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# The dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: border making and its consequences

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## ABSTRACT

This special issue addresses practices of border-making and their consequences on the territory of the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. As the reality did not correspond to the peaceful Europe articulated in the Paris Treaties, a multitude of (un)foreseen complications followed the drawing of borders and states. Articles include new case studies on the creation, centralization or peripheralization of border regions, such as Subcarpathian Rus, Vojvodina, Banat and the Carpathian Mountains, on border zones such as the Czechoslovakian harbour in Germany, and on cross-border activities. The special issue shows how disputes over national identities and ethnic minorities, as well as other factors such as the economic consequences of the new state borders, appeared on the interwar political agenda and coloured the lives of borderland inhabitants. Adopting a bottom-up approach, the contributions demonstrate the agency of borderlands and their people in the establishment, functioning, disorganization or ultimate breakdown of some of the newly created interwar nation-states.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Major border changes (triggered by the demise of the Cold War set-up following the collapse of communism, the Yugoslav wars and the enlargement project of the European Union), as well as the recent strengthening of state borders as a response to asylum seekers and the COVID-19 pandemic, have inspired contemporary historians to re-address or shift their lens of analysis to the physical demarcation lines between states. Space, which was functioning in the background of most historical analyses, has begun to come to the foreground. It is no longer assumed to be independent of humans, with historical events manifesting themselves within the closed box of the nation-state, but is perceived as ‘a product of human agency and perception, as both the medium and presupposition for sociability and historicity’.<sup>1</sup> An understanding of space as a social, political and cultural product invites us to approach nation-states as flexible and historically changing phenomena. What then becomes visible is that space is transient, in the sense that it is ‘created through economic, social, cultural or political movements and interactions’, and is ‘meaningful for historical actors only in relation to a specific set of perceptions, interests and strategies, and in a given temporal context’.<sup>2</sup>

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The Association for Borderlands Studies, the world's largest organization for scholars analysing the historical and contemporary dynamics of border creation, border management and border shifting, as well as the consequences of these practices for the societies concerned, held its Second World Conference in Vienna and Budapest in July 2018. The participants sought to gain a deeper insight into the similarities and differences in the ways in which borders were and are made around the world, as well as the forms and functions borders fulfil over time. The conference had a strong focus on history, as the post-imperial experience of Europe raises numerous questions that relate to borders, identities and citizenship and, ultimately, migration. A special series of 11 conference sessions focused specifically on the consequences of the dissolution of the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire in the aftermath of the First World War, one of the single most comprehensive changes in the European state system, for old and/or newly created borderlands.<sup>3</sup> This special issue contains a selection of the papers presented at the conference, all of which deal with different and often unknown aspects of border-making and its consequences in the space formerly composed of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

With the demise of three multinational empires at the end of the First World War (Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman), as well as the containment of the German Empire, nationalist forces all over Europe claimed the right to a territory for what they considered to be their own people. The decision-makers in Paris were guided by their visions of a just Europe and adhered to the vague and contentious principle of self-determination while determining the layout of a European continent with changed state borders.<sup>4</sup> Self-determination arose as a theoretical concept in the texts of Lenin and became the motor for political action in the steppe rebellion of 1916. Soon after the February Revolution, the Soviet started to speak of self-determination and peace. Peace was to bring an end to the oppression of people hitherto considered at the margins of society by granting them their own sovereignty. Imperial paternalism needed to be exchanged for national self-determination.<sup>5</sup> The Western Allies despised the German expansionism presented in the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty in March 1918 and responded by making the dissolution of imperial regimes and the self-determination of people in Central and Eastern Europe their war aims.<sup>6</sup>

However, the idea of national self-determination could not be translated into homogeneous entities; uncontested nation-states as identities were multifold and not graspable within clear territorial lines of demarcation. The peace treaties resulting from the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 caused a major redrawing of the map of Europe. Two treaties recognized the independent status of newly emerged nation-states on the territory of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye divided the Austrian part of the Dual Monarchy between the interwar Austrian state, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The Treaty of Trianon divided the Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy between the interwar Hungarian state, Romania, Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Austria and the Free State of Fiume (today Rijeka), which emerged in 1921, operated under the auspices of the League of Nations and was annexed to Italy in 1924.

