

## Book Review

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Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas (ed.), *The First World War and the Nationality Question in Europe. Global Impact and Local Dynamics (=National Cultivation of Culture, vol. 23)*.

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Recently, nationalism has been studied at different geographical scales, often deviating from the traditional emphasis on the nation-state.<sup>1</sup> This collection of essays, edited by Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas, Professor at the University of Santiago de Compostela, and published in Brill's *National Cultivation of Culture* series, joins a growing body of scholarship that emphasises the ways in which international events, and the First World War in particular, have influenced concepts and ideas of nationhood and nationalism.

The First World War marked a turning point in the question of nationality. The catastrophic conflict that engulfed nations left an indelible mark on the question of nationality. The trenches and battlefields were not only sites of physical destruction but also ideological battlegrounds, challenging long-held notions of belonging and loyalty. The war also hastened the decline of once mighty empires. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian empires caused seismic shifts in the geopolitical landscape. Imperial dominions fragmented into new nation-states, redrawing borders, and forcing



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populations to reconsider their allegiances. The dissolution of empires, coupled with the ideas of Woodrow Wilson, further destabilised traditional notions of national belonging and challenged the assumption of fixed, unchanging identities tied to imperial powers.

This volume goes beyond a narrow focus on national case studies. Instead, it examines, in Núñez Seixas's words, the 'wave of national self-determination that accompanied the course of the Great War' (p. 1) in a comparative and transnational manner. It delves into the intricate web of transnational action, exploring how individuals, groups and intellectual circles engaged in a lively exchange of ideas on the question of nationality. Through this transnational history of ideas, the volume paints a vivid picture of how the experience of war reshaped perceptions of nationality, challenged established hierarchies and fostered the emergence of new political narratives, either through direct contact and collaboration or through indirect influences. This volume considers the First World War as a 'Zeitenwende' for the question of nationality, both as a turning point for transnational activism and for changing notions of nationality. It examines both conceptually and theoretically the ways in which the transnational atmosphere of the Great War affected nationalist movements in both the West and the East, and how these nationalisms were intertwined and interconnected at both ideological and organisational levels.

The structure of the volume reflects the subtitle of the book, examining both the global impact of the First World War and its more local dynamics. It is divided into three parts. The first and most extensive section of the volume, entitled 'The Great War, Transnational Action and the Principle of Nationality', examines the profound impact of the global conflict on the concept of nationality. Offering a comprehensive examination of how the war acted as a catalyst for the dissemination of political concepts, this section provides a rich transnational history of ideas with more theoretical chapters by Joep Leerssen and Núñez Seixas

and three case studies from Central and Eastern Europe. They explore how the war affected notions of citizenship, self-determination, and the rights of ethnic and national minorities.

During the 'Wilsonian moment', as Manela describes it, Woodrow Wilson's advocacy of self-determination had a profound impact on anti-colonial nationalist movements around the world. His ideas resonated with nationalist leaders and intellectuals in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, who saw an opportunity to advance their struggles for independence and sovereignty. While several articles mention the impact of Woodrow Wilson's principles of self-determination, it is Zantedeschi's chapter 7 and Núñez Seixas's chapter 3 that offer in-depth analyses of the impact of Wilson's arguments. Núñez Seixas's chapter on the diffusion and circulation of political ideas highlights how Woodrow Wilson's vision of self-determination added a new dimension to the concept of nationality, changing international public opinion and thus the institutional and international responses to the question of nationality. The idea that nations should have the right to determine their own political destiny resonated throughout Europe, particularly with smaller nationalisms such as the Basque and Catalan nationalists, creating new alliances. As well as providing an excellent overview of the different political and territorial solutions that existed before and after the First World War, this chapter is also strong in its examination of how international actors such as exiles used international platforms and organisations such as the *Union de Nationalités* to advance their political and cultural claims. The First World War as Núñez Seixas writes 'offered a huge opportunity for ethnonationalist activists to gain audibility for their cause, as the nationality question was exploited as a useful propaganda tool by both sides, thus gaining an unexpected global audience and a decisive influence on war aims and peacemaking' (p.39).

The excellent theoretical chapter on 'Cultural mobility and political mobilisation', skilfully written by Joep Leerssen, pays particular

attention to both temporal aspects and different models of international diffusion and connection. Building on the work of the *Spin*-network research project, he examines the role of cultural practices and how they might affect national movements across national borders. It calls for a truly transnational and comparative study of national and regional movements in Europe that embraces the complexity and multidimensionality of transfers and connections. For such a study of 'complex systems' (p. 26), Leerssen proposes a methodology for examining the communication of ideas, shared repertoires, institutional exchanges and associational reticulation of nationalist movements. He argues convincingly that a focus on such communicative networks would 'liberate' national movements from their 'perceived marginality' (p. 29). His chapter is strikingly visualised by the intricate webs of intellectual nationalist exchange across Europe.

