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Histories of Central Europe in the Atlantic World: A Review Essay

Historie Europy Środkowej w świecie atlantyckim. Artykuł przeglądowy

ABSTRACT

The essay reviews three recent European publications in the field of Atlantic History. The authors of these studies present extensive research centered on the place and role of Central Europe in the Atlantic World in the 18th and 19th centuries. The monographs are important contributions to Atlantic studies and offer new insights into the understanding of the significance of Central Europe in such global processes as migration, slavery, and trade.

Keywords: Atlantic History; Central Europe; migration; slavery; trade

Annemarie Steidl, *On Many Routes: Internal, European, and Transatlantic Migration in the Late Habsburg Empire*, West Lafayette 2020, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15pjz1z>.

Beyond Exceptionalism: Traces of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Early Modern Germany, 1650–1850, eds. Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, Josef Köstlbauer, Sarah Lentz, Berlin–Boston 2021, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110748833>.

Globalized Peripheries: Central Europe and the Atlantic World, 1680–1860, eds. Jutta Wimpler, Klaus Weber, Woodbridge 2020, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxhrkbs>.

Atlantic History has been a vibrant field of study since its institutional inception in the 1980s and the pioneering work of such scholars as Bernard Bailyn and Jack P. Greene¹. The major premise of Atlantic History is that of the existence of a regional system of economic exchange and cultural transfer, made up of Europe, Africa, and Asia, the continents that border the Atlantic Ocean.

¹ For general introductions to Atlantic History as a field of research, see B. Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours*, Cambridge 2005; *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal*, eds. J.P. Greene, P.D. Morgan, Oxford–New York 2009.

Atlantic History assumes that study of this new sphere, created after Europeans came into intensive contact with the Americas in the 16th century, treated as a complex whole, can lead to a better understanding of both local and global history in the early modern and modern periods.

The research in Atlantic History, especially in the 1990s, was dominated by American and British historians. The idea that the Atlantic was a site of cultural, political, and economic exchange and competition, connecting the three continents, dramatically changed the shape of American and British history. Researchers from other European countries of the Atlantic seaboard, France, Spain, and Portugal, gradually entered the field in the 1990s and 2000s. The idea that Central Europe, although geographically distant from the shores of the Atlantic, may also have been part of the same Atlantic system was slow to appear and there is only a limited number of studies situating Central Europe within the complex networks of the Atlantic World². The present essay reviews three recent publications presenting empirical research done in Central Europe, which offer important contributions to the study of Atlantic History. These books, dealing, respectively, with migration, slavery, and economic exchange, serve to prove that Central and Eastern Europe was indeed an important part of the Atlantic World, and people inhabiting this area were not just affected by the powerful social and economic processes of a transatlantic nature, but functioned as agents and actors in the cultural and economic exchange of goods, people, and ideas which created this world.

Central Europe is a contentious concept, but it is usually defined as including the historical Holy Roman Empire, the Danubian Habsburg Empire, and the Polish-Lithuanian State. The domination of the field of Atlantic History by British and American historians and the fact that Central Europe is distant from the transatlantic routes are just two of the possible causes for the frequent lack of inclusion of this vast area in the study of the Atlantic World. It has been argued that Central and Eastern Europe has been in general overlooked and neglected in global history³. The emergence of Atlantic studies can be seen as a shift away from Eurocentric historiography, but the new narratives it produced still centered on the contact of the countries of Western Europe with America and Africa, with Central and Eastern Europe mainly left outside the equation. Moreover, after

² Oxford Bibliographies Online provides a survey of major works: C. Lévai, Z. Mazur, *Central Europe and the Atlantic World*, www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199730414/obo-9780199730414-0093.xml [access: 5.10.2021].

³ See, for example, M. Aust, J. Obertreis, *Einleitung*, [in:] *Osteuropäische Geschichte und Globalgeschichte*, hrsg. v. M. Aust, J. Obertreis, Stuttgart 2014, p. 8.

World War II, Eastern Europe was defined as political and economic “periphery” from the Western European perspective, and this view for a long time impacted the work of Western historians. Central and Eastern European historians, on the other hand, have been preoccupied with national histories, worked within a fairly limited research agenda, and often exhibited a lack of interest in global historical processes. The three books under review in the present paper overcome these limitations and extend the field of Atlantic studies, by analyzing the nature of such global processes as migration, slavery, and trade from a Central European perspective and studying them in the larger context of the Atlantic World.