The seven articles included in this special issue focus on the policies adopted by national and local authorities with regard to borderlands, as well as the way in which state

policies were approved, reinforced or refuted by borderland inhabitants. They address practices of border-making and their consequences in the interwar nation-states of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Poland and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.<sup>7</sup> They include case studies on the creation, centralization or peripheralization of border regions, such as Subcarpathian Rus,<sup>8</sup> Vojvodina, Banat and the Carpathian Mountains, on border zones such as the Czechoslovakian harbour in Germany, and on cross-border activities. The articles contribute to historical scholarship by offering new insights in three areas: border-making in interwar Europe; phantom borders; and belonging.

Several factors, such as geopolitical concerns, economic reasons, the development of supranational protection of minority rights and the internationalization of rivers, shaped the contours of Europe's interwar state borders. Historians have convincingly shown how geopolitical concerns about safety and order on the continent were behind the drawing of state borders in borderlands such as Upper Silesia, Eupen-Malmedy and Schleswig.<sup>9</sup> The way in which interwar state border lines could be drawn for economic reasons is equally well covered in historical literature, an example being the Polish Corridor giving the newly independent Polish state access to the Baltic Sea.<sup>10</sup> Three articles in this special issue break new ground by showing the economic consequences of new state borders. Both Stanislav Holubec and Gábor Egry demonstrate that the establishment of the Romanian-Czechoslovak state border line mainly along the Tisza River and mostly respecting the ethnic differences as declared in the last Habsburg census of 1910 caused local trade networks to be cut and increased local dependency on resources flowing in from Prague and Bucharest. The Hungarian-Czechoslovak state border line in Subcarpathian Rus decided upon by the Entente Powers in 1919, on the other hand, had to facilitate transportation from and to interwar Czechoslovakia and did not take into account the allegiances of the local population, leaving approximately 100,000 Hungarian speakers in Subcarpathian Rus. Stanislav Holubec compares the consequences of border-making for local inhabitants in Subcarpathian Rus, pointing in particular to the growth of a local Hungarian, but not Romanian, national party refuting Czechoslovak state sovereignty. With his article on trade across Hungary's state border lines, Peter Bencsik, on the other hand, places himself in a new current of research focusing on economic possibilities in interwar Hungary. Following on from research showing how the use of modern technologies and the opening of the economy to larger international markets outweighed the fact that Hungarians were left without most of the raw resources they had had access to in Dualist Hungary,<sup>11</sup> the author analyses how those who owned land on two sides of the newly established state borders benefitted from legal and illegal cross-border trade. Based on historical newspaper research, he unravels how poverty and food shortages in the early 1920s triggered the emergence of a new social practice, namely cross-border contraband activities.

The development and functioning of a supranational framework for the protection of rights of national minorities in the newly established nation-states of Central and Eastern Europe is one of the most well researched topics in contemporary historiography,<sup>12</sup> and there are numerous studies on schools in borderlands.<sup>13</sup> At a time of growing state involvement in the lives of individuals inhabiting the European continent, with nation-state representatives unambiguously defining their incentives in their measures for future citizens, borderland schools often became essential sites of interwar political struggle

