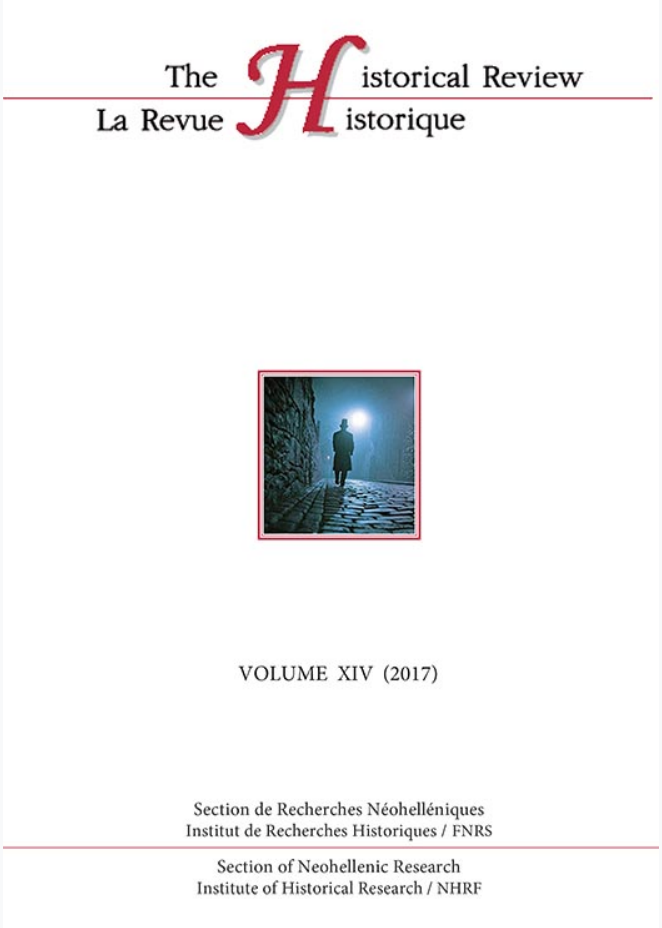
ePublishing

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 14 (2017)




# Review of: Volker Prott, THE POLITICS OF SELF-DETERMINATION: REMAKING TERRITORIES AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN EUROPE, 1917-1923, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016

*Alexandra Patrikiou*

doi: 10.12681/hr.16308

Copyright © 2018, Alexandra Patrikiou

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0.

**To cite this article:**

Patrikiou, A. (2018). Review of: Volker Prott, THE POLITICS OF SELF-DETERMINATION: REMAKING TERRITORIES AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN EUROPE, 1917-1923, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, *14*, 257–259. https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.16308

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 26/01/2026 03:27:08

Volker Prott,
*THE POLITICS OF SELF-DETERMINATION: REMAKING TERRITORIES AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN EUROPE, 1917-1923,*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 265 pages.

Volker Prott, a historian at the University of Melbourne, investigates what may seem as an oxymoron at first glance: the international dimensions of nationalist conflicts. Through two case studies – quite different in nature – of nationalist conflict, the Greek-Turkish War of 1919-1922 and the Franco-German dispute over Alsace-Lorraine, which he examines as "acute episodes of ethnic violence" (1), he basically explores international relations in this early interwar period and what the Paris system meant in practice. In addition, he delves into how these relations were influenced by local realities and how these realities affected these relations.

He considers the Paris system as a "not irreversibly flawed" peace order that emerged between 1917 and 1923 but as a nexus of international values, national interests and local realities (5). In a way, the book offers an interpretational viewpoint of the early interwar period. Since it considers the Paris peace settlement as a starting point, it is obvious that interpretations, such as "the years between 1917 and 1923 saw the emergence of an international system that fundamentally reorganized territories, national identities, and political rhetoric" (3) will appear.[1] While indeed these years saw the emergence of an international system that fundamentally reorganised territories and definitely shaped political rhetoric, one may wonder about the ways it affected national identities. There is no denying the reciprocal relation between national identity and international system, but is national identity not, first and foremost, a social phenomenon? Policies promoting national ideals were definitely influenced by the international scene, but identity requires another perspective. How can one really comprehend grassroots perceptions and how the peace settlement influenced different social groups if one's starting point has almost nothing to do with this grassroots level? How can we begin to understand the roots of any phenomenon, much less of a worldwide phenomenon, such as nationalism, the shaping of national identities through territorial definitions to be exact, by beginning from the upper level?

