

The Austrian Contribution to American Life Reconsidered

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Books reviewed:

From a Multiethnic Empire to a Nation of Nations: Austro-Hungarian Migrants in the US, 1870–1940. By Annemarie Steidl, Wladimir Fischer-Nebmaier, and James W. Oberly (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2017), 354pp.

Quiet Invaders Revisited: Biographies of Twentieth Century Immigrants to the United States. Edited by Günter Bischof (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2017), 323pp.

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It is funny how one individual can make a big splash in the world. In 1968, E. Wilder Spaulding, then an employee at the US Embassy in Vienna, published his latest hobby history *The Quiet Invaders: The Story of the Austrian Impact Upon America*. Almost fifty years later and twenty-one years after his death, a superb volume under the editorship of Günter Bischof questions Spaulding's central thesis that Austrian immigrants to the United States achieved a "quiet migration." At the same time, another excellent book by a trio of authors focuses on the overlapping processes of migration, return migration, and assimilation by Austro-Hungarian migrants to United States. Both works do much to illuminate the experiences of Austrian/Austro-Hungarian migrants in the long twentieth century, their motivations, their tribulations, and their overall impact on the United States as well as their places of origin. In doing so, both of these books will, like Spaulding, positively shape their respective fields of Austrian-American relations and migration studies for at least the next fifty years.

The core strength of both works is the meticulous attention to detail stemming from deep-archival work. In their book, Annemarie Steidl, Wladimir Fischer-Nebmaier, and James Oberly have demonstrated the power of rigorous archival digging combined with expert analysis. *From a Multiethnic Empire to a Nation of Nations* is a tour de force of source work relying on statistical studies, government documents, migrant ephemera, and local newspapers. Particularly enriching is the plethora of Slavic manuscripts unearthed by Fischer-Nebmaier, which complements the mosaic that these different sources construct. Each author brings a certain speciality to the materials used and a clear fingerprint can be sensed from reading chapters on themes such as a marriage patterns, Slavic identity, and migrant occupations. Although their individual specialisms have concentrated attention towards primarily German-speaking and Slavic groups of migrants, the authors' combined backgrounds give rise to a model interdisciplinary framework for discussing Aus-

tro-Hungarian migration.¹ However, this does not result in a disaggregated style, as the authors have clearly taken great lengths to focus their respective angles on what these sources tell us about the overall migrant experience. This blending of “mixed sources and mixed methods” (25) is a fruitful and, in this case, successful venture.

One of the great payoffs Steidl, Fischer-Nebmaier, and Oberly have to offer is a more humanized view of the Austro-Hungarian migrant. At a time when migrants and migration can be a contentious issue, the authors have reminded us of the very real and pragmatic decisions that influenced immigration and return migration to and from the United States. Most migrants from the different regions of Austria-Hungary, they point out, married within their respective regional communities. The sixth chapter places the marriage factor front and center, yielding many interesting observations such as these marriage preferences being determined by different generational and ethnic attitudes towards endogamy (225) as well as influenced by the benefits to be gained by being already married following more restrictive immigration policies (232). Insights such as these are accentuated by the skillful use of macro and micro data combined with the anecdotal recollections of the migrants themselves.

The theme of identity runs strongly throughout the book from discussions of “identity managers” (40, 79, 92–3, 153–60, for example) to how inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic marriages shaped collective identities (ch. 6). The short section on the purchasing of government war-bonds during the First World War as a test of allegiances for Austro-Hungarian migrants is a particularly fascinating and concise prism (100–5), showing how migrants resisted pressure groups demanding their investment perhaps because of their uncertainties over “which side of the ocean they would live on after the war ended” (105). Economic data is deployed here to an expert degree, not only pointing out how much of an enormous burden this would have been on the relatively stockpiled family savings of Austro-Hungarian migrants but also to show how they generally failed to “participate in the American ‘buy now-pay later’ credit economy” (104). Economics is given the greatest attention in the final chapter however, which looks at the economic behaviour of Austro-Hungarians in the US. In the discussion on remittances made by Austro-Hungarian migrants to their relatives back home, the authors extrapolate that a staggering sum of \$300 million would have flowed back per annum to Central Europe (283). Such an estimation calls to mind again the sense of dual-allegiance and pragmatism, not to mention the necessary frugality, many migrant labourers experienced during their lives on American soil.

