread perception among both civilians at home and the military leadership that the Reich was under siege and on the verge of starvation. As previously discussed, the growing panic and desperation over shortages in Germany prompted a reorientation from internal mobilization to looking towards occupied Europe as a solution to hunger at home. German administrators were quite frank about their goal; as Major von Kessler, the head of the German Economic Staff in Romania bluntly stated, “our most pressing task is to extract of the land what can be gotten out.”²²⁸ German “experts” on occupation administration in the 1940s looking back on 1914-1918 doubted that the Central Powers had been very successful, in large part because these Nazified personnel felt that their predecessors lacked the ruthless resolve to properly exploit newly conquered lands and peoples.²²⁹ They assessed Germany's gross profits from its conquered lands at 57 million gold marks, covering little more than five percent of its total direct war expenditure. Once the expenses of occupation were subtracted, these territories appeared of even less value.²³⁰

However, contemporary figures point to a different conclusion. More recent scholarship has stressed the large quantities of diverse resources extracted from the occupied territories.²³¹

²²⁸Abteilung V. des Wirtschaftsstabes des OKM, “Ausfuhr aus Rumänien und Bessarabien bis zum 20. September 1918,” AVA Vienna: Mdi, Praesidium 22/Bukowina 1900-1918 (Karton 2096): Akte 37818.

²²⁹ Michael Burleigh, *Germany Turns East: A Study of Ostforschung in the East*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 79.

²³⁰ Ibid., pp. 81-82.

²³¹ See for example, Andreas Köhler, *Staatsverwaltung der besetzten Gebiete*, (Dusseldorf, 2013).

Moreover, Germany's leaders, especially their military establishment (although not limited to them), attributed an importance to occupation belying the relatively modest gains extracted abroad. Above all, the food produced in German-occupied Eastern Europe, while not worth much in monetary terms, was arguably invaluable in sustaining Germany and Austria-Hungary under siege. Ludendorff repeatedly stressed in his memoirs how "the occupied territories helped us with food supplies" and even asserted that after 1916, "we should not have been able to exist, much less carry on the war, without Romania's corn and oil."²³² On a similar vein, Major General Franz von Wandel, Prussia's Deputy War Minister, also rated their reinforced contribution highly when he told the Reichstag in March 1916 that it was thanks to the economic committees tasked with resource extraction in conquered regions that "our men in the field are so well fed" and that "large supplies can be conveyed from the occupied territories into the home country."²³³ Habsburg commanders were no less convinced of the value of the far smaller foreign territories under their control. For the Deputy Chief of the Habsburg General Staff, Major General von Hoeffner, resources from occupied lands were "the anchor of hope in the desperate days at the end of 1916" without which, he thought, "holding out until the beginning of a new harvest is impossible."²³⁴

The predominantly agricultural resources of occupied territories did indeed help to alleviate the food shortages of the Central Powers. Germany's population had consumed 13.3 million tons of grain annually in peacetime: taking into account animals' consumption, the Reich's needs were over twenty-five million tons of grain, one fifth of which had been imported.

²³² Erich Ludendorff, *My War Memoirs*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 1919), p. 354.

²³³ Berich v. Wandel, *Rüstung und Rohstoff*, BA/MA Freiburg, PH117(II), Band 2.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

In this context, the half million tons of grain taken yearly from occupied lands after 1915 compensated for potentially as much as one-sixth of lost imports.²³⁵ Animal-rearing in occupied lands was even more important for Germany. As the Reich's own pig stock plummeted from over twenty-five million to around ten million, the more than two million taken from the east in 1916 alone provided a substantial contribution to alleviating Germans' hunger.²³⁶ The conquest of Romania was especially significant. Ludendorff was likely exaggerating when he claimed that "in the year 1917, only Romania enable Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Constantinople to keep their heads above water."²³⁷ As was the case elsewhere in Eastern Europe, peaceful trade, which between autumn of 1915 and August of 1916 had permitted the Central Powers to import almost three million tons of Romanian grain, was much more effective than outright domination in securing food supplies.²³⁸ Nonetheless, the capture of Romania's full granaries in December 1916, in the midst of acute shortages of the "turnip winter," was timely.

Moreover, official export figures do not tell the full story. Armies lived partly (and after 1918 mostly) off the land. German forces in Romania, for example, themselves consumed almost three hundred thousand tons of food and fodder from the occupation zone between 1916 and 1918.²³⁹ On top of official exports and military consumption on the ground, significant amounts of food were dispatched privately to the homeland largely outside of official channels and state counting, ensuring that the armies' statistics never fully represented the extent of resources

²³⁵ Abteilung V. des Wirtschaftsstabes des OKM, "Ausfuhr aus Rumänien und Bessarabien bis zum 20. September 1918," AVA Vienna: Mdl, Praesidium 22/Bukowina 1900-1918 (Karton 2096): Akte 37818.

²³⁶ Arz von Straussenburg, *Zur Geschichte des Grossen Krieges*, 1914-1918, (Leipzig, 1924), p. 189.

²³⁷ Ludendorff, *Memoirs*, p. 399.

²³⁸ Abteilung V. des Wirtschaftsstabes des OKM, "Ausfuhr aus Rumaenien und Bessarabien bis zum 20. September 1918." AVA Vienna: Mdl, Praesidium 22/Bukowina 1900-1918 (Karton 2096): Akte 37818.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

removed from the conquered territories. Within the German occupying forces, soldiers were permitted to send 5-kilogram food parcels to friends and relatives; soldiers understandably made extensive use of this practice and the weight limit was routinely flaunted.²⁴⁰ In just eight months in 1916-1917, German troops in Romania sent home enough foodstuffs to fill over one thousand wagons. A further eighteen thousand tons were brought back by men on leave.²⁴¹

For soldiers' beleaguered families, the periodic supplements to their inadequate official ration must have been a godsend. However, the mass "purchase" of food by Central Powers' soldiers with unbacked and useless currency did little to endear themselves and their regimes to occupied civilians. In their own diaries and postwar memoirs, German soldiers often referred to themselves as "a swarm of locusts" or a "hungry flood."²⁴² From rural villages to small towns and cities across Eastern Europe, German soldiers on requisitioning missions became the bane of peasants farmsteads while also prompting massive inflation in local markets by buying up huge sums of supplies.²⁴³ In turn locals from the Baltics to Romania began hiding grain and intentionally misleading German officials attempting to register the quantities of agricultural produce available for extraction.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁰ Kurt von Zeynak, *Erinnerungen eines Offizieres im Generalstab*, (Berlin, 1923), p. 314.

²⁴¹ Lisa Mayerhofer, *Zwischen Freund und Feind: Deutsche Besatzung in Rumänien 1916-1918*, (Munich, 2010), p. 212.

²⁴² A. Hartmuth, Letter to his sister Trudi, 24 October, 1916.

²⁴³ Mayerhofer, *Zwischen Freund und Feind*, pp. 215-216.

²⁴⁴ Von Zeynak, *Erinnerungen eines Offizieres im Generalstab*, p. 323.

Extreme Occupation: The Case of Ober Ost

The Central Powers' occupation regimes may all have had economic exploitation as their most pressing goal but the means adopted and the style of rule varied between the conquered territories. Regions run purely by the military were treated differently from those managed by army-civilian hybrid authorities. The culture, prejudices, and procedures that administrators brought with them shaped how they governed and treated inhabitants. What they encountered when they arrived in the occupied regions also mattered a great deal. Contemporary international law envisaged local authorities continuing in their functions under occupation, but in the east, invading German armies found that Tsarist officials had retreated, leaving lawless and devastated territories. Local elites might be negotiated with or ignored, and the occupying forces also often had to decide how to balance competing multi-ethnic interests. Germany's long-term plans for re-shaping Mitteleuropa influenced these decisions. However, as previously discussed, Mitteleuropa meant different things for different people. Grandiose Germanization schemes in the Baltic or the strip of land in Northern Congress Poland to be annexed to the Reich appear to point towards the larger, genocidal racial reorganization desired a quarter of a century later by the Nazis. However, large, utopian schemes were generally not a feature of German occupation practices in the First World War. German occupiers attempted some limited state-building but much more common were confusion and chaos, which, along with the overriding need to plunder resources for the war effort, hindered the formulation and implementation of grand new designs.²⁴⁵ In this sense, while shortages on the home front provided the impetus for a more

²⁴⁵ A good recent overview of the scholarship on the priorities of the Central Powers in the east can be found in Stephan Lehnstaedt, "Imperiale Ordnungen statt Germanisierung. Die Mittelmächte in Kogresspolen, 1915-1918," in *Osteuropa* 64 (2-4) 2014, pp. 221-232.

ruthless occupation policy in eastern Europe, the perceived urgency of the need for resources also hindered a more unified and coherent vision of how to manage these territories.

The First World War's most notorious occupation regime, and the clearest antecedent for Nazi methods of domination in Eastern Europe, was Ober Ost in the Baltic. Ludendorff founded this military state in 1915, and his domineering personality and the martial culture of its soldier-administrators pervaded the rump state's culture. Ober Ost was a testing ground for a new form of more total mobilization; it was here that the future First Quartermaster General developed and practiced his ideas for a centralized war effort run by command. It was also the prime object of Ludendorff's longer-term colonizing ambition. Ober Ost's rule was marked by a twisted idealism – Ludendorff himself described the occupation as a “work for civilization which benefited the army and Germany as well as the country and its inhabitants.”²⁴⁶ In this sense, Ober Ost's military rulers saw themselves as conveyors of culture. “Deutsche Arbeit,” labor imbued with the high moral values of Kultur, would tame the wild land in the Baltic and raise its people from sloth and ignorance. The military authorities' press section trumpeted their achievements, stressing that not only was the infrastructure damaged by the Russians in their scorched earth retreat repaired, but new roads, railways, and telegraph lines being built with remarkable speed; already by the end of 1915, Ober Ost's press commissioners claimed that some four hundred and thirty-four bridges had been erected.²⁴⁷ Trained German agronomists intervened in agriculture, taking over the management of abandoned estates, and brought new industry to the region.²⁴⁸ All in all, some twelve million marks were invested in setting up saw mills, wood-processing plants,

²⁴⁶ Ludendorff, *Memoirs*, p. 194.

²⁴⁷ Transkript Reichstagsreden, 18 January, 1917, BA/MA RM3 Teil 2, Militaer/Ruestungs Akten 23.

²⁴⁸ Liuleviscius, *War Land*, p. 231.

and carpentry workshops in order to capitalize on the dense forest that covered much of Ober Ost.

The army promoted not only what it regarded as a much-needed work ethic among the inhabitants but also hygiene and education; under its watch, the number of schools doubled to more than 1,350.²⁴⁹ Ludendorff and his subordinates dreamed of turning this neglected backwater into a productive region capable of contributing to German security. Indeed, Ober Ost's press commissioners explicitly stated in 1916 before the Reichstag that the newly developed area comprised the "northernmost bastion of a new Mitteleuropa" and moreover one that would soon provide "enormous material benefit to the Reich."²⁵⁰ Moreover, the work undertaken, Ludendorff and his subordinates hoped, would prepare the way for settlement by ethnic Germans who would form for the Reich a "living barrier against the barbarous east."²⁵¹ In reality, behind this utopianism lay an extremely oppressive military regime. Ludendorff staffed Ober Ost's bureaucracy with officers and experts in uniform, effectively shutting out all civilian influence. The principle on which the occupation was built, laid down explicitly in the closest thing that this military state had to a constitution, the "Order of Rule" of June 7th, 1916, was that "the interests of the German Army and the German Reich always supersede the interests of the occupied territory."²⁵²

²⁴⁹ Christian Westerhoff, *Zwangsarbeit im Ersten Weltkrieg. Deutsche Arbeitskraeftepolitik im besetzten Polen und Litauen, 1914-1918* (Paderborn, 2012), p. 171.

²⁵⁰ Briefing on the New Territories, BA/MA Freiburg, PH2 Teil 2/1, Aktenhandels des Preussisches Kriegsministeriums.

²⁵¹ Ludendorff, *Memoirs*, p. 189.

²⁵² Order of Rule and Supplementary Briefs, 7-9 June, 1916, BA/SA R901 No. 27.

In this vein, the rulers imposed a repressive and obsessive system of control. Inhabitants over the age of ten were registered, photographed and issued with an identity card, for which each was compelled to pay one mark. During 1915-1917, the military bureaucracy of Ober Ost estimated that some 1.8 million people, approximately two-thirds of the entire scattered population of the area, were put through this compulsory procedure. A survey of possessions was undertaken, which covered everything from land ownership and cattle to household utensils. Fearing the spread of disease and espionage, the occupation authorities restricted people's freedom of movement: not only was Ober Ost sealed off from the outside world by a wall of border posts, but the Germans also introduced an internal passport issued by local commanders that greatly hindered domestic mobility.²⁵³ The documentation of the local population, the censusing of their goods, and restrictions on their movement, as well as conscripted "German work" of road and railway building, laid the foundations for highly effective exploitation. Contrary to subsequent Nazi statisticians who largely undercounted the profits from occupation during WWI, it seems Ober Ost was able to easily recoup the costs of its own infrastructure and administration while generating a total of over three hundred and thirty million marks of revenue in the latter half of 1916 alone.²⁵⁴

A large proportion of the income generated by Ober Ost was through a direct head tax and duties on land sales and retail sales. To this was added additional revenues from German-created state monopolies on cigarettes, liquor, beer, salt, sugar, saccharin, matches, and fishing from the waters of the Baltic.²⁵⁵ Above all else, the occupation authorities with Ludendorff at the

²⁵³ Westerhoff, *Zwangsarbeit*, pp. 34-35.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

²⁵⁵ Andreas Strazhas, *Deutsche Ostpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg: Der Fall Ober Ost, 1915-1917*, (Wiesbaden, 1993), p. 47.

head were focused on harnessing Ober Ost's agricultural and human resources for the German war effort, which in turn meant relatively little thought was actually given to long-term economic planning. In his memoirs, Ludendorff himself seems to have spared no thought to whether the militarist fiefdom he erected was replicable outside of the Baltics or regarding the future of Ober Ost after the war (beyond vague pronouncements of German colonization). Indeed, the coercion of the Ober Ost regime was effective in the short term in thoroughly plundering the land's material and human resources. However, in the long term it also had severe costs: plunder was generally wasteful and counter-productive in the medium and longer term for actually erecting a self-sustaining occupation regime. The frantic efforts to gather as much food as possible in 1916, in large part driven by pressures from domestic food shortages, disastrously depleted the stocks of Lithuanian and Latvian farms and left insufficient seed for the 1917 harvest.²⁵⁶ The Ludendorff state's reliance on intimidation and naked violence to underpin its authority was not only immoral but actively diminished the productivity of the land on which the Germans pinned such high hopes.

