

Bernhard Bachinger, *Die Mittelmächte an der Saloniki-Front 1915–1918: Zwischen Zweck, Zwang und Zwist*, Krieg in der Geschichte 106 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2019)

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Studies on the history of World War I have been experiencing a boom for quite some time in many countries, including Austria. The Europe-wide paradigm change of the 1990s, which in the context of the so called “new military history” marked the transition to operationalizing everyday-, mental- and cultural-historical research designs, has in the long run revived the research of World War I in two respects. On the one hand, this reorientation moved away from those classical military and political history studies that had up to then characterized the research. On the other hand, the spatial horizon of interests was extended—in particular prior to the 2014–18 centennial. This again not only resulted in a clear tendency towards a global history view on the war, which in the context of the centennial resulted in quite a number of remarkable studies, but also had the effect that the previous research focus on the Western Front was weakened and other war theatres moved increasingly into focus. To this new trend of the research on World War I, there also belongs the valuable study by young Austrian historian Bernhard Bachinger which—initially written as a dissertation thesis—has now been published by Schöningh Verlag in the context of the “Krieg in der Geschichte” publication series.

In his study, Bernhard Bachinger deals with the Macedonian war theatre, which has gone down in history as the “Salonica Front.” Apart from punctual references, for a long time the international historiography of World War I has barely dealt with this front in southeast Europe. Given the focus on the Western Front, its status was only that of a sideshow. However, this was an extremely complex, heterogeneous front that showed a great national and ethnic diversity of troops involved. Until September 1918, there was a kind of stalemate on the Salonica Front between the Entente and the Central Powers, which came to an end only because of the Entente’s breakthrough at Dobro Polje and the resulting collapse of Bulgaria. Finally, the collapse of the Bulgarian front considerably influenced the destabilization of the Central Powers’ armies on the other fronts—such as on the Austrian-Italian Front.

In addition to already existing studies on the Bulgarian, Greek, or British views, Bachinger analyzes the German and Austrian-Hungarian

part, in particular under the perspective of (military) cooperation with the Bulgarian alliance partner. Accordingly, the focus is on the nature of the Central Powers' coalition war on the Macedonian front. In this context, it is an achievement by Bachinger that his view, as well as his historical scientific analysis, goes well beyond the conventional horizon of interests, beyond structural, political, and military alliance policy and coalition warfare. This way he is able to reasonably combine conventional research interests with methods of new military history. Consequently, the author succeeds in deciphering the complex picture of heterogeneous motivations, objectives, and conditions as they were typical for this front. He also succeeds in pointing out the interactions of fundamentally different, mental and cultural group identities and their significance for the development of (sources of) frictions and disputes in the context of coalition warfare.

The study works out the nature of coalition warfare on the Salonica Front in much detail. It was something like a German-Bulgarian community of fate and purpose. The longer the war lasted, the more the German supremacy within this coalition created ever bigger problems, which were mostly results of a cooperation of "unequal partners." The German Supreme Army Command (Oberste Heeresleitung) determined the strategic military concept, occupied almost all key positions of the military command hierarchy, and provided the bulk of the military equipment; whereas ordinary combat was overwhelmingly shouldered by Bulgarian troops. The thus resulting uneasiness, general differences, and different mental dispositions and group identities prevented the development of any kind of collective and shared "regimental spirit." As a result, there was never any real "brotherhood in arms," like the propaganda during World War I—as well as a number of recollections after 1918—tried to pretend. This finding strongly resembles similar research results for other fronts and constellations of coalition warfare, such as the conflict-ridden cooperation of German and Austrian-Hungarian troops on the Eastern Front. Different war aims reciprocal resentment, and asymmetrical military capability caused the German-Bulgarian cooperation partners to have regularly falling outs with each other. A growing longing for peace and war-weariness, as well as the gradually petering out of material support by Germany, created wide-spread disillusionment among the Bulgarian troops. Anti-German resentment was growing as the Bulgarian side had the impression they were being abandoned by the Germans. The functionality of the German-Bulgarian alliance on the Salonica Front—this is worked out in detail by the author—was severely damaged even in the first half of 1918. "Thus, militarily seen, the German-Bulgarian alliance," as is Bernhard Bachinger's conclusion, "had

become a failure even months before the collapse of the Salonica Front" (p. 344). This failure was not only—as it has previously been emphasized by research—the consequence of political and economic alienation between Bulgaria and her alliance partners, but also the result of problems, differences, and disputes concerning the genuinely military realm, as the author succeeds in demonstrating.

Bernhard Bachinger has produced an interesting study, extensively researched, which represents an important contribution to a theater of World War I that has been neglected in terms of research until now.

Visual Histories of Austria

Günter Bischof, ed.

Martin Kofler, Hans Petschar, Guest Editors

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRIAN STUDIES | VOLUME 30

UNO PRESS

innsbruck university press

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University of New Orleans Press
2000 Lakeshore Drive, Earl K. Long Library, Room 221
New Orleans, LA, 70148, USA
www.unopress.org

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Published in the United States by
University of New Orleans Press
ISBN: 9781608012237

Published and distributed in Europe
by *Innsbruck* University Press
ISBN: 9783991060406

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS PRESS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bischof, Günter, 1953- editor.

Title: Visual histories of Austria / editor: Günter Bischof.

Description: [New Orleans, Louisiana] : University of New Orleans Press, [2021] | Series: Contemporary Austrian studies ; Volume 30 | "This volume was conceived out of a panel in the 2019 German Studies Association meeting Portland, Oregon (Kofler/Siller, Markova, and Richter papers)." --Introduction. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021023494 | ISBN 9781608012237 (paperback) | ISBN 9781608012244 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Photography in historiography. | Museums and photography--Austria. | Austria--Historiography. | Photography--Austria--History--20th century. | Photographers--Austria--History--20th century. | Archives--Austria. | Pictures as information resources--Austria.

Classification: LCC D16.155 .V57 2021 | DDC 907.2/09436--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021023494>

Publication of this volume has been made possible through a generous grant by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research through Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalization (OeAD). The Austrian Marshall Plan Anniversary Foundation in Vienna has been very generous in supporting Center Austria: The Austrian Marshall Plan Center for European Studies at the University of New Orleans and its publications series. The College of Liberal Arts at the University of New Orleans, as well as the Vice Rectorate for Research and the International Relations Office of the University of Innsbruck provided additional financial support.



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