where nationalists clashed over the meaning of childhood. The article by Dragica Koljanin, Biljana Šimunović-Bešlin and Paulina Čović focuses on multi-ethnic Vojvodina, a border region within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (after 1929 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia). Initially, a pluralistic understanding of Yugoslav nationhood legitimizing the commonalities among its inhabitants through the inclusion of political, regional or religious particularities was pursued. Because the state ideology of Yugoslavism was developed at a moment in time when identities such as being Serbian, Slovenian or Croatian were still contingent and dynamic, it could eventually have generated a hybrid but vernacular Yugoslav identity. In the process, however, the endeavour failed because of the centralization and politicization of Yugoslav nationhood undertaken by Belgrade authorities during the authoritarian rule that characterized the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.<sup>14</sup> State authorities increasingly doubted whether their citizens were willing enough to place their regional identities within the larger idea of Yugoslav ideology. The dictatorship in Yugoslavia preferred to execute its power as prohibition, domination and repression.<sup>15</sup> The authors use school textbooks to explore how national education was practised before and during the dictatorship, and conclude that borderland children were exposed to increasingly non-negotiable Yugoslavian (mostly interpreted as Serbian) content in history, geography and language classes. The findings need to be read in tandem with the latest insights on minority education for German-speaking *Donauschwaben*. The latter learned that by framing themselves as a national minority, and not merely a cultural one, their cultural and linguistic needs could be met. As a national minority, they were able to attract the attention of a powerful transnational actor, Germany, and have their concerns addressed by the League of Nations in Geneva. This led to a change in the enrolment policy for German-speaking minority schools, where name analysis (i.e. state officials deciding which child was entitled to education in a minority school based on the names of his/her ancestors) was exchanged for a procedure based on what a parent declared their child's mother tongue to be.<sup>16</sup>

The creation of a patchwork of small nation-states went hand in hand with an internationalization of rivers.<sup>17</sup> Sarah Lemmen presents the fascinating case of the Czechoslovak right of access to the sea, an illustrative new example of the problem of combining the ideology of self-determination with the need for functional economic structures in newly established states. While describing the 10 years of negotiations over the inclusion of a clause concerning a Czechoslovak rental property at a German port in the Treaty of Versailles and the operation of the Czechoslovak Free Zone in Hamburg, Lemmen meticulously unravels different understandings of a sovereign territory at the time. Whereas the Czechoslovak authorities started out claiming that their sovereignty rights needed to entail a transfer of territory, their German counterparts asserted that a lease of a port zone did not mean that Germany had to give up its sovereign rights over the zone. Common ground was found in the late 1920s, when good bilateral economic relations were given priority, replacing the previous bombastic nationalist rhetoric. Czechoslovakian authorities could lease zones in the harbour of Hamburg and offer customs controls for their ships in Prague instead of in Hamburg. This partial transfer of sovereign rights was a solution that preserved the interwar political order of nation-states executing control over their territory.

A second research field to which articles included in this special issue contribute is phantom borders. Borderlands have already been referred to as palimpsests: manuscripts

‘on which two or more successive texts have been written, each one being erased to make room for the next’.<sup>18</sup> Whereas erasure suggests a picture of the past as a definitive break, a group of mainly German historians has preferred to understand the history of borderlands as an activity of layering well captured by the concept of phantom borders. Phantom borders are ‘earlier, most commonly political borders or territorial structures that, after they were dissolved, continued to structure the space’.<sup>19</sup> The concept of phantom borders allows us to look at how, after a switch of state sovereignty, certain structures, discourses or practices from the past can reappear or be reassembled or lost through human activities. The search for what remains in new and changing situational contexts concentrates on the way in which historical players gave meaning to a new geographic-political order. Borders are thus approached as complex historically contingent processes, and borderlands as places where different ideas about belonging are negotiated and renegotiated whilst making use of, adapting or ignoring past structures, discourses and practices depending on the situational context.<sup>20</sup> Scholars have already demonstrated, for example, that the Habsburg administration supported the strengthening of various nationalisms by installing a mandatory system of classification into strictly defined national groups along linguistic and/or ethnic lines.<sup>21</sup> Most of the scholarship, however, has focused on the Western part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, with little attention being paid to the different ethnic policy agenda of the Eastern part. Three articles included in this special issue deepen our understanding of the influence of the past within the interwar lands formerly belonging to Dualist Hungary.