Yet despite the parallels highlighted by recent historiography, there remained some considerable distance between Imperial German occupation practices and the genocidal "hunger plan" that the Nazis intended to apply to the same region a quarter of a century later. Insofar as we can trace certain continuities in occupation practices between the two German wartime regimes, as will be subsequently discussed, a tentative link can be drawn centering on a shared perception of space. Indeed, the birth of the *Mitteleuropa* idea in Germany at the turn of the century marked the beginning of an understanding of Europe as a "continental politics of large spaces," to use Carl Schmitt's phrasing from two decades later. While Ober Ost and the

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49-50.

sometimes brutal German extraction policies in Eastern Europe initially seems at odds with earlier conceptions of Mitteleuropa as either an economic zone or a loose political association headed by Germany, both nevertheless derive from the same underlying assumption – namely, that Germany can only survive and prosper as part of a larger spatial unit in Europe. And while the Reich's own increasingly desperate material conditions in the latter years of WWI reinforced the appeal of treating occupied east-central Europe as primarily a space for extraction, earlier conceptions of Mitteleuropa also persisted. If anything, the inability of the leaders of Ober Ost to sustain the degree of extraction seen in 1916 paradoxically strengthened subsequent (more moderate) arguments within Germany that cooperation and collaboration as opposed to domination through outright occupation ought to be the desired course of action.

Chapter 4

False Hopes and Dangerous Ideas

In the spring of 1917, the nature of the war changed fundamentally. The outbreak of revolution in Russia and the entry of the United States into hostilities brought a new, ideological edge to the conflict and, ultimately, to competing German visions of the postwar European order. In Woodrow Wilson's words to Congress on April 2, 1917, "democracy" and the "rights and liberties of small nations" were the causes for which the war was now to be fought.²⁵⁷ Wilson echoed the new revolutionary regime in Russia, which already at the end of March – although nobody had actually voted – proudly declared itself a "Russian democracy" whose war aim was the "establishment of stable peace on the basis of the self-determination of peoples."²⁵⁸ These were not just powerful slogans intended for pleasing domestic audiences. Rather the new ideological rhetoric had a universal appeal that struck deep at divisions inside Germany and Austria-Hungary. From being the norm in 1914, almost three years of total war had shaken the very foundations of the Monarchical idea. The timing was especially dangerous, for these ideas of popular governance would resonate with populations increasingly angry and disillusioned with their unelected leaders' wartime errors, and above all their inability to provide and distribute food, as discussed in the previous chapter. The Russian Revolution was particularly frightening for the Central Powers' governments and inspiring for their dissidents, as it revealed that violent, popular regime change was no chimera but a very real possibility in the radicalized and violent atmosphere of world war.

²⁵⁷ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self Determination and the International Origins of Anti-Colonial Nationalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 36.

²⁵⁸ Quoted from Roger. A. Wade, *The Russian Search for Peace, February-October 1917*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), pp. 16 and 29.

Indeed, the year 1917 was defined in Central Europe by deepening divisions between peoples and their governments. Political reform was one key area of contention. In 1914, large, marginalized groups had mobilized hoping for reform as a reward for their service and sacrifices: the Social Democrats and Poles in Germany and those nationalities in Austria-Hungary who felt alienated and short-changed by the 1967 Ausgleich, most vocally the Czechs and South Slavs. The calls became louder due both to the increasing hardship at home and to the ideas issuing from abroad; as Judson's recent study of the Habsburg Empire highlights, Wilson's call for "government by the consent of the governed" appealed to democrats and nationalists alike.²⁵⁹ Yet the responses on the part of autocratic governments in Central Europe in 1917 to conform to the changing *Zeitgeist* and implement change were, on the whole, half-hearted, ill-organized, and frequently met insurmountable opposition from groups that refused to surrender their privileged positions. In this context, debates over the running of occupied lands in Eastern Europe and the future of Mitteleuropa after the war became a key battleground for those seeking to preserve the antebellum system and those hoping to radically reshape it.

Thus a further cause for the widening division between peoples and rulers was the controversy over war aims. The prohibition on public discussion of war aims in Germany had been lifted at Ludendorff's insistence in November 1916, and both there and in Hungary especially, arguments became increasingly vitriolic in response to the Russian revolution and the American declaration of war. With deprivation and misery endemic, many Austro-Hungarians and Germans found attractive the call made by the revolutionary Petrograd Soviet at the start of 1917 for international peace through a democratic settlement "without annexations or

²⁵⁹ "President Woodrow Wilson's Address of January 22, 1917," in *The American Journal of International Law* 11(4), (October 1917), p. 323.

indemnities.”²⁶⁰ Yet far from the war ending, enemies multiplied, food shortages worsened and the suspicion grew that rulers were deliberately prolonging the war to win vast conquests. While annexationist conservatives and nationalists welcomed the prospect of new conquests, wider sections of the German population came to fear, as the Social Democratic newspaper *Vorwärts* observed in November 1917, “that the real and most profound reason making it so enormously difficult to get peace lies in the military successes of Germany.”²⁶¹ As Mitteleuropa increasingly became an annexationist vision of imperial conquest, the Central Powers’ governments, through their refusal to raise their peoples’ stake in the state and its war effort, failed to underpin their waning legitimacy. The reactionary elites in government and the military staked their existence on the fallacy that popular commitment won by reforms, rather than being a precondition, could be replaced by total victory. Thus, the prospect of actualizing Mitteleuropa as an imperial space in Central-Eastern Europe became an illusory escape for German conservatives unwilling to seriously contemplate actual political reform domestically.

In Germany, 1917 saw building pressure for political reform. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg’s decision at the outbreak of war to co-opt the Social Democrats into the national effort and fight with consent rather than overt coercion had bought Germany a remarkable degree of internal unity. Yet that price for domestic stability in wartime was the promise of further political reform down the road. The Kaiser’s famous pronouncement at the beginning of the Burgfrieden that “he saw no more parties... only Germans,” and the Chancellor’s promise of a “new orientation of internal policy,” intensified hope for the abolition of Prussia’s bitterly resented three-class franchise, which had made the votes of the wealthy disproportionately influential in

²⁶⁰ Laura Engelstein, *Russia in Flames: War, Revolution, and Civil War 1914-1921*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 187-189.

²⁶¹ *Vorwärts*, November 6, 1917, BA/MA Freiburg, RM3/11682b; folio 49, pp. 17-21.

elections to the lower house of the state parliament.²⁶² While the SPD and unions had cooperated closely with Reich authorities, the latter had still made no real concessions by the Spring of 1917. Patience, like everything else in Germany at the time, was running short. The popular mood in Germany, which was already fragile after the hardship of the winter, turned uglier as news arrived of revolution in Russia. As Theodor Wolff, the perceptive editor of the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt*, observed in late March 1917, there was a seething resentment “directed against the government, against the estate owners who hoard food and don’t give it out, against the war, against the entire regime.”²⁶³

Even the Kaiser, who in the words of one historian “possessed a remarkable ability to see only what he wished,” recognized that the people’s mood had changed.²⁶⁴ In a series of exchanges with Hindenburg, he expressed worry that “the popular sentiment (*Volksstimmung*) has become dangerous... and even the Berlin police noticed increased socialist agitation on the streets.”²⁶⁵ The Reich’s authorities at first stuck to the view that any reform must be left to the war’s end and they settled on a press campaign to counter the dangerous ideas coming from the revolutionary east. However, it quickly became clear that this would be inadequate. The SPD’s moderate and patriotic leadership was embroiled in acrimonious conflict with a minority on the left, which fiercely criticized cooperation with official government organs, regarded the war as one of aggression and resented that its views and influence were being overridden.²⁶⁶ The SPD

²⁶² Hans Ulrich Wehler, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich*, (Bonn: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht Vrlg., 1973), p. 27.

²⁶³ Theodor Wolff, *Tagebücher* (Band I), Diary Entry March 22, 1917, p. 395.

²⁶⁴ Isabel Hull, *The Entourage of Kaiser Wilhelm II 1888-1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 178-181.

²⁶⁵ Kaiser Wilhelm’s diary entry 22 March, 1917, Preussischer Kulturebesitz, R012, pp. 248-249.

²⁶⁶ “Debate um eine neue Stellung der SPD zum Imperialistischen Krieg, Bezirk Berlin” March 12 1917, BA/SA RA

was on the verge of total schism by the Spring of 1917. The party leadership in this situation urgently needed some concession to demonstrate to its increasingly uneasy rank-and-file membership that the Burgfrieden policy of internal unity and cooperation with the Reich authorities was beneficial to working-class interests. To this end and to exert pressure on the government, on March 19, Philipp Scheidemann, the SPD's parliamentary co-chair, published an article in *Vorwärts* that pointed menacingly to Russia as an illustration of what could happen when reforms were delayed.²⁶⁷ While acknowledging that the context within Germany and in Tsarist Russia were different and paying lip service to the official SPD line that Germany was fighting a defensive war, Scheidemann nonetheless made a number of thinly-veiled threats and even invoked the specter of an uncontrollable general strike in an effort to press for more democratic reforms.²⁶⁸

Throughout that March, the Chancellor tried to tread a middle way between castigating conservatives who denied the need for political change while delaying any concrete commitment until the conclusion of the war. Indeed between 13th and the 30th of March, Bethmann Hollweg dispatched at least twenty urgent memoranda to various conservative party leaders and the heads of various interest groups all but pleading with them to tone down the annexationist rhetoric.²⁶⁹ It becomes clear in this flurry of exchanges, particularly between the Reich Chancellery and the leaders of the conservative National Liberals and the even more radical *völkisch* pressure groups, that the Chancellor recognized that the Russian Revolution only further complicated Germany's domestic situation. In an exchange with the pro-annexationist German economist Horst

²⁶⁷ *Vorwärts*, March 19, 1917, BA/MA Freiburg, RM3/11682b; folio 50, pp. 23-26.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R 43 – II, 627A Band II; folio 11.

Kammler, Bethmann Hollweg emphasized that while revolution in Russia had made the military situation in the east more stable, the rapid advance of German armies, and potentially the “unshackling of Russia’s various subject nations” only presented a new host of political dilemmas which threatened to further de-stabilize the Reich.²⁷⁰ It was thus imperative to “silence all voices seeking to influence the postwar situation both internal and external at present.”²⁷¹ In the uncertain days of March 1917, the Reich’s political and military leadership, including even Ludendorff and Hindenburg briefly, maintained this position. However, at the start of April, the United States’ imminent declaration of war changed Bethmann-Hollweg’s view abruptly. With Wilson’s declaration that Germany’s autocratic rulers, not its people, were America’s enemies, it became essential for the Reich government to demonstrate at home and abroad that such distinction was fantasy, and that the ruling system was legitimate and that the country was engaged in a war supported by the people.

The Chancellor now prescribed a dramatic gesture - the immediate introduction of direct and secret voting under equal suffrage for Prussia’s parliament.²⁷² His more reactionary colleagues in the Prussian Ministry of state disagreed and successfully diluted his proposal. Consequently, the Kaiser’s “Easter Message” to the German people on April 7th, 1917 announced reforms that worried conservatives while remaining too weak and vague to win over skeptical Social Democrats. The Easter Message pledged to broaden the membership of the Prussian House of Lords, and for the lower house, to abolish the three-class franchise and introduce direct and secret elections. Yet crucially, however, there was no promise or even

²⁷⁰ BA/HA Koblenz, R301 Aktens Bethmann Hollweg, Bnd. III, pp. 12-15.

²⁷¹ BA/HA Koblenz, R301 Aktens Bethmann Hollweg, Bnd. III, pp. 27-28.

²⁷² Miller, *Burgfrieden*, pp. 286-290; Fritz Fischer also covers the ultimate failure of the reform proposals in *Germany’s War Aims*, pp. 397-399.

mention of universal suffrage and the reforms were only to be enacted “immediately upon the successful end of the war.”²⁷³ Neither a committee created by the Reichstag on March 30th to consider constitutional reform nor even a promise made by the Kaiser at Bethmann Hollweg’s urging later in July 1917, ever succeeded in imposing equal franchise on the Prussian parliament.²⁷⁴

Regardless, the German political system had evolved during wartime. In peacetime, the Kaiser and the Chancellor whom he appointed had been the center of power. However, the overwhelming need to assure the cooperation of the population in a “people’s war” meant that leaders with a popular mandate came to the fore. By 1917, German politics was pushed in two opposite directions. On one side were Hindenburg and Ludendorff, proponents of autocracy and total victory. They had already demonstrated their readiness to intervene in society and the economy and were well aware of the power that Hindenburg’s popularity gave to the duo. They were also proponents of a novel, ruthless vision of German-occupied Europe, whereby the peoples, resources, and economies of Mitteleuropa were to be brutally subordinated to the German war-effort. In short, Ludendorff and Hindenburg were the most radical proponents of the rethinking and total mobilization of what Carl Schmitt would later refer to as the “Big Space” or *Grossraum*. In this regard as well as in the considerable political clout the duo wielded within Germany, reactionaries anxious about the reformist drives in the Reich flocked to Hindenburg and Ludendorff and hoped they would implement a military dictatorship. They saw in the duo the “strong men” for whom they yearned, capable of not only bringing total victory but also

²⁷³ “Wilhelm II’s Easter Speech,” from germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org.

