

**Jonathan SINGERTON**

*The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy*

Charlottesville, London 2021

ISBN 978-0813948232, 390 pp.

Jonathan Singerton (1991) is a promising British historian of Welsh roots. He graduated from universities in Birmingham and Vienna. He focuses on relations between the Central European Habsburg Monarchy and the United States in the early stages of their development. He embarked on his successful career by the thesis “*A story of Benign Neglect? Relations between America and Austria 1776–1778*”, defense of which took place at the University of Edinburgh. In 2014, it was awarded the Crompton Prize. He elaborated his pieces of information in his dissertation “*Empires on the Edge – The Habsburg Monarchy and the American Revolution 1776–1789*”. This work has won several awards. Since June 2021, Singerton has been an associate professor at the University of Innsbruck. His long-prepared synthesis, the subject of this review, was published last year in a DLC form and was printed in June 2022.

It is undoubtedly a significant work, if only because it is the first synthesis of the American-Habsburg relations between 1763 and 1789 to be composed in such a way. The author has studied archival material from nearly fifty American, Austrian, Belgian, British, Croatian, Czech, Dutch, French,

German, Hungarian, Italian, Slovak, and Swedish archives to summarize: “*meaning of the American Revolution for the Habsburg monarchy and, at the same time, the Habsburg moment in the American Revolution. It is story about how one Europa’s most important dynasties managed the first opening salvo in what would become a succession of revolutionary crises stretching into the mid-nineteenth century*” (p. 3).

The book is divided into 9 chapters, in which the author tried to cover all aspects of mutual relations. In the epilogue he deals with responses to the American Revolution in the Habsburg Monarchy in 1787–1795. One of few things that can be reproached is that he sometimes uses too overly literary style, the work has no overall conclusion, thus it looks more like a collection of studies. However, there is a summary at the end of each chapter which makes the text easier to work with.

In Chapter 1 the author states that the term America fascinated the inhabitants of the Habsburg lands long before the American Revolution. There were different views of the New World in Central Europe, from a symbol of wealth for Habsburg rulers and elites

to an image of America as a primitive and inferior environment. It was Jesuits from Trnava and Graz that especially contributed to understanding realities. From the mid-18th century onwards, the population of the Monarchy reflected the situation in British North America in various ways. Authors such as Taube and Sérionne believed in the inevitability of American independence, while Frisi and Carli disproved ideas of American degeneracy pointing out the progress in the British colonies. British colonists began being seen as tolerant and industrious people.

Another chapter is devoted to the reflection of the American Revolution in the environment of the Viennese court. Ideals brought about by the revolution resulted in excitement at the imperial court. Much to despair of the British ambassador in Vienna, there was a positive attitude towards American victories and only little counterrevolutionary rhetoric. Noblemen such as Seilern, Wilczek and Windischgrätz and bureaucrats such as Birkenstock and Zinzendorf looked at achievements of the American patriots positively. The imperial family was also flooded with information about the American Revolution. Maria Theresa read tailored reports from Franklin, while Joseph tried to meet him in person. His brother Leopold pondered the principles of the revolution. The reach of the American Revolution was unexpectedly large even in a distant place and in circles previously considered anti-revolutionary.

Chapter 3 is devoted to advocates of the Revolution among ordinary in-

habitants in the Monarchy. The author states that about a hundred of them exchanged correspondence with Benjamin Franklin. One of the eagerest supporters of the American issue was doctor and botanist Jan Ingenhousz and his students, such as Joseph Cauffman, who would go to fight for the American thing as a volunteer.

Chapter 4 is devoted to difficulties of the Habsburg neutrality in the War for American Independence in 1775–1783. The War placed many Habsburg subjects in difficult situations. There was the British “*despotism at sea,*” on one side as had been called Joseph II, and courage of American corsairs and Austrian smugglers willing to supply America in that battle on the other. However, complexities of international trade and its legal consequence posed an intractable problem for officials in the Austrian Netherlands and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. The Grand Duke of Tuscany declared strict neutrality in the port of Leghorn, which would change the former trade relations of the local merchants. There were both US supporters and opponents in the Austrian Netherlands, and officials found it difficult to placate both sides. Moreover, Prince Starhemberg, as a leader of the regional government, worsened the situation by stirring up British suspicions of his pro-American prejudice. The author rightly points out there was no easy way to disengage from the War for American Independence as it was fought in the Mediterranean and the North Sea, Europe and North America, the Caribbean, India, etc.

