

Small Nations and Colonial Peripheries in World War I: Europe and the Wider World

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One of the biggest challenges facing historians of the First World War today concerns the manner in which new, or lesser known accounts of the conflict are integrated into the established scholarship. Therefore with the 100th-anniversary of the outbreak of the war, and the current debates on the multifaceted reasons for and on the impact of the war in mind, Róisín Healy, Enrico Dal Lago, and Gearóid Barry of the History Department at the National University of Ireland, Galway convened a workshop that focused on the small nations and colonial peripheries during the war. Held between 13–14 June 2014, the workshop brought together scholars from across Europe, the US, and Kazakhstan to present case studies on small nations, ethnic groups, and the colonies – or regions treated as such. The regions covered were Europe, Central Asia, and Africa. Additionally, the keynote by Michael S. Neiberg dealt with European immigrant communities in the US during the war.

The conference had a strong focus on Europe and its small nations. Many papers dealt with the impact of the war on countries such as Poland, the Ukraine, and Luxembourg. Given due to the location of the conference, it was opened by a panel on Ireland. Here CONOR MORRISSEY (Dublin) focused on one of the countries smaller minorities: Irish Protestant Nationalists. He argued that their activism during the Conscription crisis 1918 led to the anti-conscription movement being able to present itself as non-sectarian. He thereby opened the conference with a strong example of how the war influenced and shaped domestic politics and local communities.

WILLIAM BUCK (Limerick), moreover, reported on how the war affected Ireland through the presence of prisoners of war and

civilian internees. According to Buck, the purpose of internment of enemy aliens was solely to restrict their movement. Buck's findings suggest that, after an initial period of xenophobia and war hysteria in August 1914, internment was not very harsh on Germans and Austrian-Hungarians. He also suggested that the local population around the camps was sympathetic towards the inmates and that the few attempted escapes occurred after the sinking of the RMS Lusitania. So seemingly the event brought back tension to the relative peaceful local cohabitation of central European inmates and their Irish captors.

JOHN CUNNINGHAM (Galway) spoke about the impact of a global war on global networks of political activists. In his biographical sketch of Tom Glynn, an Irish „Wobbly“ (member of the „Industrial Workers of the World“ Union) who, during the war was an agitator in Australia, Cunningham demonstrated how the war's opponents and pacifists of all creeds were globally connected and affected.

The second panel on North and Central Europe was opened by CHRISTINE STROTMANN (Berlin), whose paper linked Ireland with the region. Her presentation demonstrated the German interest in Irish matters; particularly collaboration with Irish separatists, but also the fact that this interest never amounted to substantial support for the cause. Therefore she argued that the term „revolutionary programme,“ as used in older scholarship for German involvement in (mostly) peripheral regions of Entente-influence, does not describe an actual coherent programme, at least not in the Irish case.

MICHAEL JONAS (Hamburg) also presented the case of a small European nation in the tides of the conflict. His presentation scrutinized Swedish neutrality and the fight for or against it. In Scandinavia an agreement was reached in favour of neutrality despite an activist movement in Sweden. Jonas described the movement as monarchist, conservative, and germanophil. Subsequently they tried to get Sweden to join forces with the middle-powers. Again the talk presented how a relatively small country was – despite its outward neutrality – in the firm grip of events outside its borders, but also how political pressure

groups within the country tried to get Sweden involved in the war and to exploit this for their own aims.

Another case of a small nation under the pressure of the „Great War“ was Luxembourg, as presented by MATIAS GARDIN (Luxembourg). His case study investigated Luxembourgian teachers' patriotism in German-occupied Luxembourg. Gardin presented the difficult situation for those teachers. Since Luxembourg was a multinational country, language could not be used for patriotic purposes. Therefore, Gardin showed how the teachers resorted to religious and patriotic language, while often using pacifist and antimilitarist arguments.

The last presentation on the panel, given by LILI ZACH (Galway), looked at Irish perceptions of a Central Power. Very often they drew comparisons between the UK and Austria-Hungary by paralleling their own claims to those of minority groups in Austria-Hungary. Irish Catholics, she argued, used Czechoslovaks as an example of a group deserving its own nation, while rejecting the claim of others.

The panel on Eastern Europe was opened by BOZENA CIERLIK (Cork) with her presentation on Polish military formations. Cierlik argued that even though the Poles managed to raise relatively high numbers of soldiers, effectively Poland's fate was decided by international treaties. However the symbolic meaning of Polish men in arms and its impact on the (re)founded state should, according to Cierlik, not be underestimated.