²⁷⁴ Jarausch, *The Engimatic Chancellor*, pp. 168-169.

halting the rise of the political left, two issues which had become inextricably tangled in Germany as 1917 progressed.²⁷⁵

The second, contrary trend, and a prime cause of conservative fears, was the increased influence and assertiveness of Germany's most important representative institution, the Reichstag, and particularly the unprecedented cooperation between its left and center parties. The power of Reichstag deputies to vote through war credits raised the parliament's importance. In peacetime it had scrutinized and voted on budgets, but war credits were different because they were requested so often, no fewer than sixteen times up to February 1919 – and because the votes were invested with great symbolism by the parliamentarians.²⁷⁶ The Burgfrieden had first been sealed on August 4, 1914 with effectively a unanimous vote for war credits, and thereafter the readiness of the Social Democrats, who had always abstained as a party in peacetime budget votes, to support the credits was seen as proof of the continuance of German unity.²⁷⁷ From the third war credit in March 1915, almost a third of the SPD's 110 deputies abstained. At the fifth vote in December, twenty, including one of its chairmen, Hugo Haase, opposed the credits and a further twenty-two abstained.²⁷⁸ However, the fact that the majority of the party continued to support the war effort helped to maintain the Burgfrieden and keep the Reich's working class acquiescent. As a result, even though Socialist deputies, who occupied about one-third of the 397 seats in the Reichstag, were not numerous enough to block the credit, the Chancellor was

²⁷⁵ Armin Mohler, *The Conservative Revolution in Germany*, (New York: Radik Press, 2013), especially pp. 29-36.

²⁷⁶ For example, Karl Roesler's study on the political symbology of the war credits vote, *Deutsche Finanzpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Stuttgart: Drosler Vrlg., 2009).

²⁷⁷ A.J. Ryder, *The German Revolution of 1918: German Socialism in War and Revolt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 49-58, pp. 72-73.

²⁷⁸ BA/SA Lichterfelde R43 – II/642A, folio 2, "Kriegsfinanz," pp. 40-43.

committed to maintain the SPD's cooperation and unusually willing to hear, if not acted upon, its views.²⁷⁹

The Reichstag's bourgeois majority wished at heart for a total victory and hoped for some gains for Germany once the war was won. As a recent study has shown, the bourgeois parties had exerted their influence in the autumn of 1916, when its deputies followed their constituents' enthusiasm and severely restricted Bethmann Hollweg's freedom of action by urging him to launch the U-boat campaign that ultimately brought America into the war.²⁸⁰ After the spring of 1917, however, majority opinion in the German Reichstag began to move leftwards. Partly, the Russian revolution encouraged greater sympathy among the moderate middle-class parties for immediate democratic reform. The decisive shift seemed to have come with the realization of Matthias Erzberger, the influential Center Party deputy, that the U-boat campaign alone would not defeat Britain; in his speech in the Reichstag Steering Committee on 6th of July, 1917, he demolished the German Navy's argument that ruthless submarine warfare could work and radically proposed that the Reichstag take the initiative in preparing the groundwork for "peace of understanding" with Russia.²⁸¹ He argued, "If in the Reichstag an enormous majority or possibly even all deputies could bring themselves to agree on the idea of 1st August 1914 – that we Germans stand for a war of national self-defense – we strive for a peace of reconciliation, which recognizes the power constellation that has come about through the war, a peace which brings no forcible oppression of peoples or border areas – if the Reichstag could say this to the

²⁷⁹ Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor*, p. 327.

²⁸⁰ Isabel V. Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: The Making and Breaking of International Law during the Great War*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 97-101.

²⁸¹ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R8007/9 Fraktionsitzungen und Protokolle, Band I, folio: Leitsätze Zentrumspartei, pp. 88-102.

Reich government, this would be the best way to bring about peace.”²⁸² He went on to urge in a published manifesto circulated throughout parliament and eventually leaked to the press of a “return to the spirit of 1914... wherein all belligerent parties will accept the reality of a new Middle European alignment (*Mitteleuropäische Ausrichtung*) of free and sovereign peoples... headed by the Reich.”²⁸³

On the one hand, Erzeberg’s speech cemented the shift to the left in the Reichstag that had begun with the Russian Revolution and the opening of the reform question. On the same day of his speech, deputies of the Center, Progressives, National Liberals, and Social Democrats established an Inter-Party committee, which tentatively agreed for universal suffrage in Prussia and a parliamentary government from party representatives.²⁸⁴ As much of the historiography has stressed, this was a historic moment; the coming together of the Center, Progressives and Social Democrats in the Inter-Party Committee lasted throughout the war and helped provide the Reich with an alternative basis of authority in late 1918, once the advocates of total war failed and destroyed the regime’s remaining legitimacy.²⁸⁵ As Scheidemann, the SPD leader, himself subsequently reflected, this was the “first step of a parliament that was taking independence.”²⁸⁶

On the other hand, it also triggered the most acute political crisis experienced to this point in the war regarding the question of Mitteleuropa and what was to be done about Germany’s vast

²⁸² BA/SA Lichterfelde, R8007/9 Band I, folio: Leitsätze Zentrumspartei, pp. 121-124.

²⁸³ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R-45 – I/11 “Schreiben zum Nationalliberalen betr. Politik, Krieg, und Finanz,” pp. 41-43.

²⁸⁴ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R45 – I/2 Band 3, folio 2, pp. 13-40.

²⁸⁵ An excellent summary of this position can be found in W.J. Mommsen, “Die deutsche öffentliche Meinung und der Zusammenbruch der Regierungssysteme Bethman Hollweg im Juli 1917,” in *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 19(11) (November 1988), especially pp. 665-671.

²⁸⁶ Philip Scheidemann in Reichstag Steering Committee, 6 July 1919, in Michaelis, Schraepler and Scheel eds., *Ursachen und Folgen*, ii, pp. 6 (doc. 233).b

conquests in Eastern Europe. For one, Bethmann Hollweg became a main victim of the Reichstag asserting itself. While certainly no dove, the Chancellor was opposed to the vast annexationist aims of the Reich's military and conservative elites and, through the course of the first three years of the war, had also become quite deft at deflecting and sidelining the most vocal hawks in the Reich.²⁸⁷ Yet his contortions to maintain his "politics of the diagonal" between left-wing demands for domestic change and conservative and völkisch nationalists' desires for conquest had by this point made him the subject of hostility from all sides of the political spectrum.²⁸⁸ While the National Liberals, who shortly after left the Inter-Party Committee, favored a total victory and disliked the Chancellor's ambiguity, the Center and their Allies on the left considered him an obstacle to reform and peace. Bethmann Hollweg reacted to the parliamentarians' maneuver by again urging reform on the Kaiser. In a memo submitted to Wilhelm II on June 29th, just two weeks before his resignation, the old Chancellor stated Germany's awkward position in the clearest of terms: "It has become clear that the collapse of Russia has only strengthened the feelings of many in the country that honorable peace without annexation is the quickest path to a conclusion of the struggle... which has exhausted the wealth and blood of your people. As of now the only tactic that may prolong the fighting spirit of the German people is to implement immediate and significant openings in the political organs of the state... If we were to delay this [process] in the pursuit of further conquest, every advance of the German army eastwards would only serve to strengthen our opponents at home and enemies

²⁸⁷ Christopher Clark has argued that it may have been Bethmann Hollweg's deft political maneuvering which ultimately kept Kaiser Wilhelm II in power for as long as he did. Christopher Clark, *Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Life in Power*, (London: Penguin, 2009), especially pp. 217-220.

²⁸⁸ For wartime opposition to the Imperial Chancellor, see Günter Wollstein, *Theobold von Bethmann Hollweg. Letzter Erbe Bismarcks, Erste Opfer Dolchstosslegende*, (Goettingen: Muster-Schmidt Vrlg., 1995), pp. 162-167.

abroad.”²⁸⁹ Nonetheless, the clear evidence that Bethmann Hollweg could no longer guide moderate and left-wing opinion in the country and the Reichstag enabled his conservative and military enemies to give him the final push out. Hindenburg and Ludendorff threatened the Kaiser with their resignation unless the Bethmann was dismissed, and he went on July 13th. Subsequent chancellors were creatures of the OHL and the Hindenburg-Ludendorff duo which ran it; in the words of one SPD deputy, “the Reich Chancellorship [after Bethmann Hollweg] had become an advertisement for the omnipotent military clique” with no interest in either reform or a negotiated peace.”²⁹⁰

Yet the peace resolution that was passed in the Reichstag on July 19th 1917, itself a sign of parliament’s ascendancy, also further complicated the political crisis over the fate of the Mitteleuropa that German armies had conquered. I argue that Erzberger’s call for “a peace of reconciliation, which recognizes the power constellation that has come about through the war” was as revealing as it was unrealistic. Erzberger, and many patriotic deputies within the dominant Inter-Party Committee, still hoped that Germany’s enemies could be persuaded to accept its wartime gains. Moreover, his subsequent actions demonstrated the intention that the resolution stiffen, not undermine, the people’s will to hold out. Indeed, the invocation of a Mitteleuropa without outright annexations actually spurred otherwise anti-militarist forces in the Reichstag to envision a postwar order still predicated on German continental dominance. Within twenty-four hours of the “peace vote,” its architect, Erzberger, was advising the Reich’s new Chancellor, the former Prussian Food Controller Georg Michaelis, that the Longwy-Briey ore fields could be won through exchange and that Lithuania should become a semi-autonomous

²⁸⁹ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R 43-I/2810 Band 9(b).

²⁹⁰ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R44 – II/2109, Band 3, “Haase on the New Chancelry.”

duchy with Wilhelm II as its head.²⁹¹ In a perhaps telling change of position, even the SPD was not immune to this allure of a new Mitteleuropa centered on German power. Despite the fact that Scheidemann and the SPD had, earlier in April, advocated for “peace without annexations or reparations” and had publicly pressed the Reich government for “for a clear rejection of any policy of conquest,” it now changed tack.²⁹² The moderate (majority) wing of the SPD now maintained, according to the left SPD critic Haase, a blatantly nationalistic program, which would persist until 1918.²⁹³ While the SPD paid lip service to “territorial acquisitions achieved by force and violations of political, economic, or financial integrity,” as well as to the right of national self-determination, it joined Erzberger in now envisioning a new system of satellite states and “informal empire” (according to Haase) throughout East-Central Europe.²⁹⁴

In a series of maps distributed to its party base in August 1917, the SPD moderates now depicted a Europe with a slew of new states including an independent Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland – all presumably with their own influential Socialist parties paving the way for a gradual evolution towards a social democratic Mitteleuropa.²⁹⁵ Moreover, alongside its support for an idea of Mitteleuropa through informal German dominance, the SPD in a seeming patriotic fervor added its own pronouncement alongside a new vote of 15,000 million Reichsmarks for the war effort: this SPD-Center resolution denounced England and America for “threatening Germany... and allied nations with territorial conquests and violations” and ended by defiantly asserting that

²⁹¹ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R8007/10 Band 5, pp. 17-36.

²⁹² David Stevenson, “The Failure of Peace by Negotiations in 1917,” *The Historical Journal* 34(1), March 1991, p. 72.

²⁹³ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R44 – II/2109, Band 3 (folio 2), p. 49.

²⁹⁴ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R44 – II/ 2109, Band 3, pp. 55-59.

²⁹⁵ BA/MA Freiburg RM4 – I/ 13480, Band 9, folio “Bilder und Karten.”

“the German people is unconquerable and will continue to fight for its own preservation and the liberation of other fraternal nations.”²⁹⁶

All or Nothing

The German government had, from the outbreak of the First World War, sought to gain advantage. While not going as far as some of Fritz Fischer’s more extreme earlier claim of German aspirations for an empire from “the Volga to the Atlantic,” many in Germany’s political, economic, and intellectual elite did indeed regard the outbreak of war as a chance for realizing a fundamental political-economic realignment in East-Central Europe.²⁹⁷ Yet Bethmann Hollweg’s primary objective, as laid down in the program of September 1914, “security for the German Reich in the west and east for all imaginable time,” reflected just one of the competing visions for a German-led Mitteleuropa at the time. As the war dragged on, that particular vision to secure economic political domination became the primary imaginary of the postwar order; with the support of the moderates in the Reichstag, the vision of Mitteleuropa as a system of informal German power uniting a vast swathe of continental Europe politically and economically became dominant. Furthermore, the rise of the Third OHL by September of 1917 led by Hindenburg and Ludendorff ushered in a period of quasi-military dictatorship in Germany. The Hindenburg-Ludendorff government brought a new inflexibility combined with greater megalomania to the Reich’s war aims, thereby pushing German plans for a postwar Mitteleuropa further into the realm of outright empire.

²⁹⁶ BA/HA Koblenz L13 – I, 1003, Band I. “Reichstag Peace Resolution 1917, July 19, 1917.”

²⁹⁷ Fischer, *Germany and its War Aims*, pp. 49-51. Also reiterated in Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions*, pp. 13-14

Hindenburg and Ludendorff were fundamentally interested in power, not rights. The blockade by Germany's enemies and the methods of industrial combat had profoundly influenced the thinking of many in the Reich's military, political, and industrial elite – including Germany's most powerful warlords.²⁹⁸ The blockade had radicalized German thinking by teaching the importance of securing an extensive resource base, although, as discussed in chapter one, the seeds of this thinking were already present in Germany at the turn of the century and had developed as both a reaction to German unification as well as to economic globalization. For Hindenburg and Ludendorff, their rule in Ober Ost had provided them with the experience of how to harness people and materials ruthlessly. In this regard, the duo were focused not only on winning the present conflict. Their gaze extended into the future, although the world they inhabited was much darker than other forward thinking theorists of Mitteleuropa; as Ludendorff's own memoirs attest, it was a Weltanschauung defined by a perpetual, violent Social Darwinist struggle between states. In this regard it shares much in common with subsequent National Socialist ideology. The OHL's prime purpose, as Ludendorff explained in a memorandum to his staff in September 1917, was "to achieve an economic and military position which allows us to face another war of defense without anxiety."²⁹⁹

In December 1916, as Hindenburg and Ludendorff used Germany's dire strategic situation to justify the desperate gamble of unrestricted submarine warfare, they also extended a secret list to the Kaiser advocating extensive annexations.³⁰⁰ As the OHL asserted the primacy of military aims over politics, and as the Russian revolution presented new strategic alternatives, its

²⁹⁸ Erich Ludendorff, *My War Memoirs 1914-1918*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 1929), pp. 301-311, and pp. 380-387.

²⁹⁹ BA/MA Freiburg, PH30 – III/66, Ludendorff at the Crown Council of September 14, 1917.

