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Central European Elites in Post-Imperial Transition: Locality, Agency, Capital

Introduction

One of the most significant new tendencies within the historiography of the aftermath of First World War in general and the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in particular calls for a change of perspective, prioritizing bottom-up approaches instead of top-down views.[1] Works on the fragmentation of imperial space around the Baltic Sea, the colonial aspects of the integration of interwar Volhynia into Poland, the unification of Bessarabia with Romania, and changes in the Balkans and Middle East all shift the perspective of the historical narrative, revealing how people on the ground experienced and related to the novel frameworks of new states and their borders.[2] These works cover disparate topics: from the administration to the reactions of legal professions to unification, from the adaptation strategies of local business elites to the social institutions and interactions that fostered national and regional identifications, and from social policies of local exclusion and inclusion to local violence, all of these have focused on the practices of transitions as opposed to plans of regional reconstruction or state ideologies.[3] While these choices of topic are often in line with broader trends of historiography, their rationale in this specific context of imperial collapse and state reconfiguration goes beyond exhausting research questions with a broader salience, or providing historians with the advantage of working with more limited topics. The main goal within this shift is to shed the potentially essentializing concepts of state, society, and nation, and to reconstruct historical processes with all their complexity and variegation revealed. Moreover, such an approach aims at changing our understanding of phenomena which are subsumed under these essentialized concepts.[4]

This bottom-up approach means moving from the customary large scales of analysis used to interpret the collapse of Austria-Hungary, Imperial Russia and the Ottoman Empire; the reconfiguration of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe and the Middle East after the First World War; and the consolidation of the new nation states, to favouring smaller, primarily local and regional ones. In a sense, this is an inevitable shift that should be inherent to the more traditional historiography too. The new borders and new institutions—national, trans- and international—brought changes of space and new configurations of power. Local and regional societies and their constitutive groups had to find their places within this new context through processes of adaptation, resistance, and negotiation.[5]

While not the only one, local elites were a key social group in the process of adjustment and accommodation, and this thematic dossier investigates the role of locality in their agency vis-á-vis the other important actors of this process. The ‘elite’ is a popular but also often problematized concept of the social sciences. It has its origins in the tangible experience of societies and the perceived existence of a group of people who had significantly more influence on key decisions than most others. While such popular assumptions are impossible to operationalize for the purpose of social science research, even some of the classic scholars of elite theories in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, defined elites in this Machiavellian way.[6] Although their theories have been subject to heavy criticism and labelled as crude or inapplicable, since the inception of the academic

study and theorizing of ‘elites,’ researchers have struggled with the same issues: what are the factors that define an ‘elite’? And—in a step that is the necessary for research on its characteristics and sources of position or status —how it is possible to delimit the group that is an ‘elite’ within society?[7] Concepts like ‘positional’ or ‘multipositional elite,’ ‘reputational elite,’ ‘power elite,’ ‘achieving elite,’ and ‘decisional elite’ all face similar epistemological issues. If the selection of elites is based on formal criteria (like institutional positions), it is often hard to verify that those institutions and their leadership positions really offer entry to a social elite of a group recruited from multiple institutions. If the selection is based on softer criteria (like power, decision-making, achievements, and so forth) the problem becomes how to identify those individuals who do not hold formal roles, and yet still wield influence and power—a tough challenge for both historians and contemporary social scientists.[8]

What unites all these approaches is that elites are considered not only to be on top of a hierarchy, be it institutional or a less formal social one, but also to have a real power and influence on decisions, a weight that is perceived as outsized when compared to most of the members of society. Through this involvement with decision-making processes, being ‘elite’ becomes both a role and function.[9] The basis of this outsized power can vary. One of its elements is access to different forms—material, social, cultural, institutional—and sources of capital that elites can use to exert influence and exercise power.[10] Another element is the performance of a role in a way that conform with broader social expectations of what elites should do.[11] While research on elites is often linked with the state and the nation, and posits the existence of the elite at the top of a state or a national society, it is possible—and common in the literature—to shift the scale of analysis, and to move to a transnational or local focus, or to hone in on a single institution.[12]

Taking into account Hans Pohl’s warning that elites are always historically defined and coined,[13] the contributions to this thematic issue hope to answer questions that arise logically from this observation: what is that makes an elite, how are elites formed and why those that we identify and no other factors make elites? In particular, what is the role of the ‘local’ in this phenomenon? In responding, we apply the above definition borrowed from Shamus Rahman Khan’s work in that we see elites defined by their greater ease of access to certain resources over other parts of society, and their ability to fulfil societal expectations. We take into account both of its aspects, although the contributions analyse very different individuals or groups whose capital was derived from varying sources. In this way, the historical protagonists not only represent elites from narrower geographic and social contexts, but they are also examples of various types of elites too.