The first book to be discussed, *On Many Routes: Internal, European, and Transatlantic Migration in the Late Habsburg Empire* (2020), by Austrian scholar Annemarie Steidl, examines migration patterns in the Habsburg Empire, concentrating on the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries, which goes beyond the time span typical for research in Atlantic History. Moreover, the author of this comprehensive study based on quantitative methods does not place her investigation within the paradigms of Atlantic History. Despite that, Steidl’s work has a definite transatlantic dimension and helps to better understand the significance of the movement of Central Europeans across the Atlantic, by connecting it to the pre-existing intra-Habsburg and European migrations. The author offers a persuasive argument, based on solid quantitative analysis of population censuses, that

Transatlantic migration did not take place in a vacuum, and paths to the Americas emerged as new options in the context of previously established migration strategies. In previous centuries regional mobility rates were high, and would-be migrants established new routes based on previous traditions, making use of knowledge gained from their own past experiences and those of others. Overseas migration can, in fact, be described as an extension of long-distance internal migration⁴.

On Many Routes does not introduce new theoretical concepts to explain human migrations. Instead, the study shows that studying transatlantic mobility of Germans, Poles or Slovaks without taking into account that they were only a part of complex whole of migrations, including first of all those in the Habsburg Empire and within Europe, ignores the impact which the local conditions and long-term patterns of human movements had on transatlantic population movements.

Thus, the first chapter of the book, based on the Austrian and the Hungarian censuses, presents a long story of human mobility in the multinational Habsburg

⁴ A. Steidl, *On Many Routes: Internal, European, and Transatlantic Migration in the Late Habsburg Empire*, West Lafayette 2020, p. 218.

Empire. The author shows that labor migrations had a long tradition in this part of Central Europe and definite patterns of human movement had been created before migrations over longer distances commenced. The story is continued in Chapter 2, which analyzes international mobility of the inhabitants of Imperial Austria and the Kingdom of Hungary and discusses migrations into the Habsburg territories from the neighboring countries. The author stresses the permanent character of seasonal labor migrations in Central Europe.

It is against this background that Steidl offers, in Chapter 3, an overview of the migrations of inhabitants of the Habsburg Empire to America, from the 1850s until World War I. Transatlantic mobility is viewed as an extension of earlier patterns of migration and its chronology becomes understandable only when the American pull factor is seen in conjunction with the already established patterns of labor migrations in Central Europe. Steidl distinguishes two different waves of Austro-Hungarian emigration to America. During the first period, between 1850 and 1890, migrants from the Habsburg Empire moved to America to settle in both urban areas and in the countryside, where many of them eventually bought land and became owners of family farms. The second wave arrived after 1890 and was predominantly made up of agricultural laborers, who became industrial workers in the United States. Importantly, the author stresses the need to consider the fact that many migrants treated their transatlantic migrations as temporary and planned to return, with as many as 40 percent of Austro-Hungarian migrants to the United States actually coming back to Europe.

In the fourth chapter, Steidl applies methods from inferential statistics to study the influence of internal and European migration patterns on transatlantic mobility of the inhabitants of the Habsburg Empire. The author concludes that in the case of Austria, internal migration can be interpreted as a substitute for transatlantic movement. On the other hand, for the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Hungary, European migrations contributed to the growth of transatlantic mobility, because they generated interest in America and made individuals ready for longer-distance travel. The analysis based on inferential statistics is supplemented by several descriptive case studies of different regions in the Kingdom of Hungary and in Galicia, focusing on local migration patterns.

On Many Routes demonstrates how important it is to adopt a regional approach to transatlantic migration. This extensive study, well-substantiated by detailed statistical evidence, shows that in order to understand long-distance migrations in an accurate way, historians must recognize the intensity of internal, short distance population movements in such places as Central Europe and their broader implications. The analysis of transatlantic migration patterns cannot

be done in isolation from earlier patterns of mobility within or across political boundaries in Europe.