³⁰⁰ BA/MA Freiburg PH2 – 303/12, Band 4, pp. 37-39.

ambition became increasingly problematic. Bethmann Hollweg was keen for a separate peace with Russia, but also opportunistic and seemingly averse to being pinned down by any inflexible war-aims program. In a meeting with the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister Oskar Czernin in March 1917, he acknowledged that while he personally would like to see extensive annexations of Russian territory in the event of total victory, he would also be willing to reduce German claims to minor frontier adjustments to secure an end to hostilities in the east.³⁰¹ For Hindenburg and Ludendorff, such vagueness and moderation were unacceptable. On April 23rd 1917, a meeting between Hindenburg and Ludendorff, the Chancellor, the Foreign Secretary, Arthur Zimmerman, and the Head of the Political Section of the General Government in Belgium was convened at Kreuznach, in the Rhineland, to formally discuss German war aims. At that point, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were confident of swift German victory following the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and forced through the rest of the committee their conception of a peace of extensive conquests.³⁰² As with the September 1914 Program the valuable French mining region of Longwy-Briey was to be annexed to the Reich directly.³⁰³

However, elsewhere, all the previous demands of 1914 were far exceeded: Belgium was “to remain under German military control indefinitely until it is politically and economically ready for a defensive and offensive alliance with the Reich,” while Liege and the entire Flemish coast were to be annexed outright. In the east, the OHL envisioned Germany acquiring Courland and Lithuania as “military colonies,” while newly annexed buffer zones carved out from Poland

³⁰¹ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R901/ 71830, Band I.

³⁰² “Report of Legationssekretärs Freiherr von Lersner to the Foreign Secretary, 5th May 1917,” in E. Deist ed., *Militär und Innenpolitik: Quellen zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien, vol. I*, (Dusseldorf: Droste Vrlg., 1970), doc. 209, pp. 744-746.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 747.

were intended to protect heavily industrialized German Silesia. Following both German industrial and military interests, on the second day of the meeting, the committee agreed to press for an “economically favorable treaty with Romania that would secure the Reich access to Romanian oil for the foreseeable future.” Austria-Hungary meanwhile was to get Serbia, Montenegro and Albania, as well as territory in Romania’s western Wallachia.³⁰⁴

The Third OHL’s push for maximum war aims has long justly been characterized as militarism run amok, yet behind it stood longer-term German thinking regarding the Reich’s vulnerable position in the heart of Europe and a general propensity on the side of all the belligerent powers to envisage the conflict as a struggle to secure large spaces or blocs. Indeed, as recent scholarship has highlighted, some of the radicalism of Germany’s wartime Mitteleuropa vision was mirrored on the French side. French leaders coveted Alsace-Lorraine with the borders not of 1870, but of 1814 or even 1790, encompassing the unambiguously German but extremely valuable industrial and mining area of the Saar regions, while also secretly planning for the long-term military occupation of the Rhineland.³⁰⁵ From the German perspective, their vision of Mitteleuropa was also directly challenged by French calls to their allies in Eastern Europe as well as to the subject nations of the Habsburg Empire to “establish a self-sufficient economic bloc... that will secure the material basis for the liberation of Italians, of Slavs, of Roumanians and of Tschecho Slovaques [sic] from the foreign domination of

³⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 750.

³⁰⁵ See David Harvey, “Lost Children or Enemy Aliens? Classifying the Populating of Alsace after the First World War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 34(4) (October 2009), pp. 537-534; and Louis Boswell, “From Liberation to Purge Trials in the Mythic Province”: Recasting French Identities in Alsace and Lorraine, 1918-1920,” *French Historical Studies* 23 (1) Winter 2000, pp. 129-162. Broader French war aims are discussed in depth in David Stevenson, “French War Aims and Peace Planning,” in M.F. Boemeke, Gary Feldman, and Edward Glaser eds., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 93-101.

Germanics.”³⁰⁶ When a copy of this official French reply to Wilson’s peace note was leaked to Germany in February 1917, it paradoxically bolstered popular support for the war effort among the Central Powers – no Reich minister or even Parliamentarian who voted for “no peace, no annexations” could have supported what became known as the “French peace” within German government circles. Even to the vehemently anti-war SPD delegate Haase, French designs represented an effort to “return Germany to a condition of encirclement, weakened and economically isolated.”³⁰⁷

Other wartime developments had also informed the shift towards an explicitly expansionist vision of Mitteleuropa. As a recent study on the siege of Przemyśl has argued, the advent of long-range artillery, aircraft, and the increasing devaluation of soldiers’ lives for the sake of the offensive had impressed upon military planners the need for protective barriers formed from enemy territory to safeguard one’s own vital resources and industries.³⁰⁸ More importantly, as Ludendorff affirmed in his memoirs, “after three years of total war,” he realized that “corn and potatoes are power, just like coal and iron.”³⁰⁹ The disastrous turnip winter of 1916-17 and the endemic hunger in Central Europe during the war had revealed that the Reich’s own farmland was insufficient to feed its population. Crucially, this wartime realization paralleled prewar German thinking among liberal and economic circles on the necessity of increasing the sheer scale of the economic space afforded to Germany in an epoch of globalized

³⁰⁶ “French Entente Reply to President Wilson’s Peace Note, January 10, 1917,” in Carnegie Endowment for International Peace ed., *Official Communications and Speeches Relating to Peace Proposals 1916-1917*, (Washington DC: Carnegie Institute, 1917), pp. 49-50.

³⁰⁷ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R 43 – II, 627A Band 5, “Verteidigungskrieg.”

³⁰⁸ Alexander Watson, *The Fortress: The Great Siege of Przemyśl*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), especially pp. 199-201.

³⁰⁹ Ludendorff, *War Memoirs vol. II*, p. 517.

economics. Crucially, this then may explain the seeming eagerness with which otherwise anti-annexationist figures in moderate and leftist parties supported a vision of postwar Europe premised on German economic hegemony. Ludendorff's own answer to the problem of inadequate space was to seize an eastern empire, a solution Hitler would subsequently revive for making German-dominated Europe what he termed "the most blockade-proof place in the world."³¹⁰

Ludendorff's experience of brutally exploiting Ober Ost convinced him that the territory must be permanently retained as a granary; in an August 1917 scheme which Ludendorff secretly drafted for Hindenburg to present to the new Chancellor, he proposed to displace almost half a million of the native population, mostly in Latvia, and to replace them with German soldier-farmers.³¹¹ He also recommended that the approximately 20,000 ethnic German refugees from the Volhynia region of Russian-controlled Ukraine who had fled the fighting and were living in the Reich would make ideal colonists. The racial thinking behind this scheme was also a harbinger of future Nazi plans. In a private memo for Hindenburg attached to the plan, Ludendorff notes that the German settlers were to act as a "human wall" protecting the Reich and the occupied land, and serving, he hoped, as "breeding grounds for people, who will be necessary for further fights in the barbarous, threatening east."³¹²

The Central Powers (but chiefly Germany) effectively chose to go for broke in 1917. The rise of the Hindenburg-Ludendorff duo and the military regime they established with the Third

³¹⁰ Adolf Hitler, 17 September 1941, quoted in Jürgen Zimmerer, "Holocaust und Kolonialismus. Beitrag einer Archäologie des genozidalen Gendankens," in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 51(12), 2003, p. 1098.

³¹¹ BA/MA Freiburg PH3 – 311/10, Band 2, Eastern Proposal, August 6, 1917.

³¹² BA/MA Freiburg PH3 – 311/10, Band 2, Memorandum to Hindenburg August 17, 1917.

OHL hardened and expanded German aspirations for continental hegemony. Yet Hindenburg and Ludendorff, while certainly advocates of the most brutal vision of Mitteleuropa, were also more realistic than what many scholars have since given them credit for, especially when taking into consideration the Entente's unwillingness to offer any realistic peace compromise.³¹³ Indeed, with Russia tottering and the United States lacking any significant army, the militarists in government thought the Central Powers had a window of opportunity to win total victory. Their Austro-Hungarian allies trailed reluctantly behind Germany, largely due to an absence of any real strategic alternative. However, the military men of the Third OHL and Ludendorff especially had also miscalculated. He not only underestimated his enemies, especially the United States, but also ultimately misunderstood the German people.

The Volk had been mobilized in 1914 to fight a war of self-defense in the German popular imagination.³¹⁴ The struggle over what shape a Mitteleuropa would take after the war thus ultimately spilled over into the increasingly fraught question in 1917 of why the war was being fought at all. While the Reich government had the sense to keep war aims largely secret in the first years of war, officials' euphemistic talk of "safeguards," "frontier rectifications," and even "new constellations" of postwar political alignment excited widespread fears that Germany's leaders were shedding the people's blood in a needless war of conquest.³¹⁵ In an ominous foreshadowing of interwar politics, the willingness of the SPD's moderate leadership to align themselves (even if temporarily) with the pro-war factions in the Reichstag flew in the face

³¹³ See for example, Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and its Attempt to End War*, (New York: John Murray, 2011).

³¹⁴ Peter Fritzsche stresses the significance of this "defensive mentality" in mobilizing popular enthusiasm in the mythology of Germany's "August unity," in *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), especially pp. 21-23.

³¹⁵ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, pp. 573-574.

of the growing war weariness of their party rank and file. At a time when public exhaustion, the regimes' waning legitimacy and ideological challenge from across the Atlantic all sponsored a great and growing popular desire for some way out of daily suffering and privation, the shift in official rhetoric over Mitteleuropa into the realm of outright annexation and exploitation was extremely dangerous. The Habsburg foreign minister Czernin recognized the likely consequence: "If the monarchs of the Central Powers are unable to conclude peace within the next months," he warned in a memorandum of April 12, 1917 drawn up for the new emperor Karl and sent to Wilhelm II, "then the peoples of Central Europe will make it over their heads, and then the waves of revolution will sweep away everything for which our peoples are still fighting and dying today."³¹⁶

Opposition and Alternative Visions

"A terrible time we live through at the moment," confided the Polish Viennese diarist Alexandra Czechowna at the start of March 1917. "We hear absolutely nothing about the end of the war but instead they speak ever more often about the hunger threatening us."³¹⁷ Across Central Europe, the public mood was subdued. The food shortages had not eased. Exhaustion, despair and anger were growing and becoming increasingly difficult for the state censors to suppress. The Hamburg housewife Anna Kohnstern's letter to her sister from April 1917 largely echoes Alexandra's sentiments: "It's been almost three years now, but still no end in sight... I walked to the greengrocer down the street last Friday and all I saw were emaciated children and

³¹⁶ BA/MA Freiburg, RH03 – II/14, Band 1; folio 2.

³¹⁷ Alexandra Czechowna diary, p. 62, 8 March 1917, OA/SA IT 428/41.

their tired-looking mothers. I pray this war ends soon or it shall be the end of us all and not just our boys at the front.”³¹⁸ During April, reductions in the bread and flour ration sparked a rash of riots in Austria and Germany. Strikes also multiplied as everybody grappled with inflation.³¹⁹ In Germany, the number of workers downing tools in protest was up by over half a million on the previous twelve months, reaching 650,000 by the end of 1917.³²⁰ In Vienna, so bitter was the atmosphere that Amalie Seidel, the leader of the Socialist women’s movement in the Habsburg capital, felt that “we are sitting on a volcano, only waiting for it to erupt.”³²¹ Above all, there a growing wish for peace. More problematically for the Habsburgs, Woodrow Wilson’s call for “peace without victory” and the right to national self determination as well as the “Petrograd formula” advocated by the Bolsheviks of a settlement “without annexations or indemnities” captured the imagination of radical nationalists within the Dual Monarchy. For them, Wilson’s vision seemed to legitimate both a way out of the horror of war and to imagine a post-Habsburg political future.

In Austria, Emperor Karl’s recall of the Reichsrat was a brave attempt to shore up the state and restore the dynasty’s waning legitimacy. The parliament’s reopening on May 30, 1917 was supposed to mark the start of a new relationship between the Habsburg subjects and their Emperor. The Monarch hoped for reconciliation and public support; more cynically, a return to a legal and more representative system of rule also offered the opportunity to spread the blame

³¹⁸ Anna Kohnstern letter to her sister, April 1917, in Volker Ulrich ed., *Vom Augusterlebnis zur Novemberrevolution. Beiträge zur Sozialgeschichte Hamburgs und Norddeutschlands im Ersten Weltkrieg*, (Bremen, 1999), pp. 89-91.

³¹⁹ Schlegelmilch, “Massenprotest,” p. 293.

³²⁰ Davis, *Home Fires Burning*, p. 195.

³²¹ “Juni-Bericht des Gemeinsamen Zentralnachweisebureaus, Auskunftsstelle für Kriegsgefangene, Zensurabteilung über die Stimmung der österreichischen Bevölkerung im Hinterlande,” in AVA Vienna, MdI, Praesidium (1917). 22/gen. No. 14234, p. 1.

more widely for the realm's continuing woes. The summons to the deputies betrayed this more sinister purpose of the recall, as well as the limited political concession on offer. The official summons to the deputies explicitly stated that the Reichsrat's return "was to deal with the food question, as well as economic, social, and financial matters arising out of the present state of the War."³²² The execution of this political maneuver highlighted how out of touch Karl's government was. Three years of repressive bureaucratic-military dictatorship in the Dual Monarchy had left deep scars of mistrust and bitterness – if not necessarily against the emperor himself, then at the very least against the state that he symbolically headed. Indeed, at the Reichsrat's reopening, forty of its five-hundred and sixteen members were absent due either to exile or imprisonment for subversive behavior against the state.³²³ As Pieter Judson has recently noted, Minister President Clam-Martinic had alienated most of the Slavic deputies with his initial attempt to implement pro-Austrian German reforms by fiat just prior to Karl's announcement of a return of parliament.³²⁴ Clam-Martinic's belated attempt at reconciliation by organizing meetings with parliamentarians barely a week before the Reichsrat reopening was likewise inadequate for winning over any goodwill. Astoundingly, Karl and his government, in recalling the people's representatives, were permitting a forum for long-suppressed grievances to be expressed without any plan for how to manage or resolve them.³²⁵

³²² "Reichsratsladung" AVA Vienna OR – 42/ 140343, pp. 1-23.

³²³ Isaac Glaise-Horstenau, *The Collapse of the Habsburg Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 109.