Kate Densford describes the career of a secondary school teacher-cum-school director, Mathias Arthold, from the Moravian-Lower Austrian border town of Feldsberg/Valtice. The school he managed was an agronomy school, whose foundation was part of a broader effort aimed at rural development and modernization in Habsburg Austria. Arthold gained a valuable reputation as the school’s head and featured as a key figure of the local intelligentsia and positional elite, while outside the region he served as an expert of specialized education. These expert credentials helped him to manage the post-war transition, when, despite local support for him to stay at the school after the town was incorporated into Czechoslovakia, he finally moved to Austria. There, he restarted his career as an expert of national profile, while maintaining an active role in his former school’s alumni organizations.

Veronika Szeghy-Gayer's contribution is linked to Arthold's case through the context of education in another region that was annexed to the new state of Czechoslovakia after the war. Her study, however, takes up Slovakia—former Upper Hungary—and is focused not on a single person, but on two groups of people defined by their profession and employment status: schoolteachers and employees of the postal service. Not always belonging to the elite, members of this group could attain such a role if they were based in rural communities, or if they reached a position within their institutions that won them recognition as part of the local elite by its other members. Szeghy-Gayer examines how the Czechoslovak state managed these groups' transition from the Hungarian to Czechoslovak state service, how loyalty to the state was defined, and what sort of logic was behind decisions to lay-off, pension, or retain these employees in the new state service. While a surprisingly large part of this professional body was retained, and the rationale behind decisions was more complex than merely being about ethnicity, the typical cases that are analysed reveal a wide range of attitudes and options of evaluation both from the representatives of the state and from those affected.

Christopher Wendt devotes his article to another group linked not only by their profession, but also by their role within local society. He examines Catholic clergy in the new federal province of Tyrol and its role in recasting regional conservative rule. Wendt presents clergy not as an elite in itself, but rather as a sub-elite that was most active at the local level and whose position and role became both embattled and enhanced after the war. While Tyrol's post-imperial transition is often considered as one that occurred without significant challenges to conservative rule due to the strength of the Catholic Church, Wendt argues that wartime depredations generated significant challenges to conservative elites and sub-elites. It took time and effort to restore social trust, a process the clergy was instrumental in carrying forward. Nonetheless, even after an equilibrium was reached, political divisions of the 'Black' camp continued to spill over to the local level with destabilizing effects.

Csongor Jánosi traces the story of a fascinating personality whose biography is that of switching and shifting between alternative elites. Count Ármin Mikes was the scion of an aristocratic Transylvanian family that established a profitable forestry business in the late nineteenth century, before successfully extending its operations into pre-1914 Romania too. As the brother-in-law of interwar Hungarian prime minister István Bethlen and father of Klementina Mikes—who married a prince Auersperg—Ármin Mikes stayed in Romania after 1919, where he managed the long, complicated transition of his forestry firm. In doing so, he employed all his available connections in an attempt to save one of his most significant assets, the Tisiţa Forestry Company. His efforts illuminate a wide network of personal and business links and expose his methods of influencing political and judicial decisions at local, county, national and even transnational levels, while also attesting to the permanent conflicts he remained embroiled in with local rural communities.

Finally, Gábor Egry brings to the fore the transition of former imperial business networks in interwar Romania. Taking up the network woven around assets of the Pesti Hungarian Commercial Bank (PMKB), he focuses on the group of people who became instrumental in managing these assets after companies in Greater Romania were nationalized, falling at least nominally under Romanian majority ownership. However, as PMKB still retained its property and management rights through various deals with Romanian partners, running these businesses created numerous opportunities for upward mobility within the network, just as it provided possibilities of profit to people who assisted PMKB from the outside. As Egry

shows, in some cases, this new source of capital even propelled industrious individuals into the ranks of the transnational business elites.

Returning to the definition of elites, I want to point out again how important power is to any concept of elites. Power was, however, contested in the wake of the First World War, as imperial institutions collapsed, revolutionary efforts attempted to establish new states, and the sum of these processes reshaped societies obviously reconfiguring access to capital. The contestation of elites' roles was not without precedent, in terms of either ethnic or class politics,[14] but the scale and depth of the changes in 1918 and afterwards was unprecedented.