Another chapter deals with the first unsuccessful attempt to establish diplomatic relations between the Habsburg Monarchy and the USA made between 1776 and 1779. The author states that the American diplomatic failure in Vienna resulted from many factors and was not only fault of American envoy Thomas Lee. He was an inexperienced diplomat who had found himself in a strictly ruled ceremonial court in Europe, where he had made some faux pas in his dealings with ministers. The attempt resulted in failure also due to the French Ambassador Breteuil's wrong assumptions as to results of British Envoy Keith's two successful interventions. The Habsburgs could not recognize Lee because they would have risked losing the neutral position created to protect the Habsburg interests. On the other hand, Lee's mission to Vienna demonstrated American patriots' determination to establish their own diplomatic relations within the European system, and Lee's visit to Vienna stimulated further interest in the American revolution.

Chapter 6 deals with years from 1780 to 1783. At that time, the ports of Trieste and Ostend were presented with new extraordinary economic opportunities. The neutrality that had been difficult to preserve in the early stages of the War, literally became a goldmine once new belligerents entered the War. Access to Atlantic markets opened up opportunities for Habsburg goods and sparked debate among the Monarchy's ministers about how to secure them in a long term. However, the efforts of the Habs-

burg monarchs and Prince Kaunitz to mediate a peace agreement by holding a congress in Vienna in 1782 failed due to a lack of regard for American independence, and to the contrary, due to emphasising reconciliation between the belligerents, which had been Kaunitz's main goal.

Chapter 7 describes the development of post-war trade between the Habsburg Monarchy and the USA between 1783 and 1785 conducted mostly between Leghorn, Ostend, and Trieste on one side, and the main American ports from Charleston to Boston on the other. Austrian merchants established several contacts in American economy by sending their representatives, entering partnerships, and dealing with American trades. Although some of these connections only lasted for a short time, the development of this exchange affected broader regional markets. In the Habsburg Monarchy, it had both positive and negative impacts, e.g. hopes for reviving the Hungarian tobacco market collapsed after the reintroduction of cheap American tobacco. Yet, a "new group of traders" emerged, whose success was supported at a state level. However, the interest of the Habsburg monarchy's merchants exceeded Americans'.

Chapter 8 is devoted to the first Habsburg diplomatic representatives in the USA in 1783–1789. Baron Frederick Eugene de Beelen-Bertholff represented the Habsburg Monarchy as a commercial advisor for nearly six years. He systematically went beyond the scope of his assignment and sought new economic opportunities for the

Monarchy. His detailed reports facilitated direct exchanges between Habsburg ministers and merchants with their counterparts in the United States. Due to his effort the Habsburg Monarchy reached the level of other European powers seeking to benefit from advantages of the new American republic.

Chapter 9 is devoted to Thomas Jefferson and the second attempt at recognition between the Habsburg monarchy and the USA in 1785–1786. Jefferson supported entering a commercial treaty with the Monarchy, thus *de facto* recognition of both states. The negotiations successfully developed in the Franklin era changed abruptly after Jefferson's arrival in Vienna. His prejudice, and personal ineptitude final-

ly foiled those negotiations. Then the Habsburg Monarchy gave up to establish any diplomatic relations with the USA. The new revolutionary era introduced a new era of divergence that lasted until the early 19th century.

Singerton's book is one of the most stimulating studies of the recent years. It unquestionably brings together numerous pieces of knowledge and raises several questions that deserve scholars' further attention. Another satisfying thing is that the author does not neglect the Czech environment, where he has already published, e.g. an annotated edition of two letters concerning activities of Czech merchant Joseph Donath and his engagement in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup>

*Michal Wanner*

---

<sup>1</sup> J. SINGERTON, Science, Revolution, and Monarchy in Two Letters of Joseph Donath to František Antonín Steinský, in: *Opera Historica, Časopis pro dějiny raného novověku / Journal of Early Modern History*, 22, 1, 2021, pp. 145–165.