³²⁴ Judson, *Habsburg Empire*, pp. 298-299.

³²⁵ As argued by Carl Redlich, *The Austrian War Government*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 150-152.

Brest-Litovsk and the Bread Peace

The war efforts of the Central Powers were re-invigorated when, in November 1917, the Bolsheviks launched their second revolution in Russia and, a few weeks later, sued for an armistice with the Central Powers. For German leaders it was a triumph. Germany had gone to war in 1914 in large part through fear of Russian rearmament and aggression. A key component of the Reich's early war-aims program that outlined a vision for Mitteleuropa had stated that the Russian behemoth "must be thrust back as far as possible... and her domination over the non-Russian vassal peoples broken."³²⁶ The revolutionary turmoil in Russia's interior and the dissolution of its army after its last failed offensive in Galicia in the summer of 1917 now made this almost utopian objective seem achievable. For Austria-Hungary, the Bolsheviks' peace request came as a lifeline. Emperor Karl and his Foreign Minister Czernin hoped that the cessation of hostilities in the east might lead to a general peace. At the very least, they hoped the resumption of trade might bring relief from the Empire's catastrophic food shortages and permit their regime to survive. Yet ironically, the much hoped for "bread peace" as advertised to the German press, laid the groundwork for the collapse of both Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1918. The Treaties of Brest-Litovsk with Ukraine and Russia brought political disaffection and social disaster to Galicia and by opening a way for revolutionary propaganda and new discontents also undermined the Habsburg Army. For Germany, Brest-Litovsk and its aftermath represented the moment when the vision of a "soft," cooperative Mitteleuropa decisively gave way to the reality of brutal, colonial exploitation in the east; this made supporting the war

³²⁶ "September Programme," BA/SA Lichterfelde, R903 – I/204, band 1, p. 2.

indefensible for those who had earlier convinced themselves that the Reich was struggling for a pan-European Mitteleuropa.

The armistice on the Eastern Front began on December 15th 1917 and one week later, a peace conference between all four Central Powers – Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire – and the Bolsheviks, opened in the fortress town of Brest-Litovsk, at the German Eastern Field Army’s headquarters. In the interest of swaying opinion at home and abroad, the Reich’s Foreign Minister, Richard von Kühlmann, and his Habsburg counterpart, Czernin, at first tentatively assented to Bolshevik proposals for peace without annexations or indemnities, but only under the condition that the Western Allies also participate in the negotiations. In effect, Kühlmann, an early proponent of Naumann’s *Mitteleuropa*, was trying to satisfy both pro-annexationist conservatives and militarists as well as moderates and leftists who wished to see a dominant Germany which did not also preclude the principle of national self-determination. In a memorandum to Czernin, Kühlmann stated his plan to “secure a dominant place us... with plans in place to subvert the principle of national self-determination without destroying it.”³²⁷ In a separate dispatch to the OHL chiefs Hindenburg and Ludendorff, Kühlmann seems to have intentionally toughened his stance, explaining that whatever “short term concessions to the national principle we agree on in the present... will secure a peace in the east that will benefit all the Reich... and will present the opportunity to get for ourselves whatever territorial concessions *we absolutely need* in the future.”³²⁸ Towards this end, the Germans had established a series of national councils in Poland, Courland, Lithuania, and parts of Estonia, with another two being set up in the Ukraine and Belarus when the negotiations

³²⁷ BA/SA Lichterfelde, RH9 – 203/2993, band 15, p. 31.

³²⁸ “Zusammenstellung des Monatsberichte der Stellv. Generalstabs an das Preussische Kriegsministeriums,” GSTa PK Berlin, HA - 90A/2685.

commenced. The plan was then to strong-arm these councils to issue declarations seceding from Russia and either to invite German troops or to proclaim a wish for greater “cooperation and connection” with the Reich, thus ultimately drawing these new states into German orbit.³²⁹

This strategy, however, was too subtle and “soft” for the OHL; Ludendorff and Hindenburg were outraged, fearing that by conditionally agreeing to Bolshevik proposals, Kühlmann had renounced the chance to dictate peace. Their interpretation of what Germany absolutely needed was also extensive. In their reply to Kühlmann, Ludendorff and Hindenburg wrote “of detaching huge areas from the present Russia and building up those districts into effective bulwarks on our frontier.”³³⁰ Through a separate communique to Kühlmann, Ludendorff also repudiated the need for independent states in Eastern Europe. He dismissed “these fantasies of a new Mitteleuropa founded on false fraternal bonds. What the Reich most needs presently are resources and buffers!”³³¹ To this end, the OHL expected the direct annexation of Lithuania, Courland, Riga and its nearby islands as well as direct occupation of the Ukraine, “so we can feed our people.”³³² Most of former Congress Poland was to be directly attached to Germany. Russia itself was “to evacuate Finland, Estonia, Livonia, Bessarabia, Armenia and the eastern tip of Galicia... her economy would be opened to Reich influence, she would pay compensation for her prisoners held in Germany, and would deliver grains, oil, and

³²⁹ Jochen Böhrer, *Civil War in Central Europe 1918-1921*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 19.

³³⁰ BA/MA Freiburg, PH3 – 312/2, band 3, folio 2.

³³¹ “Stellung btrg. die Allgemeine Stimmung im Volke...” BA/MA PH3 – 313/1, band 1, p. 2.

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

other materials at favorable prices.”³³³ In short, the OHL pursued the reduction of Russia to that of a semi-colonial satellite of Germany.

The promise of peace in the east, even if by way of direct annexation, meant that there was little political restraint on the military men who now seemed firmly in command of Germany’s future. The Reich’s politicians in this context also succumbed to the seductive promise of an eastern empire. When the expansive treaty with Bolshevik Russia was eventually put before the Reichstag on March 1st 1918, the bourgeois parties that had supported the peace resolution eight months earlier, all voted unhesitatingly for the Brest-Litovsk settlement; even the SPD, on principle opposed to annexations and indemnities, merely abstained from the vote.³³⁴ The final terms of the Brest-Litovsk treaty signed on March 3rd, 1918 were staggering. In a subsequent April 3rd classified report submitted to the OHL by a special “Reich Eastern Bureau,” German economists, agronomists, and statisticians estimated that Russia lost around 2.5 million square kilometers of territory with some 50 million inhabitants, over 90 percent of its coal mines, 54 percent of its industries (including approximately 60 percent of its steel-manufacturing capability), and roughly a third of its agriculture and railways.³³⁵ When news of the scale of German conquests in the east broke on the home front, liberal circles were largely enthusiastic. Naumann, the National Liberal deputy most responsible for propagating the idea of Mitteleuropa during World War I, argued before his party that the peace settlement would provide “the material basis for a new continental fraternity of nations... aligned naturally with

³³³ Quoted from Mark Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship: The Politics of the German High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff*, (London, Routledge Press, 1973), pp. 160-161.

³³⁴ BA/SA Lichterfelde, R 43 – II, 627A Band 6.

³³⁵ “Wirtschaftsbericht im besetzende Ukraine,” in BA/MA Freiburg, PH12 – 104/29334, Band 2.

Central Europe.”³³⁶ The moderate SPD deputies were far more skeptical. Philip Scheidemann denounced the settlement in an Inter-Party meeting, correctly recognizing that the de-facto establishment of a German empire on the remnants of Tsarist Russia likely doomed whatever chance Germany still had of achieving a negotiated peace with the Allies.³³⁷ The SPD rank and file and Germany’s working class seemed even more outraged. When the terms of the treaty were announced in German newspapers on March 4th, it elicited shock and outrage among the urban proletariat. In Berlin, the revolutionary firebrand Richard Müller attracted some half-a-million workers to a massive peace rally before being suppressed by a combination of the police and the urging of the SPD leadership.³³⁸ Similar demonstrations occurred across Germany, with the largest in Hamburg and Cologne, before being stamped out by the authorities – an ominous sign of the growing gap between popular pacifist opinion and the ambivalent nationalism of the moderate SPD leadership.

Before heading to Brest-Litovsk, Emperor Karl had stresses to his Foreign Minister that “the whole fate of the Monarchy and dynasty depends on peace being concluded as quickly as possible.”³³⁹ But above all, Czernin needed to secure food from the east as quickly as possible for the starving Empire. The flurry of diplomatic communiques back and forth from Vienna to Brest-Litovsk also highlighted the Habsburg hope to rein in German expansionism, or at the very

³³⁶ Naumann speech before the National Liberal Association, March 1st, from Friedrich Naumann Stiftung Berlin, GA1 – 19400/1A, pp. 4-6.

³³⁷ BA/SA R43 – II/642A, band 2 folio 1.

³³⁸ For the strikes in Berlin, see Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor*, pp. 448-454. V. Ulrich also discusses the strikes in depth in *Vom Augusterlebnis*, pp. 109-157.

³³⁹ Emperor Karl on 17 January, 1918 OA/KA Vienna, K12 – Nr. 398113.

least, to share in it.³⁴⁰ A secondary objective was the acquisition of Poland for the Habsburgs, although this was considered by both the Imperial Court and the Foreign Ministry as a less important goal than the ceasing of hostilities.³⁴¹ This stance was reinforced by subsequent events. The head of Austria-Hungary's Common Food Committee, Ottokar Landwehr von Pragenau, warned in a desperate briefing to Emperor Karl at the start of January 1918 of the impending collapse of the food supply.³⁴² He stated that whatever reserves were available in Hungary following the winter could not be transported to Austria because Germany had ceased delivering coal in anticipation of their Spring offensive.³⁴³ Following this, the Habsburg authorities decided on temporarily halving the flour ration in Cisleithania; the results were almost immediate with a large wave of strikes spreading from Vienna and Prague into the Hungarian half of the Monarchy involving hundreds of thousands of starving workers of all nationalities.³⁴⁴ In an ominous portent, Viennese newspapers reported on the mutiny of sailors at the naval base in Kotor on February 4th, sparking another large wave of demonstrations in the capital before being put down by the police. In Cattaro itself, sailors had flown the red flag, demanded an immediate "peace without annexations," and killed an officer before being

³⁴⁰ See C.F. Wargelin, "A High Price for Bread: The First Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the Break-Up of Austria-Hungary, 1917-1918," *The International History Review* 19(4) November 1997, pp. 772-773.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 765.

³⁴² OA/KA Vienna, K04 – Nr. 92651/folio 2, p. 19.

³⁴³ BA/MA Freiburg PH19 – 401/3456, Band 12, folio 22.

³⁴⁴ For the January Strikes and subsequent Cattaro Naval Mutiny, see R.G. Plaschka, Heinrich Haselsteiner, and Andreas Suppan, *Innere Front. Militärassistenz, Widerstand und Umsturz in der Konaumonarchie, 1918. Zwischen Streik und Meutereri*, (2 vols., Munich: H. A. Beck Vrlg., 1974), especially pp. 59-90 and 107-148.

eventually arrested. To Habsburg leaders, it must have appeared as if the realm was on the brink of revolution.³⁴⁵

When the Germans refused to budge from their expansive demands of annexation in the east which threatened to bring revolution to the streets of the Empire, the Habsburg Foreign Minister Czernin played his last card at the negotiations. He insisted on admitting a delegation from the Ukrainian People's Council, a Ukrainian nationalist government, to the bargaining table. The drawback to this maneuver was in alienating the Poles in the Warsaw Regency Council, established by the Central Powers in October 1917 to help govern the putative Polish state and provide legitimacy to the occupation, who feared that their competing claims versus Ukraine would be disregarded. The prospect of an autonomous Ukraine detached from both Russia and Germany, appeared to Czernin to hold the key to the Empire's now dire food supply problems. It seems that parleying with the Ukrainian delegation must have been something of a last gamble for the Habsburg representatives, who found the Ukrainians uncouth and ill-mannered. Quite telling of the Empire's desperate straits, Czernin publicly displayed incredible willingness to appease the Ukrainians, including even vague promises of ennoblement by the Emperor Karl for nationalist figures.³⁴⁶ Privately, in his dispatch back to Vienna, Czernin descried the Ukrainian People's Council as "upstarts... boys, scarcely more than twenty years old, people without experience, without property, without reputation, driven by adventure, perhaps megalomania."³⁴⁷ They were members of the country's tiny intelligentsia possessing no sway with the still mostly nationally indifferent peasantry in the countryside. Indeed the

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p.145.

³⁴⁶ Timothy Snyder, *Red Prince: The Secret Lives of an Austrian Archduke*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 146.

³⁴⁷ OA/HA Vienna, G14 – II/ 27731/folio 1b, p. 4.

Hungarian Minister President expressed deep skepticism as to whether the Council would be able to keep any promises it made or even “whether this band of ruffians would be around long enough to do anything.”³⁴⁸

Yet in a sweeping gesture that seemed a far-cry from the rhetoric of “Middle European cooperation” espoused by intellectuals and liberals before and in the early months of the war, the German OHL unilaterally announced with the signing of Brest-Litovsk that Habsburg troops would be confined to less than a quarter of Ukraine and that German officials would be responsible for coordinating the export of its grain.³⁴⁹ More problematically for the Habsburgs, this happened after Czernin signed a treaty with the Ukrainian People’s Council publicly ceding Chelm to Ukraine and secretly promising that Galicia would be split between Poland and Ukraine; in return, the Ukrainians were expected to supply one million metric tons of grain by August 1st, 1918.³⁵⁰ Once these provisions became public, they would alienate the Galician Poles, historically the most loyal of the Monarchy’s Slavic peoples, and destroy any lingering possibility of tying Poland to the Habsburg Crown.

Ultimately, the prospect of vast quantities of Ukrainian grain for starving Central Europe proved to be a dangerous false promise. Even after the Germans de facto overturned the Habsburg treaty with the Ukrainian nationalists and installed their own leader who had the support of most of Ukraine’s large landowners, the Hetman Pavlo Skorodskyi, little food was extracted.³⁵¹ By German records, only 42,000 railway wagons carrying food, roughly a quarter

³⁴⁸ OA/HA Vienna, Lr 04 – Nr. 10314, band 5.

³⁴⁹ “Proklamation” BA/MA Freiburg PH17 – 109/35229, band 2, p. 2.

³⁵⁰ Wargelin, “A High Price for Bread,” p. 694.

