

one” (15) and “the jargon of life during the early 1900s tried to unpack the full potential of humanity before it was cultivated and rationalized” (51). More important, historians may well ask how Lebovic’s findings should make them rethink German political and cultural life in this period. Scholars working on the history of biopolitics in particular may wonder how (and if) this study of *Lebensphilosophie* illuminates their own work on German penal reform, antismoking campaigns, pro- and anti-natalist tax policies, racial hygiene, and other biopolitical projects that shaped the lives and deaths of millions. It is here that more work needs to be done.

CORINNA TREITEL

*Washington University in St. Louis*

**Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914–1918.**

By Alexander Watson.

New York: Basic Books, 2014. Pp. xxiv+788. \$35.00.

The alliance of Germany and Austria-Hungary provided the context for the start of World War I and also shaped its course and outcome more than most historians (especially those writing in the English language) have recognized or acknowledged. Indeed, in its origins and throughout its course, the conflict unfolded as a series of Allied reactions to the actions of the Central European powers. Too often reflecting only the view from the western side of the western front, most anglophone historians have, to varying degrees, misunderstood the war, in particular by failing to understand Austria-Hungary and its relationship with Germany. Alexander Watson’s extensive and impressive treatment of Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I seeks to address this deficiency, advancing an initiative begun by Holger Herwig in *The First World War: Germany and Austria, 1914–1918* (New York, 1997) and continued in a number of more recent works including the reviewer’s own *World War I: The Global Revolution* (Cambridge, 2011).

Watson’s title refers to the wartime encirclement of Germany and Austria-Hungary by the superior forces of the Entente. He sees his primary task as explaining how and why the people of Germany and Austria-Hungary persevered for so long, enduring ever more painful deprivations amid ever dimmer prospects for victory. Central Europeans ultimately faced a similar, even grimmer ordeal in the Second World War, and likewise persevered, but under a Nazi regime that left them no alternative to perseverance. Despite their constitutional flaws and undemocratic aspects, the Central European powers of the First World War differed from the Third Reich in that they were states with a rule of law (*Rechtsstaaten*) and featured civil societies with individual freedoms as much in evidence as in they were in the Western powers; thus, the endurance of the home front cannot be attributed to the same factors in play during the next great war. Watson finds his answer in the leaders and institutions of the civil societies themselves and their role in transforming the conflict into the “people’s war” (2, and *passim*). In multinational Austria-Hungary as well as in Germany, the political parties, trade unions, civic organizations, churches, charities, and countless other organizations carried out an “astounding self-mobilization” (4), marshaling the resources of the two empires for the first modern total war.

While Watson highlights the role of ordinary civilians and the home front throughout, his comprehensive approach includes the political, diplomatic, and military moves of the Central powers, in some cases offering provocative analysis, or at least a fresh look, at familiar topics. For example, at the close of his detailed account of the decision-making processes of Austro-Hungarian leaders in the wake of Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s assassination, Watson concludes, “The tragedy is that [their] assessments . . . were almost

certainly far too gloomy" (22). Watson traces the unique interconnectedness of foreign and domestic policies in an empire in which most of the subjects shared either a national identity with the people of a neighboring nation-state or a supranational pan-Slavic identity that made them pro-Russian, and he correctly observes that this led Habsburg statesmen and diplomats "to think of foreign policy as a means to resolving domestic discontent" (22).

The aging emperor Franz Joseph was widely considered to be a liability for Austria-Hungary by 1914, his eighty-fourth year, and his sixty-sixth on the throne. Many historians have echoed this assessment, but Watson instead stresses Franz Joseph's vital role in providing a focal point of loyalty in changing times. As such, he was underappreciated by Habsburg leaders, civilian as well as military; instead, they exhibited a "hypersensitivity to disloyalty" (308), underestimating the fidelity of so many of their own people. For the generals, disloyalty of certain nationalities served as a convenient explanation for failures such as the collapse of the eastern front in 1916 under the weight of Russia's "Brusilov offensive," deflecting attention from questions of their own competence.

After Franz Joseph's death late in 1916, the decision of his successor, Emperor Karl, to recall the suspended Reichsrat the following spring is lauded by Watson as "a brave attempt to shore up the state and the dynasty's waning legitimacy" (469). But three years of heavy-handedness left the political leaders of the nationalities in no mood to cooperate and left the restored Reichsrat ultimately unresponsive to Karl's proposals for a constitutional restructuring of Austria-Hungary after the war. Meanwhile, in Germany, the promises of postwar political reforms in Emperor Wilhelm II's "Easter Message" of 1917 drew the consternation of the Right but were too vague to satisfy the Left (456).

In both cases—for the restive nationalities of the Dual Monarchy and for the socialists of the Second Reich—the experience of war raised expectations for a better postwar future than the two empires were able to meet. Framing his characterization of the German and Austro-Hungarian effort as a "people's war," Watson highlights the dilemma faced by conservative leaders, most notably the German chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, who had recognized early on that those in power could not fight the war they wanted without unleashing passions they would not be able to control or contain. Propaganda became much more extensive and sophisticated, especially from 1916 onward, and necessarily so, as the enthusiasm shown by the civilian population in the war's first two years began to wane. By 1918, the governments of the Central powers were reaping the whirlwind of the public belligerency they had encouraged earlier and became victims of their own propaganda to drive their peoples on. Even in Austria-Hungary—after the departure of Russia in 1917, the remaining belligerent most desperate for peace—the peace overtures of Emperor Karl, when revealed by the Allies, met with widespread disapproval on the home front. Meanwhile, in Germany, the coalition of liberals, socialists, and Catholics that passed the Reichstag's Peace Resolution of July 1917 were rewarded by having a lost war dumped in their laps in the autumn of 1918. Military leaders driven by a "desire to shirk all blame" (548) implored the politicians to do their duty in getting the best deal possible for the Fatherland. They soon would be accused by the same generals, and by millions of patriotic Germans following their lead, of having stabbed their country in the back.

Thus Watson concludes on a note that also sheds light on the wartime roots of the turmoil of the interwar years and on the myriad links between the end of the First World War and the outbreak of the Second. He has produced a well-written work with the scope and depth to be considered the definitive account of the subject for years to come. There is also much here that will interest a wider audience, which one hopes will not be deterred by the length of the book.

LAWRENCE SONDHAUS

*University of Indianapolis*