Rescue and recapture of the Austro-Hungarian migrant’s position within the United States is a common theme to both works and is exemplified in the fact that

Annemarie Steidl and James Oberly are the first of many enjoyable contributions in Günter Bischof's *Quiet Invaders Revisited*. Owing its existence to a scholarly symposium can often mean the resulting edited volume runs the risk of disunity among the contributions once attendees have returned home. Fortunately, this is not the case here. *Quiet Invaders Revisited* is a sterling example, much like the previous work, of what cannot be achieved by the archetypal lone scholar and what is best obtained through collecting a myriad of views. In this regard Bischof has done an outstanding job at compiling a vast array of unique essays by a constellation of scholars that reflects the kaleidoscope of Austrian émigrés who settled in the United States.

Quiet Invaders Revisited features seventeen contributions covering the whole gamut of Austrian migration to North America in the long twentieth century. "Long" because some of the biographical sketches bring us right up to the present day; and, for a similar reason, "North America" since Austrians who relocated to Canada are represented by Andrea Strutz's informative essay and Martina Kaller's acerbic subject Ivan Illich who preferred life in the Caribbean to the US since it reminded him more of his native Brač (21, 282–5). These entries complement the other fifteen which together serve to not only extend our geographic vision but also deepen our understanding of the lives of Austrian immigrants to the United States.

There are three backbones in *Quiet Invaders Revisited* that bind the work together. The first is Bischof's careful and considered curation of the contributions into three overarching sections: "I. Austrian Migration to North America: The Larger Trajectories," "II. Austrian Emigrants/Refugees after World War I: Escaping Economic Hardship and/or Political Persecution," "III. Austrian Refugees/Migrants in the World War II Era: Staying or Returning?" Both World Wars seem to be neat coat-hooks for periodisation. Indeed in the previous work, Steidl, Fischer-Nebmaier and Oberly, noted throughout their work how pivotal the conflicts were in shaping migration patterns and crystallising the position of Austro-Hungarian immigrants already in the United States (e.g. 198, 295–7). The same sort of crux is observed in *Quiet Invaders Revisited* with fascinating chapters such as Kerstin Putz's essay on Günther Anders. As a poet forced to work servile jobs in order to survive, Anders is a typical candidate for the "quiet invader" who was "neither renowned nor financially independent" (239) and whose period of "exile" in the United States between 1936 and 1950 created a trove of unpublished anti-fascist manuscripts which he felt helped to draw ire against the National Socialists but, as Putz convincingly shows, were also "indisputably anti-American" (241).

The second glue between chapters in *Quiet Invaders Revisited* is biography. A central character or sometimes a small selection of people forms the subject of each chapter. Such an approach allows for pinpointed examples which come together to

create a pontillistic overview of the vast range of different Austrian migrants who came to the United States. The fact that biographical writing forms such an important vehicle for uncovering this “invasion” by Austrians is striking, considering the statistical lean of migration studies at a whole. It is even more striking when we bear in mind that historians more generally have a constant interest on the nature of biographical history and its usefulness.² In considering this methodological aspect, the volume is rounded off by an expert in the field of historical biography, Volker Depkat, whose conclusion reminds us of the implicit influences behind biographical writing. Immigrant biographies in particular are more susceptible to the pitfalls of the biographical enterprise given the overwhelming propensity for studying the migrant’s identity and identity formations. Yet Depkat sees much benefit to be gained for the field of migration studies through the use of biography (305) as long as “biographical approaches to migration history can—and should—do more than just give a face to the faceless mass of migrants” (306). It is entirely fitting that Depkat’s stipulation comes at the end of a volume which has demonstrated this ideal use of the biographical method.