³⁵¹ Mikhail Akulov, *War without Fronts: Attamans and Commissars in Ukraine 1917- 1919*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 102-103.

of which went to Austria-Hungary, rolled westwards delivering just over one hundred thousand tons of grain – far short of the million promised to Czernin.³⁵² The German “224 Division,” comprising trained agronomists and statisticians tasked with extraction, outlined its problems to OHL in a series of reports from July 1918. First, it asserted that “the food was simply not there.” The Central Powers had fallen victim to dubious Ukrainian promises and their own wishful thinking; instead of full granaries, German agronomists and soldiers came across a landscape also devastated by years of total war and inefficient Tsarist extraction. Moreover, whatever food was available was not easy to get. 224 Division reported that “the local authorities everywhere are impotent. Almost everywhere we roamed there was simply no government or officialdom... and we currently lack sufficient manpower on the ground to force peasants to sell their hoarded grain or livestock to us.”³⁵³ On a sinister note, one report observed that “With strictness, certainly by using weapons, truly significant supplies might have been retrieved.”³⁵⁴ However, with the thin German presence on the ground and the implementation of the peace treaty, large-scale extraction by force was simply not feasible, as Ludendorff later remarked in his memoirs.³⁵⁵

The March treaty of Brest Litovsk ended the fighting in the east, but also laid the groundwork for the subsequent collapse of both of the major Central Powers. With the conquest and occupation of the Ukraine in particular, Germany decisively turned away from the vision of a cooperative Mitteleuropa, a move that also alienated the bulk of its war-weary population from

³⁵² Ibid., p. 209.

³⁵³ “224 Division Memorandum,” June 10, 1918, BA/MA Freiburg PH81/58, p. 1.

³⁵⁴ “Bericht” July 5th, 1918 BA/MA Freiburg PH81/58, p. 29.

³⁵⁵ Ludendorff, *Memoirs*, pp. 369-371.

the Reich government as well as “patriotic” Reichstag parties on both the center and left. Eastern conquest had shattered the belief within Germany that the people were bleeding and starving for a war of defense. Similarly, Austria-Hungary’s gambled on disrupting its own nationalities status quo in a desperate attempt to secure food for its starving population. The failure of that attempt then opened the door to both nationalist demands for redrawing the map as well as revolution on the streets.

Chapter V

The Lessons of Collapse

Contrary to subsequent nationalist propaganda, the Central Powers' defeat took place on the Western Front, but the populations and politicians at home determined its consequences. The misery of civilians and their knowledge of what was taking place on the battlefield provided a crucial backdrop to state collapse in the Autumn of 1918. Austria-Hungary, not only Germany, was vulnerable to the irretrievable reverses a thousand kilometers away on the Western Front, because by 1918, Habsburg domestic politics were tied inextricably to the international balance.³⁵⁶ Both the Central Powers' regimes recognized that defeat made reform unstoppable, and both attempted to manage it by instituting first reform, then revolution from above. The failure of these last desperate efforts to stave off total collapse hastened the end of the fighting, which ceased on the Italian Front on November 4th and on the Western Front on November 11th, 1918.

In the hour of national defeat, the Reich's rulers decided that it would "be best to spread the blame," in the words of one historian.³⁵⁷ The decree issued by the Kaiser on September 30th at the behest of the OHL suddenly announced the wish "that the German people would cooperate more actively than hitherto in the determination of the fate of the Fatherland." At a point when

³⁵⁶ Oszkar Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Empire*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), especially pp. 109-111.

³⁵⁷ Sebastian Haffner, *Die Verratene Revolution*, (Bonn: Scherz Vrlg., 1969), p. 15.

that fate was already sealed, the decree announced that “men who have the confidence of the people should have a broad share in the rights and duties of government.”³⁵⁸ The Kaiser appointed Max von Baden, a scion of southern German royalty as well as a vocal liberal, as head of the new administration in the hopes that he would be able to attract the confidence of a Reichstag majority; the resulting government von Baden formed included Reichstag deputies from the Progressives, Center, and Social Democratic parties in the hopes that their inclusion would lend further credibility to the coming armistice.³⁵⁹ As a sign of how desperate Germany’s military situation on the Western Front had become, Ludendorff pressured the new government to begin armistice negotiations immediately. In response to von Baden’s questioning about whether it was really necessary to appeal for an armistice so abruptly on October 1st, Ludendorff insisted on the “speediest possible dispatch of peace feelers” with an accompanying warning from Hindenburg of a “looming potential catastrophe.”³⁶⁰ Rather confusingly for the new government, in a speech approved by Ludendorff and delivered to the party leaders of the Reichstag the next day on October 2nd, the army’s leadership sought to shirk all responsibility by explaining that Germany’s dire situation was the responsibility of Bulgaria’s military collapse, a misfortune which nobody in Germany could be held accountable.³⁶¹ Where it was conceded that problems did exist on the Western Front, they were stated in the speech to be of a purely material nature: the enemy had in the tank an invincible weapon and unmatched reserves of fresh

³⁵⁸ BA/SA Lichterfelde RH1/1422 – I, “An das Volk,” 1.

³⁵⁹ This is made very clear letters circulating within the upper echelons of the German army. For example, the head of Generalkommando XIII in Stuttgart frantically urged General Staff to conclude peace as urgently as possible to “avoid mutiny,” HStA Stuttgart, M77/1 Buecher 786/ folge 172.

³⁶⁰ BA/SA Lichterfelde RH1/1029 – 4, band 2.

³⁶¹ Max von Baden, *Errinerungen und Dokumente*, (Hamburg, 1927), pp. 331-335.

American manpower.³⁶² As historians have noted, Ludendorff's premier objective was to preserve the army's prestige at the hour of its collapse and thus he continued to insist, despite all evidence to the contrary, that "the old spirit of heroism had not disappeared," while admonishing the new government that "no time should be lost... Every twenty-four hours can make the situation worse."³⁶³

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to cover the final collapse of the German army in the Fall of 1918 and the ensuing politics of blame in its wake which so poisoned the Weimar Republic at its very inception. Rather the end of the war revived debates over Mitteleuropa that after 1917 had been thrown under the shadow of the OHL's fantasies of eastern colonialism. More immediately, Germany's unravelling in 1918 seemed to confirm some of the darker predictions regarding American domination of Europe espoused by proponents of Mitteleuropa on both the left and the right. This in turn stemmed largely from the heavy-handedness with which the Americans – and Wilson in particular – responded to German peace feelers. In October 1918, acquiescing to pressure from the military, Max von Baden and his new government dispatched via Switzerland a note requiring President Wilson to "take steps for the restoration of peace" and to organize "an immediate armistice."³⁶⁴ Appealing directly to the American president was an intentional calculation to bypass the bloodied French and British, who were much less sympathetic to German peace offerings. While Wilson's initial response was cautious but not hostile, being largely limited to inquiring which German government organs were conducting the negotiations," the president's second response on October 13 shattered the

³⁶² Ibid., p. 333.

³⁶³ Michael Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare: The Debate over *Levée en Masse* in October 1918," in *The Journal of Contemporary History* 73(3) September 2001, pp. 477-482.

³⁶⁴ Von Baden, *Erinnerungen und Dokumente*, doc. 75, p.351

illusions on which the German peace approach was founded. Wilson replied to German peace feelers with a demand that “satisfactory safeguards and guarantees must be conceded to preserve the current military advantage of the joint Allied armies” while also denouncing the “illegal and inhumane practices of the German armed forces that must immediately cease.”³⁶⁵ Reading between the lines, the German delegation in Switzerland understood (perhaps correctly) that the Americans were insisting on a unilateral disarmament from the Central Powers. Even more ominously, Wilson condemned the new German government and peace negotiators as still “part of the arbitrary power” that controlled Germany and was thus an impediment to peace; the note stressed that the solution lay with the German people as “It is within the choice of the German Nation to alter it.”³⁶⁶

The clear evidence that Wilson would not permit Germany an easy peace and, more shockingly, that America was attempting to meddle in Germany’s internal affairs briefly inflamed resistance within the new government, which now sought to continue the war in the hopes of securing a more favorable peace settlement.³⁶⁷ Moreover, for many in Germany who had envisioned Mitteleuropa as an escape from the dilemma of an Anglo-American dominated global economy and world order, there was now seemingly incontrovertible proof that there really was a hostile imperial power set on dominating Europe. Walther Rathenau, himself an admirer of American ingenuity and industry, stressed this point in a November 1st, 1918 speech at the Reich War Raw Materials Department (*Kriegsrohstoffabteilung*).³⁶⁸ Rathenau had three

³⁶⁵ “Wilson’s Appeal to the German People,” U.S. National Archives College Park, NWFH20/ roll 15.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” p. 479.

³⁶⁸ BA/SA Lichterfelde, RH17/2844-II, bnd. 5, “Rathenau Rede.”

key points. First, he reiterated earlier arguments that Germany's dire straits were the result of inadequate industrial preparedness before the outbreak of war. This he linked to his second major thesis – Britain and America had established “a chokehold” (*Würgegriff*) over the supply chains and access to resources in the world economy even before the war such that “Germany was never able to truly compete on the world-significant level” as its wartime rivals. Third, he argued that Wilson's perceived violation of German sovereignty and the heavy-handedness of the American peace terms offered an opportunity down the road: “The nations of Europe will have learned a sobering lesson these days. The so-called freedom offered by the American behemoth hides their true intentions to impose alien traditions and customs over Europe... Once Europe understands that American benevolence will come with the flooding of European markets by American commodities... they will realize that a united bloc on the continent naturally centered on Germany is the only way of pushing back this wave.”³⁶⁹

As Victoria de Grazia has pointed out, angst over the threat of American cultural and economic hegemony was a salient feature in the political *Zeitgeist* of interwar Europe.³⁷⁰ Furthermore, it was an anxiety that transcended classic political divisions and was shared by both the left and right across Europe. In this regard, the wartime discourse regarding *Mitteleuropa* directly shaped the post-1918 anti-Americanism in Europe as well as informing the strategies for resisting perceived American encroachment. Indeed, Friedrich Naumann (seriously ill by this point), the great popularizer of the concept (and strategy) of *Mitteleuropa*, made what seemed to be a last attempt to preserve something of his Central European vision for Germany on the eve of defeat. In an October 1918 letter addressed to both his fellow National Liberals in the Reichstag

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

and subsequently delivered to Walther Rathenau via Arthur von Gwinner, the former director of Deutsche Bank, Naumann reiterated many of the points he first made in his 1915 publication. Germany, he claimed, “regardless of the coming victory or not, will still remain the strongest among the small peoples of the world... [although] the war has revealed the depressing reality that our population and territory are truly small compared to the resources marshalled by the United States, Britain, and Russia.”³⁷¹ Naumann went on to stress that “no amount of martial spirit among our people or our own internal mobilization will be sufficient to overcome this deficit between us and our enemies... unless we also are able to unite the resources of the other smaller peoples of Europe.” Yet while Naumann still stressed that the “Greater Central Europe” of the postwar period ought to be “formed and led organically and without despotism,” there was also a clear strain of desperation in his last appeal: “at the very least,” he urged, “economic union is imperative, categorically necessary” since “just another generation of passivity and isolation is enough to herald the end of Germany and Europe as sovereign bodies.”³⁷² As Naumann’s letter highlights, it was precisely at the moment of Germany’s military collapse at the front and impending revolution on German streets, that a non-imperialistic vision of Mitteleuropa reemerged from the shadows of Ludendorff and Hindenburg’s eastern fantasies. Indeed, it was precisely the awareness of German weakness and its inability to truly dominate East Central Europe that revived thinking about Mitteleuropa beyond pure colonial fantasy.

The last major policy formulation regarding Mitteleuropa in the midst of imperial dissolution and revolution in East Central Europe before the armistice was penned by none other than Wilhelm II himself. On October 14, 1918 – the day that President Wilson dispatched an

³⁷¹ BA/HA Koblenz RS7/1030 – band 7, folge 1.

³⁷² Ibid.

armistice note practically demanding the abdication of the Kaiser – Wilhelm II surveyed the unraveling German political situation and formulated the last explicit articulation of a plan for Mitteleuropa before the formal end of the First World War; his ideas for the creation of a Germanic Central Europe after the close of hostilities drew much from both the national-liberal visions of someone like Friedrich Naumann or Walther Rathenau as well as from the völkisch colonial experiment of Ludendorff's Ober Ost. In a closely lined, four-page memorandum, written on Imperial stationery, he penciled his "Remarks about Austria," for the benefit of the German Foreign Office.³⁷³ The central theme of the Kaiser's outlook was what he referred to as the "awakening of the Germanic racial consciousness" that would reshape the postwar European order: the war, caused at least partially by Slavic hatred of the Germans according to Wilhelm, would result in an "instinctive Germanic racial concentration in Central Europe," that would then provide the basis for a reordering of Europe's politics and economics around Germany.³⁷⁴ Stripped of its racist jargon, the basic ideas outlined in the Kaiser's memorandum (despite being fanciful and unrealistic in the Fall of 1918), nevertheless bore a striking resemblance to basic tenets of German foreign policy in place since the beginning of the war that aimed to create a new *Mitteleuropa* after the war.

Like Bethmann Hollweg, Naumann, and the other earlier proponents of Mitteleuropa, Kaiser Wilhelm II envisioned a direct union with Austria as the linchpin of potential German hegemony on the continent. Indeed, the immediate impetus for Wilhelm II's memorandum seems to have been the news of the planned federalization of the Habsburg Empire.³⁷⁵ Both Wilhelm

³⁷³ BA/SA Lichterfelde R901/8016 band I/903, "Bemerkung über Österreich!"