The salience of changes was all the more important as elites at the local level were often multi-positional not only in terms of holding more than one position within the same field (such as in culture, politics, administration, business, and education), but also in terms of assuming important roles across many fields. While this multi-positional character enabled them to draw on different sources of capital and exercise roles in various institutions and across fields, it may also have been necessary for maintaining their stronger position in relation to national or imperial elites.[15] Inhabiting multiple roles resulted in more networks to join and offered resources to mobilize when it came time to negotiate with central elites, providing local elites either with a counterweight or something to offer. Thus, it is also important to look at the dynamics of how these different types of capital changed in significance and importance, and how the conditions of access varied in time and according to shifts of the external context. In this regard, the relation of local elites and societies to the higher levels is important, especially as space existed for negotiation between local and national (as well as transnational) actors and institutions. Instead of top-down domination, this relation is better seen as transactional.[16]

As a result, the local scale often makes it harder rather than easier to differentiate between elite groups and sub-groups, distinctions that seem easier to draw with national or imperial elites, despite their widespread multi-positionality. The boundaries between administrative, economic, cultural, and further types of elites, which can be relatively neatly drawn nationally,[17] are at the local level blurrier and often porous. In turning to the analysis of local elites, one of the important research aims is to determine how these groups access and combine different forms of capital, and to interpret its exact meaning in a specific local context where significant disparities existed between the importance of different forms of capital.

The key questions that this thematic dossier seeks to answer stem from this general conceptualization of the position of local elites and their shared experience of imperial collapse and subsequent nation-state building in and after 1918. Analysing concrete cases of how individuals within the elite or its certain subgroups reacted to the rapidly unfolding events helps to make clear important aspects of the position and role of elites locally and vis-á-vis the state. What kind of capital enabled accession to a local elite, and how did their challengers take advantage of the new situation at the end of the war? What types of knowledge (including familiarity with informal practices) and networks were crucial? How exactly did local elites negotiate their new position in local society, and what kind of internal reconfigurations of the elite did this process entail? How can we explain elite resilience, and what might it say about how an elite's old capital is converted among the new circumstances?

The case studies that the dossier highlights pursue answers for these questions in different political and national contexts. Republican Austria's peculiar province of Tyrol was defined by relative ethnic homogeneity and cultural distance from the centre, accompanied by the prominence of the Roman Catholic Church and political conservatism. Czechoslovakia's Slovak regions provide an example of a dual periphery in its relation to the old and the new centre, with often fluid or ambiguous cultural and ethnic identities, and competing national projects from the side of the new titular nation(s). Romania's new provinces in the West were characterized by a huge discrepancy between the ethnic and social composition of its urban and rural areas and a clash between centralizing and regionalist Romanian political parties. In the last two contexts it was a publicly stated goal of the state to facilitate the emergence of a new elite from the titular nation(s), even at the local level.

One of the themes connecting these studies is mobility up and down the social ladder and the stability of elites' social position together with the (relative) loss or gain of status. All aspects of imperial collapse and revolution—intended rupture with the state, social reconfiguration, and the establishment of new national hierarchies—directly pertained to the position of local elites, who often drew their capital from all of these fields. Material losses were a key concern for elites and the middle-class (which was often locally entangled with elites) in general,[18] and most of their efforts aimed at regaining wealth or reaccumulating capital. Their field of activity, however, very much determined the methods used and routes taken, just as it had an impact on whether upward mobility was achieved.

For example, the head of the Feldsberg/Valtice school, Mathias Arthold, was deeply embedded within the field of vocational education and accumulated symbolic capital through his achievements, such as increasing the prestige of the school, that were locally considered outstanding. However, in the context of national contestation, this kind of local embeddedness had a limited shielding effect, and he had to leave his position as the school was gradually transformed into a Czech institution—although not without resistance from locals. Though Arthold regained social status in Austria, and even climbed within the ranks of the national educational system, he did so at the price of abandoning his former institution.

Teachers and postal officials in Slovakia faced a similar choice that often ended with similar outcomes during their (re)integration process into the state service. Although ethnicity was nominally not part of their evaluation, the representatives of the state wielded discretionary power in terms of how much they included ethnicity—or even simple personal antipathies—into their assessments of the suspended public employees. The more symbolic capital one had within one field of Hungarian national cultural activism, the higher the chance of rejection by the Czechoslovak state was, even though the distant state organs attempted to mitigate these prejudices and preserve at least a semblance of a fair process. Thus, those who were part of the traditional elite of these regions that identified with Hungarian culture often felt that they must either abandon their role within the state to preserve their elite status within the Hungarian 'pillar' of society or reduce their public activism to keep their social position as middle-class state employees. Whatever they chose, their social roles changed as they lost the benefits of their pre-war multi-positionality that now worked to the advantage of their challengers who served the new, Czechoslovak state.