Gábor Egry compares the interwar regions of Maramureş and the Banat. Both regions were situated at the edge of the Hungarian part of the Dual Monarchy and saw state border lines being drawn across their lands in the aftermath of the First World War, with parts of both being included in Romania. The author argues that the peripheralization and political regionalism which developed in both borderlands during the interwar years, but according to different patterns, had much to do with legacies of the past. The practice of differentiated rule cast a lasting shadow on re(b)ordering practices in Romanian Maramureş. Differentiated rule meant that representatives of Dualist Hungary chose to cooperate closely with regional elites, thereby guaranteeing that power within the borderlands would remain largely executed in ways local inhabitants were used to, while at the same time offering elite members from the borderlands access to power in Budapest. In this way, the traditional elite managed to preserve its position of power within the borderlands. In the interwar Romanian part of the Banat, on the other hand, the political battle against Hungarians in the early twentieth century inspired borderland political activists to reject an alliance with a political party in Bucharest and to contest Romanian nationalism instead.

Ondrej Ficeri zooms in on the city known as Kassa when it belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Košice when it joined Czechoslovakia at the state border with Hungary in the aftermath of the First World War. Through an analysis of the position of the city in interwar discourses and practices, Ondrej Ficeri assesses the influence of the city’s switch in state sovereignty on the imagined spatial universe of its inhabitants. He concludes that while Czechoslovak authorities attempted to determine the sentiment of local inhabitants, they failed to clarify matters as they underestimated the symbolic legacy of the city for Hungarians, as well as the persistence of cultural and economic ties local inhabitants had developed during imperial times. Peter Bencsik further explains how the

drawing of interwar state borders in Central and Eastern Europe gave rise to new practices that equipped inhabitants with a suitable response to the controlled economies installed during the Second World War. On the other hand, the newly established practice of cross-border smuggling in interwar Hungary created a phantom border within occupied Hungary and the Hungarian People's Republic.

As well as offering new insights into historical knowledge about border-making in interwar Europe and phantom borders, this special issue contributes to scholarship on borderland inhabitants' feelings of belonging. Influenced by the cultural shift, historians have come to understand national appropriation as a construction – that is as an experience of the social world as differentiated between 'us' and 'them' – resulting in a departure from primordialist interpretations that claim identifications as innate characteristics.<sup>22</sup> Although it is the ambition of nation-states to hold a strong position in policy-making in borderlands, historical players made their own use of such policies. The authors included in this special issue were inspired by four different approaches in their analyses of borderlanders' feelings of belonging: *Alltagsgeschichte* (or everyday life history); national indifference; multiple loyalties; and regionalism.

The method of everyday life history serves to unravel how political ideas interact in the lives of non-hegemonic inhabitants.<sup>23</sup> Aiming to shed light on the way in which local people appropriated, changed or refuted such ideas in their daily life practices, this literature avoids using a top-down approach and instead explores microstudies from a bottom-up perspective. Practices, i.e. repetitions in everyday routines, articulate the relationship between individuals and their environment and provide experiences with one or more means of appropriation. In his article about contraband activities, Peter Bencsik sketches the profile of an ordinary peasant whose land ended up on two sides of the new state border and who was unable to understand why all of a sudden he needed papers to cross. He describes how legislation was developed that named and penalized the phenomenon, as well as how local sheriffs implemented these laws differently depending on their background and personalities. Notwithstanding legislation, contraband activities became a permanent phenomenon, which, in better economic times, shifted to the smuggling of luxury goods.

While investigating how inhabitants with different national and local allegiances lived in the vicinity of and cooperated with one another, historians have discovered inhabitants who at times happened to have distanced themselves from nationalization.<sup>24</sup> In an attempt to conduct historical research on those who would have been deaf to the appeals of nationalism, Tara Zahra proposes the concept of national indifference, pointing to 'how and why people allied themselves politically, culturally and socially from the ground up'.<sup>25</sup>

In his article, Ondrej Ficeri places the multifold and changing allegiances of city dwellers in Košice/Kassa centre stage. Although the concept of national indifference has been frequently applied to borderlands with a history in the Austrian part of the Dual Monarchy, the author argues, not enough attention has been paid to the different characteristics of the Hungarian part, where the idea of a Hungarian political nation resulted in Magyarization policies. In Košice/Kassa, city dwellers who did not identify themselves in national terms before the idea of a Hungarian political nation was promoted among them were invited to embrace the idea by joining in as an independent ethnic group called *Slovjaks*, a term distinguishing them from Slovak nationalists who



increasingly considered themselves opposed to Hungarian nationalism. Despite that mobilization, the author found that city dwellers formed alliances outside imagined national communities. Moreover, their alliances continued to be nationally indifferent throughout the interwar years. Ficeri finds proof in the fact that while 60% of the population identified as Czechoslovaks in national censuses, a majority of inhabitants voted for a political party striving for autonomy and later, ideally, incorporation within Hungary.