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ BA/SA Lichterfeld R901/18295 band 12, "Die Lage Österreichs."

and the German Foreign Minister saw clearly by October 1918 that Emperor Karl and the Austrian government were no longer able to halt the centrifugal forces within the Monarchy; in this context, the Kaiser took it upon himself personally to address the resulting power vacuum in Central Europe. Echoing Bethmann Hollweg's early-war plans for creating a new "Central European Bloc," Wilhelm proposed Anschluss with Austria as the linchpin of his new Germanic Central Europe. The Hungarians, no longer entangled in the unwieldy decennial compromise with Austria, would also freely enter into a diplomatic alliance with the Reich. Crucially, Wilhelm echoed Naumann and Rathenau in stressing the economic basis of the proposed framework that transcended supposed German-Slavic racial tensions: "The war broke out partially because of the Slavic hatred of the culturally superior Germanic race... upon which Slavdom was and will remain materially, commercially, and industrially dependent." He went on to emphasize that "the most pressing matter is to prepare the way for a firmer relationship – primarily economic – with German Austria... this German central core will provide the material preconditions for Poles, Czechs, Yugoslavs and others to our east to gravitate around the Germanic racial concentration in Europe while preserving their freedom from Russia and the Anglo-American bloc."³⁷⁶

The major difference in the Kaiser's memorandum compared with earlier concepts of Mitteleuropa was the extent to which Wilhelm's vision was racialized. This in turn reflected both the influence of explicitly imperialistic occupation policies imposed on Eastern Europe by Germany's military leaders as well as the continued agitation of radical *völkisch* nationalists on the German right. The latter especially continued to exert pressure on German foreign policy in the Weimar Republic all the while deploying the language of a racialized notion of Mitteleuropa.

³⁷⁶ BA/SA Lichterfelde R901/8016 band I/903, "Bemerkung über Österreich!"

As Andreas Hillgruber had pointed out as early as the 1980s, even in the immediate aftermath of Germany's defeat in 1918, at a historical low-point in German geopolitical fortunes, a radical revisionism had begun to crystallize around the notion of "German Mitteleuropa" as a racial mission among those on the German far-right.³⁷⁷ In an ironic mirroring of wartime liberal and SPD strategies, German conservatives in the interwar period seized upon geopolitical transformation in Mitteleuropa as a means of rejecting the reviled democracy of the Weimar Republic at home. As Ernst Jaeckh, the conservative president of the Berlin School of Politics, proclaimed in a January 1922 lecture, "Mitteleuropa's small states, being of chiefly Slavic stock... have no choice but to accept foreign domination, currently in the shape of Anglo-French and American penetration."³⁷⁸ He went on to claim that "their very inexperience and demonstrable inability to rule themselves will offer us opportunities down the line to re-establish German control over Mitteleuropa," a move that would "force [the Weimar Republic] into a fight" which would then bring about the collapse of the entire post-1918 political structure. Martin Spahn, the Reichstag delegate for the nationalist German National People's Party (DNVP) summed up the far-right's "national oppositional approach" as a strategy of "double revisionism": "Firstly if we can succeed in revising the shape of Central Europe, we shall again rise to the position of Europe's leading people. The great struggle involved therein will also be enough to throw off the crippling shackles of this Republican government."³⁷⁹

The Kaiser's Mitteleuropa memorandum highlighted another lasting consequence stemming from the breakdown of the existing Central European order in 1918, namely that the

³⁷⁷ Andreas Hillgruber, "Revisionismus – Kontinuität und Wandel in der Aussenpolitik der Weimarer Republic," in *Die Last der Nation*, (Duesseldorf 1984), pp. 59-85.

³⁷⁸ Ernst Jaeckh, *Das Grossere Mitteleuropa*, (1922).

³⁷⁹ Martin Spahn, *Mitteleuropa und das deutsche Volk*, (Neuberg: 1925), pp. 3-6, 31-32.

relationship between politics, the economy, and race had fundamentally altered. As this dissertation has already argued, the changing discourses over Mitteleuropa during the war revealed that space itself had become a totalizing category. Despite Mitteleuropa's vagueness and fluidity, the various articulations of the idea before and during the First World War shared one overarching commonality. Figures as diverse as Naumann, Bethmann Hollweg, Ludendorff, and even the Kaiser all implicitly understood Mitteleuropa as a collapsing of politics and economics as distinct spheres, or more precisely, argued that economics was inherently political. This point may seem obvious given the role of the customs unions in 19th century German unification or the importance attached to industrial might by military theorists across the continent even prior to 1914. However, the sheer violent intensity with which Germany fought World War One, alongside its sweeping aspirations for reshaping Central Europe, made it impossible to consider continental Europe as anything other than a single total space which offered political and economic salvation (or alternatively demise). One clear offshoot of this new all-or-nothing idea of spatiality can be found in Carl Schmitt's writing on *Grossraum*, which subsequently influenced how the Nazis sought to organize their newly conquered European empire during the Second World War.

Already by the mid-1920s, some German liberals and conservatives had explicitly revived the vision of Mitteleuropa, but this time as a predominantly cultural sphere, where "people considered themselves Germans."³⁸⁰ Some scholars have argued that this German "ethno-cultural fetishism of Central Europe" paved the way for the later Nazi project of creating

³⁸⁰ See for example Max Hilbert Boehm, *Europa Irredenta*, (Berlin: 1923); and Heinz Brauweiller, *Berufstand, Sprachraum und Staat*, (Berlin: 1925).

a racial empire.³⁸¹ Yet as Schmitt's writings demonstrate, it was the political and economic lessons learned from the First World War that were far more intellectually impactful. Indeed, Schmitt's writings on *Grossraum* in the 1930s comprise the major conceptual leap that pushed the contested Mitteleuropa of the First World War towards the Nazi vision of a Germanic racial empire. Rather conveniently for Schmitt, the Nazi regime of the late 1930s was seeking a new vocabulary with which to articulate its aspirations for a sweeping expansion in Europe distinct from the traditional understanding of interstate relations that had been shattered in the First World War.³⁸²

As historians have recently noted, even Hitler's own favorite vocabulary of "living space" largely derived from the writings of 19th century theories Social Darwinian, far-right and populist theorists such as Friedrich Ratzel, and was premised on the racial superiority of Germans over Slavs, which therefore gave the Germans the right to land and resources in predominantly Slavic Eastern Europe.³⁸³ A second premise of this older German-imperialist language was the trope of the *Drang nach Osten*, the semi-mythologized German colonization of East-Central Europe in the Middle Ages, which 19th century racist authors like Karl Haushofer took as evidence of an unavoidable and unfinished clash between Germanic and Slavic civilizations.³⁸⁴ However, for

³⁸¹ Henry Cord Meyer, *Mitteleuropa in German Thought and Action 1815-1945*, (New York: Routledge Press, 1955), p. 21.

³⁸² David Luban, "Carl Schmitt and the Critique of 'Lawfare'" in *Georgetown Public Law and Theory*, paper 10.

³⁸³ Geoff Eley, *Nazism as Fascism: Violence, Ideology, and the Ground of Consent in Germany 1930-1945*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 38-41.

³⁸⁴ David Thomas Murphy, *The Heroic earth: Geopolitical Thought in Weimar Germany, 1918-1933*, (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1997).

Schmitt this “eastern-centric” understanding of German expansionism lacked a theoretical grounding that would justify German hegemony over Western Europe.³⁸⁵

To address this deficiency, Schmitt's theory of *Grossraum* relies on three major intellectual foundations - the early 20th-century American Monroe Doctrine that emphasized the United States' rights to intervene in the Western Hemisphere in the protection of its own core interests; the British idea of empire dating from the nineteenth century, and Germany's own attempts at creating a *Mitteleuropa* framework during the First World War. According to Schmitt, “the great space,” which both America and Britain effectively possessed, was first and foremost a space of “action, organization and human planning” centered on a single legally sovereign core that exercised effective control over economically and legally subordinate areas at the periphery. In Germany's case, this *Grossraum* would stretch across southern, western, and central Europe, and be ruled by the Reich as a “coordinated political body subject to German law and sovereignty.” Schmitt's vision of a continental empire with an ethno-racial, German-Aryan nucleus quite clearly evokes both Kaiser Wilhelm's last formulations of a race-centered *Mitteleuropa* as well as Ludendorff's brutal colonial experiments in occupied Eastern Europe. However, his theoretical emphasis on Anglo-American precedence also reflects another key premise of the earlier formulations of *Mitteleuropa*, namely the defensive logic of creating a European economic union to counteract Anglo-Saxon economic dominance.

Throughout the course of the First World War, the political usage of *Mitteleuropa* and proposals for its realization varied across the political spectrum. That *Mitteleuropa* ultimately assumed largely racist and expansionist connotations by the end of the war was due to the

³⁸⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Völkerrechtliche Grossraumordnung mit Interventionsverbot für raumfremde Mächte. Ein Beitrag zum Reichsbegriff im Völkerrecht*, (Berlin: 1939).

shrinking of the political landscape after 1917 that effectively precluded liberal notions of a Central European union. This was even more the case after the Versailles Peace Treaty in 1919, as contested visions of Mitteleuropa from before 1914 and during World War One narrowed towards what became part of a National Socialist idea of European empire. In large part, the revivifying of Mitteleuropa as an explicitly imperial project stems from the failure of the Versailles peace settlement and the perceived precariousness of the new European countries it created. In the end, the inability of the 1919 peace to satisfy anyone in Central Europe facilitated a turn on the part of German elites towards Mitteleuropa as part of a broader search for meaning in the interwar period.

Making Sense of Things

The brave new world that formed in the dying embers of the war was fixed and formalized in the months after the armistices of the autumn of 1918. While the leaders of the victorious Allied powers earnestly debated the continent's future in Paris, the new nation states of central Europe cemented control over their territory and secured with force contested land, most often at the expense of the German, Austrian and Hungarian republics. A treaty ending the war in the west was signed with Germany on July 28th, 1919. To underline their enemy's humiliation, the French selected the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles as the venue – the place where half a century earlier a unified German Reich had been proclaimed. Almost as an afterthought, the Allies concluded a separate peace treaty with the new Austria at Saint-Germain

in September 1919. Due to the Bolshevik revolution, and then a brutal counter-revolution, only in June 1920 was the Treaty of Trianon with Hungary sealed.³⁸⁶

As historians have long noted, the postwar order turned out to please nobody in East-Central Europe.³⁸⁷ The region's reorganization along national lines had already taken place on the ground before the leaders of the victorious Allied powers began their peace deliberations in Paris in January 1919. In all likelihood, this offered the only possibility of stability, but the chances of success were not good, in historical hindsight. For one, the region was too ethnically mixed to permit strong homogeneous nation-states. In Poland, Czechoslovakia and a new Romania swollen with ex-Hungarian territory, around a third of the populations were ethnic minorities. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was, as its name suggested, a mishmash of peoples, who below the elites often nurtured long-held historical grievances towards each other rather than embraced the new Yugoslav idealism.³⁸⁸ In the postwar settlement's favor, it has been pointed out that Europe's political reorganization halved its minorities, from 60 million to 30 million. Treaties imposed on the new states were supposed to guarantee minority rights.³⁸⁹ Yet this misses the crucial point that both Wilsonian propaganda's espousal of the "self-determination of peoples" and the war itself had raised national aspirations to a fever pitch that the peace settlement – no matter how well intentioned or planned out – could not satisfy. Minority status in a continent constructed upon the basis of nation states was far less attractive or

³⁸⁶ An engaging and detailed account of the negotiations leading up to Trianon can be found in MacMillan, *Peacemakers*, especially, pp. 291-295.

³⁸⁷ A succinct historiographical summary can be found in Richard J. Evans, "The Successor States," in R. Gerwarth ed., *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

³⁸⁹ Anthony Sharp, "The Genie that would not Go Back in the Bottle: National Self-Determination and the Legacy of the First World War and the Peace Settlement," in S. Dunn and Thomas Fraser eds., *Europe and Ethnicity: World War I and Contemporary Ethnic Conflict*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 25.

acceptable than under the old empires. By one reckoning, even though minority numbers had declined, ethnic conflicts in the territory of what had been Austria-Hungary nearly doubled after 1918, from nine to at least seventeen.³⁹⁰ Older antagonisms, such as that between the Czechs and Germans of Bohemia, were joined by new national struggles as Czechs and Poles in Teschen, Germans and Croats in Yugoslavia, and Romanians and Germans in Romania, Poles and Ukrainians in Poland, all squared up to each other.³⁹¹

A century after the conclusion of the First World War, one can argue that President Wilson made a fatal mistake in placing the “self-determination of people’s” at the center of his postwar vision. The slogan made effective wartime propaganda and contributed to his popularity and moral authority, but it also ensured that his postwar order would be immediately discredited in many eyes. Indeed, so mixed were the peoples of east-central Europe that not everyone could be permitted to exercise this new right without immediately undermining the new states of the region. In short, there would be winners and there would be losers, and Realpolitik dictated that the latter would be the two ethnic groups cowed by defeat, the Germans and the Magyars. Both peoples had just reason to feel deeply aggrieved with Wilson. The American President had indicated in speeches and his responses to the Central Powers’ peace notes in 1918 that his war was with autocrats, not their peoples; while “surrender” would be demanded of the old imperial regimes, he had warned on October 23rd, 1918, only a genuinely representative government could expect “peace negotiations” on the basis of the Fourteen Points.³⁹² The Germans had duly

³⁹⁰ Sked, *Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire*, p. 129.

³⁹¹ H. Batowski, “Nationale Konflikte bei der Entstehung der Nachfolgestaaten,” in R.G. Plaschka and Karl Mack eds., *Die Aufloesung des Habsburgerreiches. Zusammenbruch und Neuorientierung im Donauraum*, (Vienna, 1979), p. 342.

³⁹² “Wilson’s Appeal to the German People,” U.S. National Archives College Park, NWFH20/ roll 15.

revolted, but half a year later there had been no negotiations, just a “Diktat,” which their representatives had been permitted to comment upon before the victors’ final ruling.

The Hungarians’ experience was even more turbulent and less to Wilson’s liking, comprising a moderate revolution, a Bolshevik takeover, and then a right-wing autocracy led by a former Habsburg admiral, but they received similar treatment at the Allies’ hands. The terms imposed on both powers were, as even members of the Allied delegation recognized, devastating.³⁹³ Germany’s Foreign Minister, Count Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, reported to Max von Baden after he had read the voluminous list of demands, conditions and losses to which his country was expected to bow under threat of invasion that Wilson and his associates should have saved their time: “a single clause would have sufficed, ‘L’Allemagne renonce à son existence.’”³⁹⁴

Versailles and Trianon constructed the postwar order at the expense of the Germans and Hungarians, a fact that explains why neither country’s government ever accepted it. The non-application of its central organizing principle, national self-determination, to the losers was confirmed when German Austrians, who in October 1918 had assumed they would join Germany, were forbidden by the victors from doing so. At Versailles, Germany was refused access to the League of Nations, the international body supposed to bind the new postwar world, and it lost roughly 13 percent of its territory and 10 percent of its prewar population. Hungary, infamously, fared even worse, losing a staggering 67.3 percent of its territory and 73 percent of its inhabitants.³⁹⁵ Most of the subjects transferred were Romanians, Slovaks, Alsace-Lorrainers,

³⁹³ MacMillan, *Peacemakers*, p. 475.