The second book chosen in this brief survey of recent historiography of Central Europe in the Atlantic World is *Beyond Exceptionalism: Traces of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Early Modern Germany, 1650–1850* (2021). The title of this collection of essays suggests that the research presented in the book questions the old claim that Germans and the Holy Roman Empire played a negligible role in the history of slavery and slave trade in the Atlantic World. For a long time it was assumed in historiography that the Holy Roman Empire, where Africans could live as free people, was exceptional among the large European countries in having no “slave problem”. This assumption has already been called into question: it was claimed that Germans drew profits from slavery and slave trade in which they were indirectly, but fairly intensively, involved. There was a large German market for colonial commodities, produced by slave labor. On the other hand, German manufacturers used raw materials from colonies and provided goods, which were also exchanged for slaves, for international trade networks⁵.

The editors of the anthology, Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, Josef Köstlbauer, and Sarah Lentz, assembled a collection of original articles, which question the assumption of German exceptionalism in relation to slavery. The essays offer discussions of empirical research into the involvement of German towns and regions with slavery and slave trade in the early modern period. Moreover, a number of case studies included in the collection follow the life narratives of non-European people who were brought to Germany through the working of the transnational system of trade in unfree labor. *Beyond Exceptionalism* goes a step further than the earlier studies by presenting a plethora of cases in which German-speaking inhabitants of the Holy Roman Empire were actively engaged in the slave trade and slavery. The overall picture this research gives is that of German lands as a periphery to Atlantic markets which functioned as the core areas for slave trafficking.

In the first article in the volume, “Germany and the Early Modern Atlantic World: Economic Involvement and Historiography”, Klaus Weber gives an overview of the engagement of the German-speaking territories in the Atlantic markets since the early 16th century, pointing to the indirect involvement of Germans in the slave trade and direct participation of Germans in slavery as plantation

⁵ See, for example, K. Weber, *Mitteleuropa und der transatlantische Sklavenhandel: Eine lange Geschichte*, „Werkstatt Geschichte“ 2014, Heft 66–67, pp. 7–30; *Slavery Hinterland: Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680–1850*, eds. F. Brahm, E. Rosenhaft, Woodbridge 2016, pp. 87–107.

owners. The author discusses the links between the trade in linen produced in German territories and slave trafficking. The chapter concludes with a detailed, chronological account of the historiography on German involvement in the slave trade and slavery.

This useful, comprehensive general survey is followed by ten case studies. Three of them focus on the histories of non-Europeans who arrived in Germany after surviving the experience of slavery: a Black trumpeter at a German court, two Native Americans purchased by August the Strong in the 1720s, enslaved persons from Africa and West Indies brought to Europe by the missionaries of the Moravian Church. These studies prove that, despite the fact that these people were treated as having a free, or at least an ambiguous status, their life narratives were influenced by deeply ingrained associations of black and exotic bodies with low status, bondage, and slavery. The two following papers deal with the legal status of trafficked people in the Holy Roman Empire. Rebekka von Mallinckrodt demonstrates how, through the use of Roman law, the status of persons of African or Ottoman origin as slaves was repeatedly affirmed in German courts. On the other hand, Walter Sauer, looking at the early 19th century, notices the change in the status individuals forcibly brought to the lands of the Habsburg Empire after the abolition of the transatlantic and Mediterranean slave trade and enactment of the new provisions in the Austrian Civil Code of 1811. Annika Bärwald, using advertisements from Hamburg newspapers between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, demonstrates how difficult it was for people of African or Asian descent in Germany to overcome the burden of their former status as slaves.

The remaining case studies deal with the contemporary discursive treatments of slavery. In "Invisible Products of Slavery: American Medicinals and Dyestuffs in the Holy Roman Empire", Jutta Wimmmler investigates the symbolic meanings of colonial commodities, posing the question why medicinals and dyestuffs produced with the use of enslaved labor remained "invisible", while sugar became a key symbol of slavery. Mark Häberlein studies the perception of the slave trade and slavery in the work of Protestant clergyman, Gottlieb Tobias Wilhelm, pointing to the incongruities in his presentation of the anthropological knowledge and intellectual debates of the time. Jessica Cronshagen's chapter is based on an original and fascinating body of source texts: a collection of letters sent by children in Moravian communities to enslaved children in Suriname. The author discovers the presence of a deeply engrained discourse of slavery in the texts written in a religious community far away from the territories where slavery was practiced. Finally, Sarah Lentz's study, "»No German Ship Conducts Slave Trade!« The Public Controversy about German Participation in the Slave Trade

during the 1840s” concerns German responses to the case of three Hanseatic ships seized on suspicion of slave trading. It shows how the coverage of this event in Germany led to conclusions about the moral superiority of Germany over the slave-holding nations.