Patrice M. Dabrowski provides an investigation into the way in which Polish authorities aimed to secure the interwar Polish long southern border composed of the Carpathian Mountains, which, prior to the First World War, had been an internal porous Habsburg frontier separating the province of Galicia from Dualist Hungary. Not all highlanders had identified themselves in national terms prior to Poland's independence in 1918. While the state had its hands full fighting over and securing state borders early on, the policy agenda of the 1930s opened up to initiatives reaching out to the highlanders. Dabrowski meticulously unravels how state officials attempted to reinforce the state border by influencing the feelings of belonging of the nationally indifferent local inhabitants.

Compared to the concept of national indifference, the concept of multiple loyalties offers more flexibility for analysing how people moved back and forth (possibly multiple times) in relation to their notions about their rights and duties towards their nation-state. Loyalties are by definition 'partial, mediated and contingent'.<sup>26</sup> Loyalties are also relational; only when orders articulated by rulers are followed by the ruled do they have consequences, and only when these orders are interpreted correctly will they generate the intended effect. When looking at the matter in a more complex way, the motives of rulers and ruled to engage are of relevance as well.<sup>27</sup> Stanislav Holubec centralizes this aspect in his contribution on the rulers and ruled in Subcarpathian Rus after the region's incorporation into the interwar Czechoslovak state. Using the concept of multiple loyalties allows the author to question the still widely prevalent notion in historiography that interwar Czechoslovakia was a rare treasure of democracy.<sup>28</sup> Obsessed with territorial expansion, Czechoslovak authorities were eager to include a region where they expected a majority of the multi-ethnic population to be and remain disloyal. Presenting themselves as saviours liberating locals from centuries-long oriental oppression, Czechoslovakian authorities left no stone unturned in implementing semi-colonial practices of domination and steadily reducing the decision-making power of local inhabitants. Analysing data from interwar censuses and elections, Holubec deciphered how local inhabitants reacted to state policies. He discovered that inhabitants displayed both loyal and disloyal attitudes towards Czechoslovak authorities. In the mid-1920s, Czechoslovak political parties attracted one third of voters, mostly Rusyns and to a lesser extent Hungarian and Jewish locals. More Hungarian borderland inhabitants, however, articulated their support for Hungarian nationalist parties, and more Rusyns were keen to put their hopes on communism, thereby idealizing incorporation into Bolshevik Russia, an independent future for a Ukrainian state, or more autonomy within interwar Czechoslovakia. Surprisingly, communists gained more than 30% of the votes in the free elections, an achievement unparalleled elsewhere in interwar Europe.

An increased use of the bottom-up approach has also enhanced research on the relationship between nationalism and regionalism. As both are inherently modern,



contrary to popular belief, they are not competing or mutually exclusive concepts.<sup>29</sup> In the interwar period, for example, authorities throughout Europe saw regionalism as a force capable of buttressing their national policies.<sup>30</sup> This was especially true in borderlands where national sovereignty had changed. In such cases, officials were well aware that regionalism, because it elicited a cognitive affinity of belonging in inhabitants, garnered more support than nations, which were imagined as larger communities.<sup>31</sup>