The last three chapters of the first part are case studies, dealing with political theory and the history of the circulation of ideas in Central and Eastern Europe. They include an insightful chapter by Malte Rolf, which analyses the Bolshevik principle of nationality after the 1917 revolution and examines whether one can really speak of a Soviet 'empire of nations' (Hirsch 2005). He shows how Bolshevik ideology, in contrast to Tsarist Russia, interacted with concepts of diversity and nationalism while incorporating Austro-Marxist ideas. This was reflected in Moscow's self-image as 'a new form of power that was explicitly anti-imperialist' (p.72), as well as in its power structures. Ramón Máiz's chapter on federalism in multinational states is a theoretical analysis of Otto Bauer's theory of nationalism. His Austromarxism sought to reconcile the Marxist principles of class struggle with the realities of nationalism and national identity. He formulated his idea of a nation against bourgeois concepts of nationhood and the postulates of classical Marxism, describing a 'nation as a community of destiny that produces a community of character' (p.98). Máiz provides a clear overview of Otto

Bauer's thought and its development, as well as a convincing analysis of his terminology and its meaning, showing its undeniable relevance to historical and contemporary debates on 'non-territorial cultural autonomy' and multinational federalism. Bence Bari's chapter focuses on the Czech nationalist leader and philosopher Tomáš G. Masaryk and the Hungarian sociologist Oszkár Jászi, examining how dynamics influenced the development of their respective positions on nationality, self-determination and national minorities. Although comparative in scope, this chapter is strongest when it introduces transnational dynamics.

The second part examines 'local dynamics' and how transnational debates on national identity have been adapted to local contexts. This section focuses primarily on the fascinating case study of Galicia, but also includes a broader chapter by Francesca Zantedeschi. Her chapter examines 'micro-nationalisms in Western Europe in the wake of the First World War' and their political attempts on international platforms for self-determination. She shows how the First World War was 'indeed an intense period for the development of imitative practices among nationalist movements' (p.155). Given the importance of the role played by linguistic mobilisation in the case of Galicia, both chapters 8 and 9 are devoted to different aspects of this issue. These chapters delve into different facets of the language issue, illuminating how language activism served as a launching pad for various nationalist aspirations and how the official recognition of languages impacted the mobilization of minority languages. Chapter 8 by Ramón Villares analyses exogenous factors such as returning migrants, the Portuguese Revolution of 1910 and the development of the Catalan movement for their role in the emergence of the first political organisation, the Language Brotherhoods in Galicia. The influence of the officialisation of minority languages as state languages on national movements in Catalonia and Galicia is examined in chapter 9 by Johannes Kabatek.

It could be said that while the first section deals mainly with political ideologies, the second with cultural politics and political practices for specific local contexts, the third examines transnational debates on nationality in the aftermath of the First World War. Stefan Berger's chapter looks at the writing of historical narratives to consolidate new territorial boundaries, new nation-states, and the histories of war guilt, war experiences, and peace treaties. Stefan Dyroff's chapter 11 is a conceptual history of the 'minority question', examining the legal and political aspects of the transnational debate on the League of Nations' Minority Protection System (MPS), a milestone in the history of Human Rights. Lourenzo Fernández-Prieto and Miguel Cabo examine the relevance of ruralism and agrarian associations for Europe after the First World War. Focusing particularly on Galicia, they analyse how ruralism figured in the self-image of nations and how agrarian pressure groups provided a 'shared meeting point between agrarian associationism and nationalism' (p.285).

The volume may give the impression of a bias towards Western European contexts and in particular the Spanish and Galician case. However, it is crucial to note that the selection and emphasis on these topics are rooted in the specific framework of the volume and its origin. The introductory remarks by the editor shed light on the rationale behind the volume. It is explained that the volume is a compilation of papers presented at the international conference 'From Empires to Nations: The International Context of the Galician Language Brotherhoods and the Nationality Question in Interwar Europe,' convened by the Galician Culture Council in Santiago de Compostela in 2016. Therefore, the focus on Western European nationalisms, with particular attention to the Spanish and Galician case, does not indicate an inherent bias, but rather reflects the thematic scope and origin of the volume. Despite its initial focus on Western European nationalisms, the volume encompasses a wider range of perspectives and contexts.

Eastern European nationalisms are also examined throughout the pages and in the various sections, ensuring a comprehensive examination of both Eastern and Western nationalist movements. The diversity of case studies and disciplinary approaches adds to the richness of the volume. The question remains of course why certain aspects such as the agrarian movement were highlighted whereas other aspects such as the importance of economic factors (economic hardships, war profiteering or resource allocation) or war volunteering was neglected. A follow-up volume could explore these aspects as well as include some geographical perspectives lacking in the present volume such as a Northern country. It is important to note that while the content of the volume is commendable, one minor issue worth mentioning is the quality of the English language translation. Attention to improving the translation would have enhanced the accessibility of the book and some chapters in the volume.

In conclusion, *The First World War and the Nationality Question in Europe* is a valuable addition to the growing body of scholarship that examines the impact of international events on concepts of nationhood and nationalism. It goes beyond traditional nation-state perspectives and offers a transnational and comparative approach to understanding the waves of national self-determination that accompanied the Great War. Through the inclusion of diverse contributions, the volume presents a nuanced and comprehensive account of nationalism, encompassing a broad geographical scope and shedding light on the complexities of national identities in different regions and their interconnections during and immediately after the First World War. The engaging collection of chapters will appeal to historians, but also other scholars of nationalism interested in complex relationship between the global and local dimensions of the nationality question during and in the immediate aftermath of the war. By exploring recurrent themes across multiple chapters, the volume convincingly assesses the significance of the First

World War as a pivotal moment for Wilsonian self-determination within the multi-ethnic states and empires of Europe.

*Joana Duyster Borredà*  
*University of Copenhagen*

## **Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> For a recent overview of the different geographical scales of analysis, see E. Storm, 'The spatial turn and the history of nationalism: Nationalism between regionalism and transnational approaches,' in *Writing the history of nationalism*, ed. by S. Berger and E. Storm (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 215-239.