

Kakanien revisited – Rückblick und Ausblick: 2000–2024.

Edited by Marijan Bobinac, Wolfgang Müller-Funk,
and Clemens Ruthner.

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Retrospective volumes concluding a long-term research project (in this case, spanning a quarter century) sometimes risk sliding into institutional self-commemoration. *Kakanien revisited – Rückblick und Ausblick* operates on fundamentally different premises. Conceived to trace the interplay between the supranational and the individual national spheres (p. 59) across two and a half decades of collaborative work, the collection returns to the Habsburg complex in the Musilian sense signaled by its title: as an ambivalent cultural formation in which the entanglement of imperial integration and national differentiation, of memory and belated modernity remains stubbornly unresolved. What gives the volume its urgency is precisely its refusal of two familiar simplifications: Neither does it rehabilitate the Habsburg world through nostalgia nor surrenders the field to self-enclosed national narratives. Instead, it asks what becomes visible when one reads Central Europe again through correspondences, transfers, asymmetries, and afterlives that national literary histories have often obscured. The three editors—Marijan Bobinac (Zagreb), Wolfgang Müller-Funk (Vienna), and Clemens Ruthner (Dublin)—also frame the volume as a double anniversary: It is the thirtieth installment of the series *Kultur – Herrschaft – Differenz*, and marks twenty-five years of the transnational research network that began as an internet platform in 2001.¹ One contextual pressure the editors could not have anticipated was that the Russian war against Ukraine, which began a few weeks before the Drosendorf symposium of April 2022, would seep into nearly every contribution, lending the Mitteleuropa problematic—widely considered a discourse past its expiration date (p. 17)—an unsettling contemporary charge.

1 www.kakanien-revisited.at

The volume's broad intellectual ambition is reflected in its architecture. The thirteen contributions are arranged into four sections—forms of rule in Central Europe, semiosis of empires, afterlives of center and periphery, and Habsburg and (Central) Europe. The volume is held together by a widened concept of culture structured by power, center–periphery relations, and the shifting dialogue between postcolonial and postimperial approaches. The result is less a unified manifesto than a cartography of a research tradition in motion, tracing how the Kakanien revisited project has, over roughly a quarter century, helped reframe Habsburg and Central European studies beyond what Bobinac describes as the twin pitfalls of nostalgic imperial rehabilitation and ideological condemnation, the “habsburgischer Mythos” on the one hand, and the “Völkerkerker” on the other (p. 53), and how its theoretical focus has shifted, expanded, and been tested against new historical pressures along the way. What the individual sections demonstrate is a productive methodological openness: one that, as the volume itself implies, is inseparable from the network's constitutively transnational character.

The first section, *Herrschaftsformen in Zentraleuropa*, foregrounds the methodological stakes of empire research. Pieter M. Judson opens with a conceptual reassessment of the 1918 caesura: The dichotomy of ‘empire’ and ‘nation state’, he argues, is analytically sterile, because the successor states perpetuated imperial practices, such as legal systems, administrative personnel, and military structures, while proclaiming the rhetoric of ethnic homogeneity. A reading of Joseph Roth's *Die Büste des Kaisers* anchors the argument in literary practice: Roth's nationalist politicians are exposed as social failures (“soziale Versager”) who pursue the abstraction of national loyalty at the cost of the human relations that constitute everyday life, and in doing so, Judson suggests, Roth anticipates by nearly a century Tara Zahra's concept of ‘national indifference’. Judson's conclusion is pointed: What Kakanien revisited has already achieved and what historical analysis more broadly requires is precisely the abandonment of what he calls the fruitless opposition between nation and empire that has organized the field for too long (p. 43).

Bobinac's essay then offers the volume's central methodological proposition: the shift from a predominantly postcolonial lens to a more explicitly postimperial one. While postcolonial analysis foregrounds asymmetry, domination, and center–periphery relations, a postimperial perspective also attends to forms of integration, circulation, and creative cultural interaction—without, as Bobinac is careful to note, abandoning the critique of the asymmetries and mechanisms of suppression that remain constitutive of imperial power (p. 56). What changes is not the object but the analytical orientation: Where, as Peter Stachel has observed, the displacement of normative definitional authority between the center and competing regional micro-centers describes a far more complex configuration than the

colonizer–colonized binary allows, the postimperial framework proves more adequate to the region’s actual dynamics. The two paradigms do not stand in opposition but in productive, mutually corrective tension.