Beyond Exceptionalism offers a body of micro-historical research, which confirms that the Holy Roman Empire (and its successor states) was a society with slaves, and slavery existed there in the legal sense and as a wide-spread and influential cultural construct. Germany was deeply involved in the commodity trade within the Atlantic World, and traffic in slaves in the German territories was part of a global system of slavery, and not a set of sporadic and isolated phenomena. The case studies in the anthology show, however, how varied the experience of slaves and former slaves in the Holy Roman Empire was and how diverse were the responses to the slave economy in early modern and modern German society.

Globalized Peripheries: Central Europe and the Atlantic World, 1680–1860, is an important new contribution to the economic history of Central Europe in the Atlantic World. This collection of essays, published by Boydell and Brewer in 2020, presents the research completed within the project “The Globalized Periphery: Atlantic Commerce, Socioeconomic and Cultural Change in Central Europe (c. 1680–1850)” (Europa-Universität Viadrina). Examining Atlantic trade networks in the period of almost 200 years, the authors show the significance of Central and Eastern Europe in commodity exchange and capital flows across the Atlantic. Edited by Jutta Wimpler and Klaus Weber, the volume not only discovers the plethora of economic networks linking Prussia, the Habsburg Empire, Russia, and northern and western Germany with the Atlantic World, but also calls into question the paradigm of “centers” and “peripheries” of the early modern world-economy in the historiography of the Atlantic World. The book’s challenge to Immanuel Wallerstein’s concept of the Modern World-System⁶, where Central and Eastern Europe is constructed as a periphery dependent on the core region, is based on meticulous qualitative and quantitative research, including the study of such sources as the invoice books of the English Royal African Company, sound toll registers, and the Admiralty toll books.

In their concise and informative “Introduction”, Wimpler and Weber discuss the causes of the obvious neglect of the study of Central and Eastern Europe in the historiography of the Atlantic World, pointing to the wider nature of the process of “peripheralization” of this region in the conceptualization of Europe and the “self-centered” nature of history writing in Central and Eastern Europe.

⁶ I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 4 vols., New York–London 1974.

They present the major purpose of the collection: challenging this discourse in historiography, the research presented in the volume contests dominant paradigms of Atlantic – and global – history of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The book's case studies encompass a large territory in the center of Europe and its economic and financial links with the Atlantic World: the trade in Silesian linens in Western Africa, the 18th-century global connections of the ports of Stettin and Trieste, the global rhubarb trade, Hamburg's imports of sugar, the impact of American trade on the organization of tape merchandise in the Wupper Valley, migrations of German merchants to London, the global migrations of members of the Moravian Church, recruitment of German settlers for North American territories, and the financial ties between the US and German states in the 19th century. In "Afterword", Göran Rydén situates the research presented in the volume within the wider context of global history and points to their significance in showing how closely Central Europe was connected to the Atlantic trade and financial networks, and the contribution the case studies made to refute Wallerstein's model of the Modern World-System.

Three chapters from the book appear to be particularly interesting when viewed from an Eastern European perspective. Firstly, the case study by Anka Steffen examines the trade in Silesian linens on the West African Coast in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Her examination of the invoice books of the English Royal African Company leads to the conclusion that Silesian linens, exported in a wide variety of qualities and forms, successfully competed with Indian cottons in the African barter trade. Importantly for an understanding of Central Europe as part of a larger economic system, Steffen argues that the involvement of Silesian merchants in the transatlantic trade may have contributed to strengthening the feudal bonds in the region, where serfs were employed in the production of fabrics. Looking at the regional politics, the chapter suggests that the Silesian success in Atlantic trade could have been one of the reasons for the Prussian interest in control of the area, which led to the Silesian Wars in the 1740s.

