

***The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy.* By Jonathan Singerton (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022), 352pp.**

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In the introductory chapter of his new monograph, *The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy*, historian Jonathan Singerton, a research fellow at the University of Innsbruck, presents a number of arguments for his thesis that the Habsburg monarchy was, in fact, “a focal point in the War of American Independence and exerted an influence on the war’s outcome.” (4).

Singerton reminds us that the Habsburg dynasty shared a common history with America. For generations, Habsburg rulers commanded the Spanish Empire and its overseas possessions. Under Emperor Charles V (King Charles I of Spain), “[t]he meaning and purpose of empire in Europe and overseas, and specific policy questions such as the treatment of the Indians, would engage intellectuals in fierce disputes and important political roles.”¹ Court culture of the early modern Habsburg Empire regularly referred to American traditions and practices. “Emperors Maximilian I through to Rudolf II all collected new-world curiosities for their wonder cabinets” and “Ferdinand I, who was born and raised in Spain, prized his collection of Americana” (17). Collecting artifacts as well as people “put the Habsburg stamp on the region and ensured that evidence of imperial advancement in the Americas was on display. The region’s gold was imperative to Charles’s ambitious visions.”² Singerton also mentions the important role that a *per definitionem* supranational organization played in shaping Central European perspectives of America: the Society of Jesus. “Jesuits from the Habsburg lands enthusiastically participated in the missionising efforts of the order in the Americas” (20)—not only men from German-speaking areas such as Bohemia or Tyrol, but also from Hungarian territories. Printworks such as *Der Neue Welt-Bott*, “a serial publication of missionary letters in the German language . . . redacted with an eye toward an educated audience beyond the Society of Jesus,”³ founded in Graz by Joseph Stöcklein in 1726, had great influence on how Habsburg subjects imagined far-away regions of the world.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, however, things had changed. The Borbón dynasty was firmly entrenched in Spain, while rule over the Habsburg lands had become more and more centralized (e.g. through the politics of Maria Theresa). The assertion of “a marked decline of hispano-centric Americanism within Habsburg audiences” (23) in the mid-eighteenth century seems most reasonable; it corresponds with the deportation of Jesuits from the Spanish realm, internal conflicts in many regions of Latin America, and the improved position of Britain in the West-

ern hemisphere. Habsburg culture increasingly centered on North American topics. Joseph Haydn composed a number of works specifically referring to this region and, during “the 1760s and 1770s, the figure of the Quaker loomed large” (31). Ranieri de’ Calzabigi, a Tuscan living in Vienna, wrote the libretto *Amiti e Ontario*, a piece in which—quite typically for this period—the “New World” was no longer depicted as primitive, but as being inhabited by a politically and economically advanced population.

In Chapter 2, Singerton directs the reader’s attention toward the American Revolution and its reception in Vienna. “There were, of course, those who disagreed with the American crusade, but they were in a minority. The imperial court at Vienna was a largely pro-American scene” (34). A number of officials sent letters to Benjamin Franklin, while newspapers such as the *Wienerisches Diarium* reported regularly (and seldom hindered by censorship) about developments in America. The British ambassador in Vienna, Robert Murray Keith, “felt that an information war was being waged... between him and those advocating for the Americans” (43). So, while Austria did not participate in the military conflict, it certainly was, as Singerton makes clear, the scene of propagandistic battles. As the author points out in Chapter 4, maintaining Habsburg neutrality was also no easy task, with the port cities of Livorno (Tuscany) and Ostend (Austrian Netherlands) being two globally neuralgic positions. Habsburg’s underestimated network of maritime connections “expanded and contracted in the turbulent wake of the American Revolution” (77).

