

Wank, Solomon. *In the Twilight of Empire: Count Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal (1854–1912): Imperial Habsburg Patriot and Statesman. Volume I: The Making of an Imperial Habsburg Patriot and Statesman.* Vienna: Böhlau, 2009. Pp. 292, illus.

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In view of the relative historiographical neglect of the important Austro-Hungarian statesman, diplomat, and Foreign Minister (1906–1912), Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal, this full blown political biography, of which the book under review is the first of two volumes, is very welcome indeed. A final verdict remains to be made, of course, but this first volume already fulfills most of my expectations for Solomon Wank's long maturing work on Aehrenthal. It is not only a very well written and thoroughly researched political biography, but it is also an important work in the wider field of the political history of the last decades of the Habsburg monarchy.

Professor Wank began his studies of Aehrenthal back in the late 1950s when he wrote his dissertation on "Aehrenthal and the Policy of Action, 1906–08" (Columbia University, 1961), and he has since published a steady flow of articles on different facets of Aehrenthal's life and especially on his diplomatic career and his politics. This background to the present biography means that it has been written on the basis of a profound knowledge of the sources' connection to Aehrenthal. It also assures that the main arguments of this book has been thought through and worked out in a way that is seldom possible in scholarly works today. Nevertheless, the long maturation process and the fact that the work has partly been written several decades ago, also marks the book in other ways. For instance, the focal points of the argument are relatively predictable for someone who knows the field and Professor Wank's previous works. Furthermore, at certain points, whole sections of text have been lifted from earlier articles and incorporated into the book. A consequence is the proliferation of cross-references in the footnotes. Many direct the reader to another chapter of the book, and often refer to the not yet published second volume, for the wider context or background, or for even the sources to a passage just read. In this respect, the book feels as though it has not quite been welded into an integrated entity. I suppose the long gestation period is also behind the fact that Professor Wank sometimes refers to scholarly books that he quotes and that are twenty or thirty years old as "recent."

The fact that the building blocks of this work are sometimes clearly discernible in the book does not, however, lessen the impact of what has been achieved by drawing together the many different snapshots of Aehrenthal produced by Professor Wank over the years. The result is a full and well-rounded picture of the man and his political career up to 1906 (in this first volume). But even more important is how the different elements of Professor Wank's analysis of Aehrenthal are here feeding one another, together generating a new understanding of the actions and thinking of the man, as well as of the events he was involved in. One of the few mainly new parts of the work, on Aehrenthal's family background and the formation of his personality and mentalité (Chapters 1 and 2 and parts of 3), is crucial to creating this effect; in this part of the book, the author creates the crucible in which the different elements of Aehrenthal can coalesce and as such contributes to the book a sense of integrity as an original work. I expect this sense of integrity will be further augmented by the appearance of the second volume.

However, I have an ambivalent feeling with regard to this early part of the book. It clearly achieves its aim, and in many ways it is strongly akin to work I have done myself on members of the Austrian

elite (see Fredrik Lindström, *Empire and Identity: Biographies of the Austrian State Problem in the Late Habsburg Empire*, West Lafayette, IN, 2008). But at the same time, I am doubtful about some of the psychologizing observations made in this part of the book. For example, I think the author goes a bit too far in the way he analyzes the relationship between Aehrenthal and his family, and his father, and the way this is transferred to the relationship between Aehrenthal and the “father figure” Emperor Francis Josef. I also find a bit doubtful propositions such as that Aehrenthal used the language of illness to talk about the problems of the Habsburg monarchy because he was ill himself (Aehrenthal died of leukemia in 1912 while in office), and that his use of such language should be understood as an effect of his identification with the monarchy. Organicist language when talking about nations, states, and societies was, after all, part of the discourse of the time. I will not delve into these marginal objections of mine any further, because I find Professor Wank’s overall description of Aehrenthal’s deep identification with the monarchy and his way of turning his diplomatic career into a personalized “holy mission” to save the monarchy and give it a new lease on life very apt. And very familiar, I might add. My main objection here—and it may well be a bit too much to ask of a groundbreaking biography in the field—is that Professor Wank should, perhaps, have considered the fact that this type of identification may have been fairly common among certain parts of the political elite in Austria.

One measure of the success of a historical work of a synthesizing kind, which a biography might be said to be, is the degree to which it makes elements that in previous interpretations have been sitting awkwardly, or have been difficult to account for, seem perfectly natural, or at least understandable. I had this feeling at many points in the present book. A very important basis for Wank’s argument is the fundamental link he posits between the internal/domestic and external/diplomatic relations in Aehrenthal’s thinking and policies. Although this is an old insight of Professor Wank’s, it is only in the comprehensive setting of the whole political biography that it achieves its full effect. Here emerges a unity—or at least very important interlinkages—in as diverse preoccupations of Aehrenthal’s as his intense engagement in domestic Austrian (Cisleithanian) politics in the late 1890s, his equally intense conflicts with Foreign Minister Goluchowski over the role of the common Foreign Minister as a form of Imperial Chancellor, his ideas about the importance of following through on the Habsburg Empire’s historical expansion in the Balkans, his long-standing preoccupation with the crucial role of the relationship between Austria-Hungary and Russia, and many other instances of his thinking and actions.

One good example is Aehrenthal’s exchange of letters with Foreign Minister Goluchowski, letters written in the aftermath of the first Russian revolution, when Aehrenthal was ambassador to Russia. These letters have always struck me as completely outlandish both in their language and in their content, especially when considering that they are official letters written by an Imperial Austro-Hungarian diplomat to his superior back in Vienna. Professor Wank wrote about these letters in an article in 1975 (“Varieties of Political Despair: Three Exchanges between Aehrenthal and Goluchowski, 1898–1906,” in *Intellectual and Social Developments in the Habsburg Empire from Maria Theresia to World War I*, ed. Stanley Winters & Joseph Held, 203–39 [New York, 1975]), and this section in the book draws heavily on that article. Nevertheless, in the context of the book, these letters now seem perfectly understandable to me, as a quite natural part of Aehrenthal’s development, in a way that the article, with its narrower context, did not even come close to. There are other similar instances, and this for me is a measure of the success of this biography.

When writing biographically, there is always the risk of identifying too closely with the subject, which sometimes affects objectivity. When writing a biography of an important political figure in the late Habsburg monarchy, especially one who saw his role as that of fulfilling a “holy mission” of saving the monarchy, this danger reveals itself with regard to the question of the potential long-term survival of the Habsburg monarchy. On this point, Professor Wank is admirably clear-sighted, when he points out that Aehrenthal’s policies were not at all suited to dealing with the challenges that modernization posed for the development and survival of the monarchy. On the

contrary, he judges that Aehrenthal lacked the fundamental understanding of the forces of modernization as requiring completely new forms of political institutions and social organization; Aehrenthal could only give old answers to the new questions posed by these developments. Nevertheless, before 1914 the “persistence of the old regime” (Arno Meyer’s words) still made the “old answers” that Aehrenthal was powerfully equipped to deliver potentially workable. In view of this, Aehrenthal’s single-minded determination and his grasp of the importance of the interrelation between external and internal factors for the regeneration of the monarchy made his appointment as foreign minister in the fall of 1906 a very significant event in the last years of the Habsburg monarchy. And this is exactly where Professor Wank leaves us hanging at the end of the first volume. For my part, I can hardly wait to lay my hands on the second volume!

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