In this special issue, Patrice M. Dabrowski investigates how Polish state officials tried to establish regionalism among different Carpathian groups. These officials developed activities to strengthen local folklore traditions as well as create a brotherhood between inhabitants of the Carpathian Mountains, so as to prevent East Carpathian highlanders from developing a Ukrainian national consciousness, in the hopes that all highlanders would identify with and take up arms for the Polish state. One group of Carpathian highlanders, the West Carpathian *Górale*, made painfully clear how the endeavour to achieve Marshal Józef Piłsudski's ideal of a civic statehood (without ethnolinguistic nationalism) through regionalism was more dictated from Warsaw and did not have a lasting influence on locals' feelings of belonging. During the Second World War, some of those who had enthusiastically participated in the interwar folklore festivals initiated by Warsaw state officials proved equally eager to receive preferential treatment by representatives of the Nazi regime. Gábor Egry's article, on the other hand, compares how Romanian state representatives' strategy of delegating tasks to local elites in two interwar Romanian border regions yielded different results. Whereas locals in Maramureş agreed to continue their cooperation with central authorities along the imperial practice of differentiated rule, elite members in the Banat were more likely to interpret regionalism as incompatible with Romanian nationalism.

Taken together, the articles show how the borderlands upon which the Paris Treaties thrust their imagined idea of a peaceful Europe, but which they failed to support by means of an international relief plan, became the places where Europe's interwar order was especially challenged. At the moment at which they were signed, it was already known that the Paris Treaties were incapable of establishing a stable peace order on the European continent.<sup>32</sup> Even Woodrow Wilson, when he left Paris, told his wife: 'Well, it is finished, and as no one is satisfied, it makes me hope we have made a just peace.'<sup>33</sup> As reality did not correspond to the ideals of nationalist movements, a multitude of (un)foreseen complications followed the drawing of borders and states. The articles in this special issue show how disputes over national identities and ethnic minorities, as well as other factors such as the economic consequences of the new state borders, appeared on the political agenda and coloured the lives of borderland inhabitants.<sup>34</sup> By adopting a bottom-up approach, moreover, the articles demonstrate the agency of borderlands and their people in the establishment, functioning, disorganization or ultimate breakdown of some of the newly created interwar nation-states.

## Notes

1. Mishkova and Trencsényi, "Introduction," 2.
2. Müller and Torp, "Conceptualising," 613.
3. See the Association for Borderlands Studies' Second World Conference website.
4. Macmillan, *Paris 1919*, 221.

5. Leonhard, *Frieden*, 96–104.
6. Gerwarth, *Vanquished*, 12.
7. Grote and Obermair (eds.), *A Land on the Threshold*; Promitzer, “A Bleeding Wound.”
8. The contemporary Zakarpacie province in Ukraine has previously been referred to as Subcarpathia, Carpathian Ruthenia and Carpathian Rus’ (Magocsi, *With their Backs to the Mountains*).
9. Karch, *Nation and Loyalty*; O’Connell, *The Annexation of Eupen-Malmedy*; Frandsen, “Schleswig,” 79–97.
10. Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe*, 234.
11. Tomka, “The Economic Consequences.”
12. Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others*.
13. Eser, ‘*Volk, Staat, Gott!*’; Leiserowitz, “Childhood”; Venken, *Peripheries at the Centre*.
14. Troch, *Nationalism and Yugoslavia*, 94 and 223.
15. Stefanov, *Erfindung*, 454.
16. Mezger, *Forging Germans*, 29–68.
17. Jakubec, *Eisenbahn und Elbeschiffahrt*.
18. Price, *Dry Place*, 6.
19. von Hirschhausen et al., “Phantomgrenzen,” 18.
20. Esch and von Hirschhausen, “Wahrnehmen,” 13.
21. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*; King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans*; Stergar and Scheer, “Ethnic Boxes.”
22. Polak-Springer, *Recovered Territory*, 15.
23. Lüdtkke, *History of Everyday Life*.
24. Kamusella, “Upper Silesia in Modern Central Europe.”
25. Zahra, “Imagined Non-Communities,” 118.
26. Schulze, “Loyalität,” 10.
27. Karch, *Nation and Loyalty*, 14.
28. Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle*, 2009.
29. Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials*.
30. Ther, “Zwischenräume,” XVI.
31. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
32. See Conze, *Illusion*; Leonhard, *Frieden*.
33. Berg, *Woodrow Wilson*, 182.
34. Novikov, *Shades of a Nation*; Matzer, “Be(com)ing ‘German.’”

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