³⁹⁴ BA/SA Lichterfelde R901/8891 – III/12, band 1, “Zum Friede.”

³⁹⁵ Figures cited from Wicker, *Weltkrieg in Zahlen*, pp. 521-522.

Danes or Poles, who could plausibly, if not always correctly, be presented as desirous of joining Romania, Czechoslovakia, France or Poland. In ambiguous areas like Masuria and Upper Silesia in Germany's east, plebiscites were held to determine the wishes of their inhabitants.

Nonetheless, there were rather grievous acts of hypocrisy, most notably the transfer of the unambiguously German Danzig to the League as a free state so as to give Poland access to the sea. The territory transfers and refusals to permit German Bohemians to "self-determine" and join with Austria or Austrians with Germany, left over 13 million Germans outside the Reich's borders while outside interwar Hungary were Magyar minorities totaling 3.23 million people.³⁹⁶

The anger felt in the heartlands of Germany and Hungary at the territorial loss was nothing compared with the intense bitterness of ethnic compatriots with property and livelihoods there who sold up or were forced out. From the Polish Corridor, 575,000 of the 1.1 million Germans who had resided there in 1919 had six years later moved to the new Weimar Republic.³⁹⁷ In the west, as many as 200,000 of the 300,000 strong German population left or were expelled from Alsace-Lorraine.³⁹⁸ The large numbers who departed underline that territorial loss brought by defeat and Wilson's new order were not merely stains on national honor; rather they were widely publicized events of collective trauma in national communities

³⁹⁶ David Kirk, *Europe's Population in the Interwar Years*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), pp. 98-99.

³⁹⁷ Georg Rhode, "Das Deutschtum in Posen und Pommerellen in der Zeit der Weimarer Republik," in *Senatskommission für das Studium des Deutschtums im Osten an der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn*, (Cologne, 1966), p. 99. Other estimates are even higher, see for example Richard Blanke, *Orphans of Versailles: The Germans of Western Poland, 1918-1939*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1993), pp. 32-34.

³⁹⁸ Louis Boswell, "From Liberation to Purge Trials in the 'Mythic Provinces': Recasting French Identities in Alsace and Lorraine, 1918-1920," in *French Historical Studies* 23(1) (Winter 2000), p. 141.

already radicalized and embittered by years of total war.³⁹⁹ Indeed, one of the salient legacies of Germany's oftentimes muddled and even self-contradicting efforts at forging a new Middle European order during wartime was in providing ample tinder for fanning the flames of perceived injustice between ethno-national communities. In Germany, the initial proposals for "modest" and "defensive" ethnic resettlement in East Prussia and Poland on the heels of Russian invasions of the area in 1914 had mutated into Ludendorff's full blown colonial fantasies of "Germanizing" Eastern Europe by 1916; Ober Ost emerged in this period as an experiment in planning a "total space" for exploitation by German bureaucrats and soldiers, where all the human, material, and natural resources of the land were harnessed for the waging of war. Germany's subsequent loss of territory and population inverted this narrative for those who earlier could only see Germany and Germans as subjects in creating the postwar order, not the objects in a now surprising and terrifying system beyond their control.

Beyond the elites, defeat broke on a people that, like all East-Central European society, was already deeply traumatized. Central European peoples had invested heavily in the war and its psychological impact was correspondingly enormous. Some have blamed the long years of mass killing for the brutalization of interwar society and politics.⁴⁰⁰ Yet only a relatively small minority of men perpetrated the paramilitary violence that wracked the region after the war; as the speed with which the German army demobilized at the end of 1918 testifies, most soldiers just wished to go home.⁴⁰¹ Instead suffering and, crucially, the fear of further suffering was key to

³⁹⁹ Istvan I. Moscy, *The Effects of World War I. The Uprooted: Hungarian Refugees and their Impact on Hungary's Domestic Politics, 1918-1921*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 10.

⁴⁰⁰ George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 161-180.

⁴⁰¹ Richard Gerwarth, "The Central European Counter-Revolution: Paramilitary Violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary after the Great War," *Past and Present* 200 (August 2008), pp. 175-209.

shaping the conflict's vast emotional legacy. Suffering was everywhere across Mitteleuropa. It was most visible in the human wreckage left by war – the millions of disabled veterans and the bereaved. In Germany alone, 533,000 war widows and 1.2 million orphans survived their fallen soldiers.⁴⁰² Czechoslovakia, whose population was one-fifth of that of the Reich and whose soldiers were alleged not to have fought well, paid pensions to 121,000 war widows and 238,000 orphans. Besides battle and bereavement, hunger and cold on the home fronts caused intense suffering. Invaded East Prussians and deported Galician Jews had suffered. So too did people who lost their homes after the war as borders moved.

This suffering, and resentments, prejudices and violence that it spawned or exacerbated, was highly and lastingly destructive. While this was true everywhere across East-Central Europe, its legacy in interwar Germany was especially toxic. One suggestive link between German suffering in the First World War and the crimes against humanity committed a quarter of a century later can be made. Germans who lived in ethnically mixed border areas, where war deprivation inflamed racial animosities, were disproportionately likely to take part in the Nazi genocide of the Jews; indeed, those who, in addition to having experienced frontier readjustment, had also lost their homes at the conflict's end were six times over-represented among Holocaust perpetrators.⁴⁰³ Wartime suffering at home fractured societies along class and racial fault-lines. These would be torn open further by inter-ethnic paramilitary fighting, left-wing revolutions, and bloody far-right reprisals in the aftermath of the conflict. Wartime suffering was at the root of

⁴⁰² Robert W. Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German "Victims" of the Great War, 1914-1939*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 95.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

what one intellectual described ominously in 1929 as the “wild and brutal atmosphere of hatred and revenge which is still the dominating current of Eastern Europe.”⁴⁰⁴

The other important legacy of wartime suffering was a desperate search for meaning. At the apex of the value system of Central European war culture had been the concept of sacrifice: a voluntary surrender to loss, suffering or pain for a higher cause.⁴⁰⁵ German and Austro-Hungarian societies sacrificed men in staggering numbers in 1914-1918.⁴⁰⁶ Austro-Hungarian casualties were especially difficult to count and never properly calculated but are estimated to have totaled between 1.1 and 1.2 million dead.⁴⁰⁷ As scholars have pointed out, Habsburg defeat did not, at least officially, devalue the sacrifices of Czech, Polish or Yugoslav soldiers; these new states reinterpreted the men’s’ deaths as both the cause and cost of independence.⁴⁰⁸ In Germany by contrast, defeat brought immense cognitive dissonance, as suggested by the diaries from that period. The Cologne diarist, Ruth Höfner blurted out the dilemma immediately on learning of the armistice. “For what have German mothers sacrificed their sons?” she asked.⁴⁰⁹ The Hamburg woman Anna Kohnstern had suffered immense personal privation during the four years of war while devotedly writing letters and sending whatever small gifts she could muster to her soldier

⁴⁰⁴ Jaszi, *Dissolution of the Habsburg Empire*, p. 455.

⁴⁰⁵ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, p.688.

⁴⁰⁶ 2,036,897 German men died in this period by the German government’s official count, *Sanitätsbericht* iii., p. 12.

⁴⁰⁷ Walther Winkler, *Die Totenverluste der öste-ung. Monarchie nach der Nationalitäten. Die Altersgliederung der Toten. Ausblicke in die Zukunft*, (Vienna, 1919), pp. 6-8.

⁴⁰⁸ Jakob Eichenberg, *Kämpfen für Frieden und Fürsorge. Polnische Veteranen des Ersten Weltkriegs und ihre international Kontakte 1918-1939*, (Munich, 2011).

⁴⁰⁹ Ruth Höfner, diary entry, November 12, 1918, DTA, Emmendingen: 1280/1.

son Albert. He died on October 26th, 1918 – just two weeks before the armistice. Anna’s diary entry from December 1st, 1918 stated simply, “He is gone. And for what?”⁴¹⁰

For German elites the postwar period also entailed an attempt to ascribe meaning to four years of brutal conflict that had shattered Germany. Among the German conservatives and far-right, confronting the legacy of the war meant maintaining the popular fiction of the “undefeated German army” and the stab-in-the-back myth. Yet across the political spectrum, there was also an effort to find something positive from wartime. Thus *Mitteleuropa*, the ever nebulous political concept taken up at various points by the left, center, and right wings of German politics, re-emerged after 1918 as usable history.

Epilogue

What remained of *Mitteleuropa* after Germany’s “*Stunde Null*” in 1945? The short answer seems to be that the concept of *Mitteleuropa* as a German project for Europeanization fell out of favor and virtually disappeared in both academic and political discourse for much of the immediate postwar period. As mentioned in the first chapter, Fritz Fischer in the early 1960s briefly cited the case of *Mitteleuropa* to argue that conservative elites in Imperial Germany pushed for war in 1914 as an opportunity to realize long-held visions for a sweeping continental empire.⁴¹¹ Interestingly, a renaissance of concepts of *Mitteleuropa* – although quite dissimilar in character to the revisionist aims espoused in either Imperial or Weimar Germany – resurfaced in the 1980s as an expression of dissatisfaction with the then international status quo in East Central Europe. This new Middle European discourse emerging from discussions among East-Central

⁴¹⁰ Anna Kohnstern Letter to Gertrud Kohnstern, November 2, 1918.

⁴¹¹ Fischer, *Germany’s War Aims*, p. 104.

European exiles and dissidents aimed at creating a regional cultural identity in opposition to Soviet-induced uniformization and what Milan Kundera referred to as “ideological brainwashing.”⁴¹² Amid the atmosphere reform in the Gorbachev era, East-Central European emphasized the idea of Mitteleuropa to promote a common project of economic cooperation and cultural linkages in the area that excluded Russia. Paralleling earlier German debates over the concept, these attempts in the 1980s to theorize a new Central European union tied the political question of domestic liberalization with a notion of regional integration.⁴¹³

Only rarely did such debates recall the darker traits of the idea’s pre-1945 political culture, its aggressive nationalism and militant anti-Semitism. In view of the consequences of the Mitteleuropa mission which Germans had historically claimed for themselves, the question of Germany’s inclusion into Central Europe was headedly debated by East European scholars and writers. Meanwhile, arguments favoring a “cultural Central Europe” were picked up and disseminated in West Germany at the time; figures like the Social Democratic Secretary General Peter Glotz seized upon an idea of a shared cultural Mitteleuropa as an “enlightened and co-reformist” policy that would square the circle with regard to the supposed permanence of the European, and therefore German, split.⁴¹⁴ Even after the fall of the Soviet Union and the revolutions in East-Central Europe, ideas about a spiritually distinctive Central Europe persisted, and seemed to have been strengthened by the logic of European economic integration. As the Hungarian philosopher Mihály Vajda noted: “That the idea of Central Europe’s cultural identity

⁴¹² Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” *New York Review of Books* 31 (April 26, 1984), pp. 33-38.

⁴¹³ Rainer Eisfeld, “Mitteleuropa in Historical and Contemporary Perspective,” *German Politics and Society*, No. 28 (Spring 1993), pp. 39-52.

⁴¹⁴ Peter Glotz, “Deutsch-böhmische Kleinigkeiten oder: Abgerissene Gedanken über Mitteleuropa,” *Die Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte* 33 (1987), p. 85.

today is backed by rather strong economic impulses and interests is plain to see... The fact that the concept has recently gained such strength is plainly to due certain economic elements. The Federal Republic of Germany is Europe's Central Europe's strongest country and the leading economic motor of Europe as a whole... [Germany] is able to get the other Central European countries out of their misery."⁴¹⁵

Vajda was right on at least one count. In the three decades since 1989, Germany has indeed established itself as the powerful engine of an integrated European market which would delight the likes of Naumann and Rathenau. Similarly, Berlin has found, in the framework of the European Union, a means of exerting considerable political influence across the continent in a way that does not directly infringe on its neighbors' sovereignty. Yet, particularly after the 2008 Great Recession and the more recent migrant crisis, that very German power has become an object of resentment across Southern and Eastern Europe; German power is again portrayed by some as a return to the expansionism of the early twentieth century. Anti-German sentiment aside, there is no resurgence of a concept of *Mitteleuropa* in Germany today, since, in large part, many of the neo-liberal underpinnings of the European common market have realized the liberal and economic aspirations which German proponents of *Mitteleuropa* first espoused in the late-nineteenth century. Indeed, the close cooperation of the German finance ministry and the German Bundesbank with the European Central Bank throughout the Eurozone crisis has fostered widespread perceptions among Europeans of Europe as "Germany's iron cage."⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ Quoted from Eisfeld, "Mitteleuropa," p. 43.

⁴¹⁶ Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe, "Introduction," in Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian, and Philip Mirowski eds., *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*, (New York: Verso Books, 2019), p. 17.

The neoliberal dimension is an important point to conclude Mitteleuropa on given that neoliberal thought itself emerges from the shadows of Mitteleuropa at the conclusion of the First World War. Moreover, it also encapsulates some of the fundamental tensions between politics and the economy which proponents of Mitteleuropa struggled to navigate throughout the First World War. As Quinn Slobodian has recently argued, the neoliberal project to “insulate” the market economy from the forces of nationalism, populism, and the state more broadly first grew out of Austrian economists’ dissatisfaction with the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy.⁴¹⁷ The undoing of the highly integrated Austro-Hungarian internal market at the end of the First World War became the impetus for figures like Hayek to subsequently espouse a radical separation of market and state. Yet rather than a departure from the concept of Mitteleuropa, neoliberals ultimately reproduced its central dialectic: since 1945 neoliberals have, despite their own rhetoric, embarked on a political project where the only political subjectivity that matters is the globalized free market of capital. Via this rather winding path through the twentieth century, Mitteleuropa has become embedded in an unfolding global story in the twenty-first century.

⁴¹⁷ Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

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