The second section, *Semiose von Imperien*, constitutes the volume’s theoretically most ambitious portion and its conceptual center of gravity. Susanne Frank revisits the cultural semiotics of Yuri Lotman against the backdrop of Russia’s war against Ukraine, arguing that what Lotman describes as the binary culture type paradigmatic of Russian culture is, in fact, nothing other than a structural description of imperial culture—a claim Lotman himself never made explicit but which his own theoretical framework enables. Frank draws the consequence directly: Empires cannot tolerate peripheral semioses and must combat them with all available forces (p. 79), and the Russian attempt to destroy Ukraine as an autonomous semiotic space is, on these terms, the imperial logic laid bare. Wolfgang Müller-Funk’s essay complements this by translating the semiosphere model into the Habsburg context, describing the Monarchy as a space marked by heterogeneity, asymmetry, and overlapping micro-centres—and proposing the additional category of a “Soziosphäre” to account for what Lotman’s model leaves out: the dimension of power, position, and relative agency within imperial formations (p. 84). A reading of Roth’s *Das falsche Gewicht* (Weights and Measures) illustrates the literary imprint of dissolving norm systems at the periphery: Eibenschütz, the weights and measures inspector at the Galician borderlands, loses not only control over his legal domain but, as Müller-Funk puts it, Eibenschütz also loses control over himself through alcohol and sexual submission (p. 86). The lawless peripheral space is described as simultaneously dangerous and seductive – civilization’s underside made visible. Clemens Ruthner’s contribution bridges this conceptual terrain with literary history proper. Drawing on Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* and Moretti’s *Atlas of the European Novel*, and presenting his argument explicitly as a “kleine Arbeitsskizze” (p. 95), Ruthner advances a series of theses on the relationship between empire, nationalism, and literary genre in Central Europe: bourgeois realism as the mediating form of imperial legitimation, modernism as imperial self-critique, and the postimperial afterlife of the Habsburg myth in the interwar period and beyond. The paper makes legible what monolingual or nationally isolated canons habitually obscure, even if it presents itself as an invitation to further research rather than a fully elaborated demonstration.

The volume is at its most persuasive where theory becomes reading practice, and the two papers which close the second and third sections demonstrate this most vividly. Jan Budňák’s reading of Ludwig Winder’s 1917 novel *Die rasende Rotationsmaschine* locates the postimperial not after the Monarchy’s collapse but within its apparently stable late-bourgeois order. The novel’s protagonist Theodor Glaser, a Galician-born press magnate, periphery man turned Viennese power

figure, does not simply attack the empire from the outside: He embodies its internal contradiction. Glaser's target is the *prächtige Mensch*, which the novel defines as a man who always conducts himself impeccably, who aspires to be a pillar of society, and who demands from everyone the outward and inward correctness he displays (p. 116). Read through Reckwitz's theory of the hybrid bourgeois subject, this formula names the Monarchy's genuine load-bearing pillar: a subjectivity produced by the entanglement of self-discipline, aesthetic cultivation, and controlled desire. What Glaser's destructive modernity reveals is that this pillar was always fractured from within—crossed by pre-modern, “ostjüdisch” residues that his journalistic career suppresses but never overcomes. In Budňák's reading, the empire does not fall in 1918: It collapses “above all as a late-bourgeois practice of subjectivity and a form of knowledge” (p. 122), unmade by the very forces it produced.

Gábor Schein's reading of Ádám Bodor's *Sinistra körzet* [The Sinistra Zone] exemplifies the same commitment to close reading that distinguishes the volume's strongest contributions. Applying Oszkár Jászi's concept of internal colonialism and Homi Bhabha's account of liminal tensions, Schein argues that Bodor's prose aestheticizes colonial discourse, makes it “sichtbar” precisely through its own ambivalence. The novel's language of dehumanization is rendered as an art form, as Schein shows through its systematic animalization of characters: Guards become “gray ganders, all long-necked, button-eyed fellows,” a woman's eyes have “something goose-like,” another's face is covered in “silky black hair, her green eyes *shone through the strands*,” and one character is described as “an animal” who was “*once a lustful fairy*” (p. 166). The survival of colonial discourse becomes legible here because the text's inner ambivalence is sensuously and stylistically palpable: Irony and nostalgia, eroticism and dystopia, bodily materiality and administrative violence are folded into the same prose world. These two essays stand out as demonstrations of what postimperial criticism can accomplish when it becomes an interpretive practice.