The overall spine in *Quiet Invaders Revisited* is, of course, the authors’ response to Spaulding’s notion of a “quiet invader.” Each essay in this volume helps to engage and at times deconstruct Spaulding’s terminology. Sometimes vindicating Spaulding in the case of Eva Maltschnig’s rich and necessary study of the 5,000 Austrian women who married American GIs and who, as she points out, “blended in easily” to their new lives in the United States (295). Sometimes contributors find fault with Spaulding’s thesis like the incomplete assimilation of the Austrian Benedictine monk Thomas Michels explored by Alexander Pinwinkler. In questioning Spaulding’s ideas, Dominik Hofman-Wellenhof’s chapter does the reader a service by exemplifying the exceptions to Spaulding’s epitome of quickly assimilated Austrians. Hofman-Wellenhof’s biographical sketches of Ruth Klüger and Frederic Morton, replete with interviews and sensitivity for the biases associated with biographical and autobiographical sources (130), provide a sophisticated take on the conceptual motor behind this volume. He questions helpfully, for example, whether Spaulding was too superficial in his definition of “assimilation” to mean simply finding work and speaking English (133). In sharing two deeply personal journeys, Hofman-Wellenhof demonstrates a pertinent truism for today’s world that assimilation is never a “quiet” process but filled with the possibility of failure and numerous bumps along the way.

At the same time, however, a more thorough investigation of Spaulding’s notion along these lines would have been desirable. Returning to his 1968 publication, it is quite possible to see the multiple meanings Spaulding referred to when coining the term “quiet invader.” There is an obvious interrogation to be made of the loaded term “invader.” “Quiet,” meanwhile, denotes not only the fact Austrians did not “shout the

achievement of their homelands” but also that Spaulding was reacting against a perceived historiographical silence on the “Austrian contribution” to American life that was not the case for “virtually every [other] people in Europe.”³ While great attention is paid throughout to the keyword “quiet” in this volume—in addition to Hofman-Wellenhof, see Wasserman (163), Lackner (183), and Kaller (277)—there is a need to consider why past historians, academics, and other cultural observers have either forgotten or actively downplayed the Austrian presence in the United States. This is a key question posed at the beginning of *From a Multiethnic Empire to a Nation of Nations*, where the trio ask why is Nikola Tesla “not remembered as the former citizen of Austria-Hungary that he was?” (18). As much as *Quiet Invaders Revisited* tangibly shows that historians are now engaging with the Austrian-American legacy Spaulding advocated, only one of the works under review here has attempted to fully grapple with why this has taken so long to come about.

Reading both books together is a rewarding exercise. Doing so provides the reader with the macro skeleton in the form of large statistical and data-orientated surveys on the one hand and the microscopic cellular characteristics of individual lives within this migration on the other. Both volumes reaffirm Spaulding’s belief in the significance of the Austrian/Austro-Hungarian impact upon the United States but they go much further beyond his original study and now convey both the scale and myriad ways this impact occurred. If one individual can make a big splash in the world, then these works go to show just how unique the resulting droplets can be and how important it remains for historians to ensure that they do not evaporate unnoticed from our minds.

Notes

- 1 Although in this sense minor, for the criticism of neglecting Hungarian migrants, see Nándor F. Dreisziger’s review in the *International Migration Review* 52, no. 1 (2018): 317–9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918318770149>.
- 2 For recent discussions, see Annette Gordon-Reed, “Writing Early American Lives as Biography,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (2014): 491–516, <https://doi.org/10.5309/willmaryquar.71.4.0491>; T. C. W. Blanning and David Cannadine, eds., *Biography and History: Essays in Honour of Derek Beales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- 3 E. Wilder Spaulding, *The Quiet Invaders: The Story of the Austrian Impact upon America* (Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag für Unterricht, Wissenschaft und Kunst, 1968), 1, 3.