Austrian Tyrol's parish clergy was more successful in preserving its role within local society. Moreover, it became a key factor in retrenching Catholic hegemony in a province that was

mentally quite far from republican Vienna or even from the idea of an Austrian Republic. What made their challenges peculiar when compared to the fate of new Czechoslovak state employees was the general absence of national or ethnic issues from local politics. Thus, they had to face challenges to their authority that sprung from a different source, that being a massive loss of legitimacy during the war. Their primary challenge was not to fend off political competition from rivals, but rather to dispel the distrust of their parishioners and manage the transition to mass politics from one based on elite overrepresentation. Religious activism, carried out in a 'Catholic offensive,' was one of the means they used to bring recalcitrant parishioners back into the fold, and to guide them not only into conservative party activities, but also into the operation of mass Catholic organizations. While their knowledge and prestige that derived in part from their belonging to the institution of the church was certainly not negligible for their success, it was also their numerous local efforts and initiatives—and demonstrable achievements, like those in Arthold's Feldsberg/Valtice—that played the most important role.

Economic elites faced a dual challenge when it came to their future in the successor states. Their experience in Romania shows in exemplary fashion how they managed the transition and the new state politics of building a strong national economy through sidelining 'foreign' businesses.[19] Some of these challenges had very local origins: the Tisiţa Forestry Company of Count Ármin Mikes faced grassroots activism from local communities aimed at regaining community resources that were appropriated from the large, capitalist business. But while Mikes needed the help of the state apparatus to defend his physical assets from the incursions of locals, he also struggled with expropriation attempts from the same state. These tensions created a complex web of interests, which Mikes navigated by sticking to the local: he moved to his rural estate in Transylvania and mobilized everything in his power to retain it intact.[20] In both of these efforts he was relatively successful, as he skilfully exploited political conflicts between Romanian parties and mobilized the local administration through his contacts in Bucharest, although in the end he had to shift his goal from preserving his company to completing an orderly withdrawal from business. His prospective exit made local communities realize just how much they really profited from the local infrastructure that Tisiáa had developed, a recognition that suddenly led to opposition of the company's withdrawal from the area. Nevertheless, these local communities were finally powerless against the complicit alliance of the Hungarian aristocrat and capitalist Mikes and the Romanian state.

The same Romanian state, which before the war was often dependent on Romanian businesses that cooperated with Austro-Hungarian partners, was utilized by Viennese and Budapest capitalists to save assets that were annexed to Romania after the war. As it turned out, they could even profit from its autarkic policies. During this effort, a group of locally embedded managers became essential for these capitalist elites' survival and later prosperity. They managed contacts with local and regional politicians, actively participated in regional social and economic organizations, and fostered contacts with those local businessmen who acted as frontmen in the process of nationalisation or nostrification. The process was peculiar, as it brought social mobility to a large number of different groups, including ethnic Romanian politicians and non-Romanian mid-level managers of transnational corporations, and it even enabled them to enter the realm of national elites. Hardly unique for this specific context, rather a result of the specific conditions, this situation was in fact similar to what Swiss

companies experienced before the war, but whose situation started to shift already in the 1920s.[21]

As mobility or stability and loss of status was equally part of their stories, all these processes point to the simultaneous presence of continuity and rupture. Even those whose elite status was now questioned or limited (such as Hungarian public employees leaving the service, Mathias Arnold emigrating to Austria, and local Hungarian politicians of the Banat who changed places with Romanian ones to facilitate political contacts for large businesses) could retain an elevated social position based on the same forms of capital that they had utilized before 1918 if they wished. Those who persisted, like the Tyrolean clergy, on the other hand, often had to turn to new sources and forms of capital to stabilize their position. Thus, knowledge in a very broad sense (including the informal mechanisms of social and elite integration) and in a very specific one (such as being aware of the secret agreements between Romanian and foreign capitalists) was the most common element in how elites managed to survive or even ascend higher.