MARIYA ROMANOVA (Paris) gave a presentation on French and German interests in the Ukraine. She focussed on Ukrainian pressure groups in Paris, who collaborated with the French „Central Office for Nationalities“ to try to secure Ukrainian interests.

A strong case for using the term „colonialism“ in a European context was made by STEVEN BALBIRNIE (Dublin), who presented on British warfare in Northern Russia in 1918–19. „Conducted in style of a colonial small war,“ he argued that while the fighting in the region was part of Great War Strategies, its conduct was comparable to colonial campaigns of the previous century.

Moving southwards the next panel dealt

solely with Spain. RICHARD GOW (Dublin) opened the discussion with an overview of the condition of the Spanish army upon the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. According to Gow, the Spanish military was not prepared for war, with a third of its recruits illiterate and the top officers' pay-checks eating up most of the military budget. Spain remained neutral during the war, while its officer corps dreamt of „grandeur“ and was mostly in favour of Germany.

The impact the war had on Catalans and Catalonia was described in two further presentations. While MARIA RODRIGUEZ CALLEJA (Barcelona) took a comparative angle, comparing Catalan and Irish nationalists, FLORIAN GRAFL (Gießen) looked at the war's impact on the region of Catalonia. Rodriguez Calleja showed how both nationalist movements were radicalized during the war. While both had tried to secure independence through parliamentary means, now they attempted to seize the chance; the war seemed to work as an enhancer of more radical means. Grafl also looked at Catalan nationalism and the hopes it invested in the war and its political dimensions, such as Wilson's programme of self-determination. Similarly he showed that the Catalan labour movement was radicalized by the war. Additionally, crime rates in Catalonia rose according to Grafl, due to its close proximity to the French border. Therefore, the presentations on the Iberian Peninsula were able to show that neutrality by no means signified the absence of war for states, movements, and nations.

The last two panels of the conference looked beyond the European continent and gave some insights into the „colonial peripheries.“ The panel on Africa was opened by DANIEL ROUVEN STEINBACH (Exeter), who looked at the British takeover of German East Africa. Steinbach argued that there is an underrepresentation in scholarship on the matter, even though the conquest was the first on „German“ soil during the First World War. However, it provided some difficulties for the British, since they did not want the African population to see white settlers fighting with each other. Therefore, Steinbach described how the fighting was kept out of the cities, and how the takeover and occupation

was a relatively painless experience for the defeated Germans.

CHRISTOPHER J. ROMINGER (New York) took the audience to Northern Africa with his biographical sketch of Mukhtar al-Ayari, a moderate nationalist who turned into an anti-colonial activist. It was mostly the unequal treatment of Tunisian soldiers in comparison to their French counterparts that fuelled the radicalization and nationalism of activists, such as al-Ayari, who would emerge as a significant threat to the French Empire after the war. Rominger's presentation brought most of the recurring themes of the conference together: moderate nationalists turned more radical, the war between the European empires was taken to their influence spheres and there resulted in new developments in turn having an impact on the Empires. In the Tunisian case the colonial component also had tremendous impact.

The panel on Central Asia gave insights into two regions rarely spoken about in the context of the First World War. DAVID NOACK (Potsdam) presented on Turkestan, and the Russian, British, and German attempts to interfere there. He was able to show that the United Kingdom and Germany had no long-term interests in the area and highlighted that the Germans even lacked a basic spatial perception of the region. Noack argued that none of the involved powers had a clear strategy on Central Asia. Hence the region became the pawn for all sides.

DANIELLE ROSS (Astana, KZ) presented on recruitment and anti-recruitment campaigns in Kazakhstan amongst the Tatar and Kirgiz populations. Ross described how the Volga-Ural Muslims were the only Muslims mobilized within the Russian Empire. The war and its recruitment campaigns coincided with a Tartar/Muslim cultural revival of said population. Recruiters and their counterparts alike used the form of traditional folk ballads to encourage or discourage enlistment. Interestingly some of these pieces were produced in German Prisoners of War (POW) camps for Muslims, which were established to try and influence Muslim POWs to support the Ottoman and hence the German cause.

In his keynote lecture, MICHAEL S. NEIBERG (Carlisle, PA) again linked recurring

themes of the conference with his topic: small nations or rather immigrant groups; in this case within the United States. Being an immigrant country, all groups in the States were more or less defined by their relation to their respective „homelands“, as in the Irish and Italian communities' cases, or with Europe as a whole, as in the Jewish community's case. Neiberg highlighted three main themes for his three case studies: Firstly, they all explore the interaction between the global and the local. Secondly, they help to transcend the idea that the war was „state based“. And finally, in all cases multiple identities need to be considered. Neiberg demonstrated how all three groups had difficulties articulating their positions on the war, for fear of compromising their assimilation into American society. So there was pressure asserted by society as a whole and politicians alike, while within the communities themselves there was also self-regulation of publicly aired opinions. While all three groups according to Neiberg were already at the end of their „assimilation project,“ the war in Europe (and elsewhere) and its developments had differing effects on the three communities, and very often they were divided amongst themselves by such issues. However, as the war continued, Neiberg's findings suggest all three of them became increasingly anti-German and remained so after the US entered the war.