Prott realised this problem and, in order to solve it, embarks on an ambitious

[1] The examples include "peace planning from below" (p. 33).

plan of combining multiple levels and different regions. Nevertheless, this multi-levelled and comparative approach based on foreign archives, as much as it is informative, seems quite limited for an understanding of local ethnic violence. Local realities, let alone social conflicts, are rarely, if ever, the sole result of diplomatic endeavours. However, what I find intriguing is the exploration of mid-level players, that is the academic experts used by the foreign ministries to resolve problems and figure out ways to implement Wilsonian ideals, that is, to look for a way to match territorial and ethnically ideal borders or otherwise to find a compromise between the two. Prott believes that these experts, to whom he devotes the first chapter of his book (21-53), worked as intermediaries between high-end politicians and local populations so as to end war as a means to change political borders or resolve international conflicts (22).

Prott has a noble and a much-needed cause: to give international relations studies a more social character. In an era when the historical perspective often extends to the individual micro-level, he attempts to combine the "great Western" power perspective with grassroots levels, which tend to differentiate quite a lot the closer one gets. The author attempts to write a kind of social international relations study. However, "social" without the voice of the historical subject, without a cultural dimension, is difficult to qualify as a social perspective.[2] Nevertheless, Prott is absolutely right when he underlines that local realities of nationalistic upsurge could not succumb to high-end political decisions (207) and that local practice was indeed implemented in the end (209). Putting it simply, he practically highlights the reciprocal nature of the relationship between politicians and society.

The book is divided into two major – practically equal – parts: planning the post-First World War order and implementing it. That way, the author does indeed try to devote the same amount of attention to both perspectives. However, the fact that the starting point is the international power perspective diminishes the importance and/or the role of the micro-level, despite the honest effort to present it as equally important. The examination of the complicated and often contradictory ways international decisions were made, along with the local reactions to these decisions, offers a renewed perspective on the period.

Through the choice of the specific case studies, one may observe the current historiographical tendency for a transnational perspective that examines two case studies, one in the centre of Europe and one on its fringes. Chapters 2 and 5 focus on the case of the Franco-German border region of Alsace-Lorraine. Prott brings to light the divergent opinions of experts regarding this much-debated issue that had led to two major wars (68-80). He also explores the role of the symbolic nature of the national claim for Alsace-Lorraine and how the end result suppressed the ambiguous and contradictory identities of the local population (178).

As for the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-22 (chapters 3 and 6), Prott employs the somewhat outdated concept

[2] Patrick Joyce, "What is Social in Social History?", *Past and Present* 206 (2010), pp. 213-248.

of philhellenism (and Turkophobia) to interpret the attitude of France and, especially, Britain regarding their stance towards the Ottoman Empire (85-88, 105, 108). However, the detailed descriptions of the experts' recommendations, I believe, are one of the biggest assets of the book. On the one hand, they offer new information as to how each decision was made. For example, academic experts explicitly voiced their doubts regarding the landing of Greek troops in Smyrna, but they were largely ignored by the politicians (110). Prott, however, minimises the importance of the reality that the Greek landing in Smyrna would put immense pressure on the emergent Kemalist state apparatus. On the other hand, these discussions are proof of how political decisions are made: they were the result of a potentially time-consuming process, conduced amid confusion and with multiple setbacks, compromises and contradictory stances (for example, pp. 93-95). As a result, the author distinguishes between the three Great Powers and characterises each accordingly, even though the end result may not appear so different: there is the "hesitant" British, "skeptic" Americans and "half-hearted" French (90-98). In the end, none gave full support to the idea of establishing a Greek zone around Smyrna. And yet that's what happened. Describing local realities in the case of Greek-Turkish War, the book offers valuable information as to the variety of ethnically violent episodes (209).

On the whole, Prott intends to contribute to the building of a "more refined picture of international European history in the early twentieth century" (235), a goal achieved in the sense that he transcends classical dichotomies, such as East and West, and liberalism and authoritarianism. He successfully surpasses Manichean, black-and-white interpretations, while revealing a series of various shades of grey when he pinpoints, for example, the coexistence of liberal and authoritarian policies (236). His effort to highlight the complicated and contradictory process of peace planning before the end of the First World War (52) is also important, since the preparations for the postwar period began in the first days of the war. For the First World War, the all-encompassing concept that was believed would bring world peace is national self-determination (53). All in all, Prott's goals to pinpoint how the impact of local violence and local nationalist policies shaped international politics and to highlight the fragility of the Paris peace order are indeed achieved through this comparative and transnational perspective. Despite any disagreements one might have, the book offers a contemporary viewpoint on international relations, focusing more on their multifaceted character than on their uniformity, and reveals the multiplicity of national voices, even within strongly homogenising international scenes. The book's importance surely lies in the emphasis given to the reciprocity of high-end politics and local realities.

Alexandra Patrikiou

*Panteion University, Athens*
*Jewish Museum of Greece*