The third section, *Nachleben von Zentrum und Peripherie*, opens the volume toward the present. Vahidin Preljević's contribution reads the Yugoslav New Wave and the Zenitism movement through the lens of Balkan discourse. He shows that even the most defiant reversals of imperial self-images—the Zenitist celebration of the “Barbarogenius” as a regenerative force—remain structurally caught within the very grammar they seek to invert, confirming that negative images of the Balkans drawn from Western perceptual grammar are not deconstructed but rather reinforced (p. 133). Milka Car's paper is more openly programmatic, but it supplies the conceptual vocabulary with which several of the volume's literary contributions can be read together: hybridity, peripheralization, and the productive instability of the center-periphery relation in contemporary literature. Her reading of Barbi Marković's *Ausgehen* (a text that rewrites Thomas Bernhard's prose from the double

position of Zagreb and Vienna) illustrates this through the materiality of its language: the intertextual and interlingual practice of the novel enacts the postimperial condition, demonstrating on the level of form what Car calls the postimperial constellation, understood as a specific mode of literary negotiation between various national and transnational identity constructions (p. 13 and 140).

The final section, *Habsburg und (Mittel-)Europa*, brings the volume's historical concerns into overt dialogue with current geopolitical anxieties. Davor Dukić revisits Claudio Magris from an imagological perspective, proposing the concept of "imagotypical nostalgia" and asking whether Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, the author's ironic-critical novel, can be read as *k. u. k.* nostalgia. His affirmative answer gives scholarly grounding to Magris's founding intuition. Aleš Urválek compares the European projects of Masaryk, Rohan, and Coudenhove-Kalergi from a postimperial angle, using the *Europäische Revue* as what he calls a "Labor" (p. 196) for tracking how imperial semantics were continuously repackaged within interwar Europa-discourse. His observation concerns Masaryk: The ostensibly anti-imperial, democratic new Europe Masaryk envisioned reproduces, in its treatment of minorities through the "Mehrheitsprinzip," the hegemonial logic it claimed to supersede.

The two closing essays carry the emotional weight of the collection. Nikola Petković reconstructs the Lisbon writers conference, where the question of Mitteleuropa became, unexpectedly, the central flashpoint, and shows how the Soviet writers' refusal to acknowledge the military presence in Central Europe as politically relevant acquires devastating retrospective force in light of 2022. What troubled Konrád, Kiš, and the other non-Soviet participants was not aggression but unawareness: "we're interested to know whether the presence of these tanks enters into their consciousness at all" (p. 205). Jurko Prochasko's essay, the volume's most emotionally fuelled text, traces through the personal biography and intellectual diary of a Galician-Ukrainian literary scholar how Galicia's double coding (simultaneously "altes Österreich" and emerging Ukraine) became the site where imperial-national entanglement is lived. One of its notable moves is the critique of Kundera. He did to Ukrainians precisely what he accused the West of doing to Central Europeans: refused to acknowledge their difference and assigned them wholesale to the Soviet sphere. Prochasko's closing is deliberately paradoxical: Mitteleuropa has "outlived its usefulness" (p. 223) as a geographic and political concept, yet Maidan and resistance against the Russian invasion brought Ukraine to its classical Central European virtues: "identity, plurality, solidarity. Free, liberal, anti-imperial" (p. 226). This provides an effective and memorable conclusion.

Kakanien revisited – Rückblick und Ausblick is theoretically strong, comparatively rich, and geopolitically urgent and it is, at the same time, generically uneven. Its most significant scholarly contribution lies in examining and redistributing the

conceptual axes on which grand narratives for or against the Habsburg Monarchy rest. Recognizing the specific debates that run beneath the individual contributions requires insider knowledge, however, and the volume itself offers little guidance in this respect. As Florian Krobb has observed in his review for the *Austrian History Yearbook*,² the title's promise of "Rückblick" and "Ausblick" is only partially redeemed: What the volume delivers is closer to a cartography of ongoing debates than a retrospective stocktaking. Methodological levels vary considerably, some contributions present themselves as sketches or essayistic interventions rather than fully elaborated case studies, and the transitions between sections are not always bridged by conceptual framing.

Kakanien revisited – Rückblick und Ausblick makes a precise case for why the Habsburg formation continues to matter as an analytic problem. Its best essays succeed by holding together asymmetry, mediation, multilingualism, aesthetic form, and historical afterlife: keeping domination and literary reading in productive, unresolved tension. The analytical basis for this, as Bobinac's essay formulates it, remains what it has always been for the network: "Die Verflechtung von Kultur, Herrschaft und Differenz" (p. 60)—the entanglement of culture, power, and difference. For scholars of Central Europe, Habsburg studies, literary history, and the afterlives of empire this is a rich and thought-provoking volume.

2 Krobb, Florian. "Book review of *Kakanien revisited – Rückblick und Ausblick: 2000–2024*." *Austrian History Yearbook* 56 (2026): 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237825100477>