All in all the conference was successful in bringing together scholars working on the First World War from different regional perspectives. Quite a few of the presentations were able to shed light on less studied cases of smaller nations or ethnic groups during the conflict. Therefore, as Michael S. Neiberg pointed out, the interactions between the global and the local could be better understood. Through various presentations on revolutionary or nationalist groups and their interactions with some of the great powers, there was a strong underlying scheme of unlikely alliances created by the war. Through those alliances, as Róisín Healy (Galway) pointed out, the small nations gained a lot, while colonies mostly lost out in their gambles for independence. One of the shortcomings of the conference therefore was the small number of presentations on genuine colonies. A few more

of those would have allowed for a better comparative understanding of small nations and colonies during those turbulent times. However, all in all the conference was a success in the way that it broadened our understanding of the conflict and its impact.

Conference Overview:

Panel 1: Ireland and the wider Irish world

Chair: Enrico Dal Lago (National University of Ireland, Galway)

Conor Morrissey (Trinity College Dublin), A Minority Voice from the Colonial Periphery: Irish Protestant Nationalists and the Conscriptio Crisis

William Buck (Mary Immaculate College, Limerick), Ireland's enemy alien POWs and civilian internees during the First World War

John Cunningham (National University of Ireland, Galway), An Anti-War Irish 'Wobbly' in Australia

Panel 2: North and Central Europe

Chair: Gearóid Barry (National University of Ireland, Galway)

Christine Strotmann (Humboldt University Berlin), The revolutionary programme of the German Empire: the case of Ireland

Michael Jonas (Helmut-Schmidt University Hamburg), Neutral Allies, Immoral Pariahs? Scandinavian Neutrality, International Law and the Great Power Politics in the First World War

Matias Gardin (University of Luxembourg), Patriotism Contained by Teachers at War: Reflections on Education, Citizenship and National Identity in Luxembourg from 1914 to 1918

Lili Zach (National University of Ireland, Galway), „Mosaic without a Pattern“: Irish Catholic Perceptions of Small Nationalities in Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918

Panel 3: Eastern Europe

Chair: Enrico Dal Lago (National University of Ireland, Galway)

Bozena Cierlik (University College Cork), „For Your Freedom and Ours“: Polish Military Formation in the First World War

Mariya Romanova (Sorbonne University, Paris), French and German Colonial Troops in Ukraine in 1918

Steven Balbirnie (University College Dublin), Small War on a Violent Frontier: Colonial Warfare and British Intervention in Northern Russia, 1918–1919

Panel 4: Southern Europe

Chair: Róisín Healy (National University of Ireland, Galway)

Richard Gow (Trinity College Dublin), Visions of Grandeur on Europe's Periphery: Spain and the Great War

Maria Rodriguez Calleja (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), Irish and Catalan National Movements within the Context of WWI

Florian Graf (University of Giessen), „Ara o Mai“: The First World War and its Impact on Catalonia

Keynote Address and Discussion

Michael Neiberg (U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania), Small Nations Inside a Big State: American Immigrant Communities React to War, 1914–1917

Panel 5: Africa

Chair: Kevin O'Sullivan (National University of Ireland, Galway)

Daniel Rouven Steinbach (University of Exeter), Allied Troops on German Soil: The Occupation of German East Africa in the First World War

Christopher J. Rominger (City University of New York), From Tirailleurs to Tramways: Mukhtar al-Ayari and Alternative Voices in Post-War Tunisia

Panel 6: Central and Southern Asia

Chair: Gearóid Barry (National University of Ireland, Galway)

David Noack (University of Potsdam), Turkestan in the Great War: Between Great Game, Russian and British Colonial Periphery, and German High Ambition

Danielle Ross (Nazarbayev University, Astana, KZ), Fighting for the Tsar, Fighting against the Tsar: The Use of „Folk“ Songs to Mobilize Tatar and Kirgiz Populations for

or against Military Service in the Great War
(1914–1918)

Closing Discussion

Tagungsbericht *Small Nations and Colonial Peripheries in World War I: Europe and the Wider World*. 13.06.2014-14.06.2014, , in: H-Soz-Kult 27.09.2014.