The reader is then presented an account of the early stages of diplomacy between American negotiators such as William Lee (who made a secret entry into Vienna in 1778) and Habsburg officials. According to Singerton, American “militia diplomacy”—the sending of uninvited envoys—was a fascinating approach for many Europeans. Singerton tries to detach developments from personal stories to show the larger picture of political and strategic activities. “American diplomatic failure in Vienna resulted from multiple factors, not just one man’s deficiencies” (118). Singerton identifies errors by the French ambassador as well as British successes in obtaining promises from the Habsburgs as main reasons for American diplomatic failures during the War of Independence; once again, this highlights the multilateral dimensions of Habsburg-American relations. In the meantime, Habsburg traders continued to profit from developments in the larger Atlantic world: “Ostend flourished in the later years of the conflict as the only neutral port in northwestern Europe” (120), while banks and businesses from Trieste were also actively engaged in North American markets. After United States independence had been recognized by the British in 1783, “attentiveness to the importance of transatlantic commerce replaced difficult political considerations of [Habsburg] neutrality” (143). Singerton again focuses on the ports of Livorno, Ostend, and Trieste, but he also mentions the importance of transatlantic business for other parts of the realm, including Carinthia, Styria, and

Bohemia. However, some trades also suffered from the new peace: revenues of Hungarian tobacco production had skyrocketed during the war, “yet, with the cessation of hostilities, boom inevitably turned to bust as American exportation resumed and Hungarian suppliers could not compete” (161).

In chapters 8 and 9 of his study, Singerton devotes his attention to the early stages of official Habsburg representation in the United States as well as the “second struggle for recognition between the Habsburg Monarchy and the United States” (190). He analyzes the mission of Baron Frederick de Beelen-Bertholff who, for six years, served as Habsburg commercial adviser in the United States, deals with attempts to finalize a commercial treaty, and shows how Thomas Jefferson’s pragmatism (prioritizing even second-rate Atlantic powers like Sweden over Austria) defined international relations. Judging Jefferson’s strategy harshly, Singerton asserts, “His actions helped set back the progress of US-Habsburg relations for a generation” (207). During the late 1780s, important transatlantic businesses such as the Austria-American Trading Company and the firm of Ignaz Verpoorten in Trieste ceased operations or collapsed. Ironically, from 1792 onwards, Thomas Jefferson “obtained at least 1,630 panes of Bohemian glass” (214), which he deemed best-suited for renovation of his house at Monticello. On a political level, the ideas of the American Revolution continued to resonate in Habsburg lands, especially the Austrian Netherlands and Hungary, where activists like Jan-Frans Vonck or József Hajnóczy, a legal theorist who “published his own works extolling the wisdom and virtue of the American laws” (223), identified closely with the new republic.

Singerton’s book sheds light on an often-ignored chapter of international relations in the early modern period. His concise monograph shows that the assumption of North America (or the new United States)—a region defined through ideals of “progress” and “freedom”—and the Habsburg Monarchy of the Haus Österreich—usually depicted as conservative and hostile towards modernization—existing in two separate worlds without really influencing each other cannot be upheld. While it seems logical that with two great powers (an “old” and a “new” one), there had to be a number of reciprocal connections, Singerton supports this argument convincingly through the results of extensive archival research in the United States, Austria, and ten other countries (including Belgium, Italy, and the United Kingdom). *The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy* should be considered a “must-read” for every scholar of eighteenth-century Austrian and North American history, but the book also provides relevant insights into early modern international relations and trade policies. While one could criticize the book for largely ignoring the opinions of “average” people in cities such as Vienna (where a critical mass of people interested in American issues existed), Singerton’s work, with its focus on diplomacy and trade, undoubtedly constitutes an important addition to international history.

Notes

- 1 Juan J. Linz, "Intellectual Roles in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Spain," *Daedalus* 101, no. 3 (1972): 59.
- 2 Katherine Bond, "Mapping Culture in the Habsburg Empire. Fashioning a Costume Book in the Court of Charles V," *Renaissance Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2018): 553, DOI: [10.1086/698140](https://doi.org/10.1086/698140).
- 3 Ulrike Strasser, *Missionary Men in the Early Modern World: German Jesuits and Pacific Journeys* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 208.