In Chapter 4, Jutta Wimmmler makes a similar claim about a global dimension of the Prussian territorial expansion. Her empirical study, based on the Sound Toll Registers, links the Prussian acquisition of Western Pomerania and the port of Stettin in 1720 to the profitability of transatlantic trade networks in which Stettin was involved. Stettin's takeover connected Prussia directly to the Atlantic economy, freeing the kingdom from dependence of the foreign port of Hamburg. Wimmmler's conclusion is that the acquisition of the port, followed by the construction of transportation routes from Stettin to Berlin, made foreign products such as sugar, rice and dyestuffs more easily accessible. This affected

the Prussian markets, both in terms of demand for consumer goods, and in increase of production of new types of colorful textiles for export.

The case study by Bernhard Struck differs from all the other ones in the collection in being concerned first of all with political rather than economic history. Despite its empirical nature, the chapter does not fail to address the theories of the world-system and questions the validity of the concepts of center and periphery. In his brave and wide-sweeping argument, the author relates the partition of Poland in 1772 to political processes and climate change in the Atlantic World. This global interpretation of the first partition of Poland begins in the Caribbean after the end of the Seven Years' War, when the region was devastated by hurricanes and the expansion of the profitable plantation system became impossible. While the imperial powers – Britain and France – intensified their competition for more land and resources, they were distracted from inner European affairs and this gave Prussia, Russia, and the Habsburg Empire the opportunity to seize large territories and make millions of people their new subjects, which was extremely beneficial for their economies. By giving the first partition of Poland an Atlantic dimension, and showing that that Prussian expansion in the 18th century cannot be isolated from processes of a global nature, the study puts in doubt the assumptions about Central Europe as a peripheral space.

The three books discussed here offer ample support for the claim that Central Europe was indeed part of the Atlantic World and that the recognition of this fact enriches the understanding of this large area and provides new interpretations of the individual histories of the countries and lands that are part of Central Europe. The three volumes, bringing in the Central European perspective to the study of the processes which have been of major interest to Atlantic History for a long time, offer a fuller understanding of migration and formation of societies both in Europe and in America, slavery and racism, trade and capitalism, and a variety of other topics, within a long-term temporal scope. The European scholars involved in the projects presented here bring their thematic expertise to show new dimensions of these important developments, relationships, and structures by means of detailed micro-analysis. Importantly, what these studies have in common is that rather than to incorporate Central and Eastern Europe into the existing narratives and paradigms of Atlantic History, they investigate how regional developments were linked to global ones and how they influenced such global processes. Consequently, they contribute to the critical discussion of the dominant paradigms of Atlantic History, helping, among other things, to overcome the criticism of this field as mainly an extension and reformulation of the histories of the former imperial powers.

While it is noticeable that many of the case studies reviewed here deal with the history of Poles and the areas which are today part of Poland, a great majority of them has been done by German historians, using German-language records. One could only hope that these examples may prompt more research by Polish scholars, in the tradition of the school of Marian Małowist, whose economic studies, translated into German and English, attempted to place Polish history within global trading networks⁷. How rewarding the use of an Atlantic – or global – context may be for an understanding of Polish history has been recently demonstrated, for example, by Dariusz Kołodziejczyk⁸. More work is certainly needed to place histories of Poles and Poland within the economic, cultural, political, and intellectual interpretations of the Atlantic World.

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⁷ See, for example, *Western Europe, Eastern Europe and World Development, 13th–18th Centuries: Collection of Essays of Marian Malowist*, eds. J. Batou, H. Szlajfer, Leiden 2009.

⁸ D. Kołodziejczyk, *Central-Eastern Europe in the Global Context*, “Dans Monde(s)” 2018, vol. 2, no. 14, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-mondes-2018-2-page-53.htm> [access: 5.10.2021]; idem, *Twisted Ways of Commodities in the Early Modern Era and the Positioning of Poland on the Map of Colonialism*, “European Review” 2018, vol. 26, no. 3.

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ABSTRACT

Artykuł poświęcony jest omówieniu trzech publikacji, w których historycy europejscy prezentują swoje studia z zakresu historii atlantyckiej. Autorzy tych badań przedstawiają szeroko zakrojone badania skoncentrowane na miejscu i roli Europy Środkowej w świecie atlantyckim w XVIII i XIX wieku. Recenzowane monografie są ważnym wkładem w badania atlantyckie i oferują nowe spojrzenie na zrozumienie znaczenia Europy Środkowej w takich globalnych procesach, jak migracja, niewolnictwo i wymiana handlowa.

Słowa kluczowe: historia atlantycka; Europa Środkowa; migracja; niewolnictwo; handel