Often this status maintenance also meant a quite visible change in the patterns of social integration and the role of local elites in it. Pillarization—be it the corporatist model of Austria, or the ethnic separation of culture and education in Czechoslovakia—might have limited elite roles locally, but at the same time it carved out some familiar fields for pre-1918 elites to still act as elites within a specific social group or milieu. The process of state disintegration and nation-state building highlighted another aspect of the role of local elites: the high degree to which they were instrumental in integrating local societies into larger social structures, and connecting local elites with national or former imperial, now transnational elites. Local elites were reconfigured in terms of their inner composition, with the inclusion of new groups, such as local Romanian politicians or Czechoslovak state delegates, or with the increased significance of rising institutions and their leaders, like the Tyrolean *Bauernbund*. (Though sometimes traditional informal means—like pure bribery in Romania – were enough to foster the necessary internal cohesion.) Forging connections with the new national (or in the case of Tyrol, pronounced regional) level was probably more challenging, although the solution was not uniform. Tyrolean clergy used the rooting of the Catholic church and their sway in local politics, while economic managers and local politicians in Romania utilized national political parties and transnational business networks. It was, however, a shared experience that those who could successfully craft working and stable relationships between various interests and groups became crucial for all actors within these structures, obviously adding to their capital. In this sense, being able to move between the fields of politics, culture, business, and so forth did not only allow access to additional types of capital: this dynamism was a special asset in itself. From this perspective, even the question of fragmentation or integration of elites looks different.[22] Taken together, the contributions point less toward a stable state of relations, with elite subgroups being either disparate and separated or connected and cooperative, and rather more toward a continuous process of social reconfiguration. Relations within the elite and the changes of its composition were not shifting only in this period; rather, they show a certain dialectics of integration-fragmentation-integration both within the local society and towards the other social scales, a process that continued after the most intense period of the transition as well.

Finally, what was the significance of the local in the process of transition and in the reconfiguration of elite(s)? First, local elites were traditionally crucial for integrating their

local societies within larger social and institutional structures. This basic fact did not change throughout the transition, but the methods and especially the knowledge necessary to steer this process did. Though the relationship between local and national was asymmetric, it was not simply defined by one-sided dependence. New states and new national elites often realized that they needed to leave some space for traditional elite groups and the social milieus that these could integrate. Locals' trust in elites as their interlocutors was essential for consolidation. Second, as it is especially pertinent in the case of the managers of the Austro-Hungarian business conglomerates, new borders reconfigured existing structures in a way that made actors at the local level much more important than before. From their local position they had an intimate knowledge of the operation of these networks and could exercise more significant influence on decisions affecting these structures as a whole. Familiarity with this kind of understanding of the local became in both aspects—at least for a time—an asset that helped local elites to entrench their position both within their local societies and in their new national settings, making the transition significantly less disruptive for elites than they had feared and assumed.

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[1] Gerwarth, "The Sky beyond," 902-903.

[2] Richter, *Fragmentation*; Ciancia, *On Civilizations Edge;* Suveica, "Die Verwaltung Bessarabiens"; Şenışık, "The Allied Occupation..."; Watenpaugh, "Cleansing the Cosmopolitian"; Mestyán, *Modern Arab Kingship*.

[3] Suveica, "Die Verwaltung Bessarabiens."; Magno, "Nazionalismo, modernizzazione, ereditá imperiale"; Bresciani and Richter, "Trieste and Danzig"; Bjork et al. eds. *Creating Nationality*; Reill, *The Fiume Crisis*; Reill et al., "Redefining Citizenship after Empire"; Mulaj "War and State Making."

[4] Reill, *The Fiume Crisis.*; Judson, "Rethinking Nationalism"; *Embers of Empire*; *Postwar Continuity*

[5] Egry, "Negotiating Local Transitons."

[6] Denord et al., "Introduction," 3-4.

[7] Denord et al. "Introduction"; Endruweit, "Elitebegriffe."

[8] Lunding et al. "The Craft of Elite Prosopography," 58–59. Endruweit, „Elitebegriffe," 36–45.

[9] Pohl, "Elite in Wirtschaft," 50.; Endruweit, "Elitebegriffe," 43-45.; Denord et al., "Introduction".

[10] Khan, "The Sociology of Elites"; Falski, "Slovenian Elites."

[11] Khan, *Privilege,* 136.

[12] O'Neill, „How Should Historians," 165.

[13] Pohl, „Elite in Wirtschaft," 51.

[14] See Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*; Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*.

[15] On the concept of multi-positionality see Lengyel, "The Ethnic Composition"; Falski, "Slovenian Elites."

[16] Falski, "Slovenian Elites."

[17] Pál, "The Study of the Hungarian Elites", Strébl and Mach, "From local champions to global players."

[18] Burri, "Clemens Pirquet," 43-44.

[19] Matis, "Disintegration and Multinational Entreprises", Rigó, *Capitalism in Chaos*, Weigl,"Beggar-Thy-Neighbour."

[20] Jánosi, "'Hontalanul'."
[21]Strébl and Mach, "From local champions to global players."
[22] Falski, "Slovenian Elites."