



HISTORY 845: EMPIRE AND NATION IN MODERN CENTRAL EUROPE



Central Europe after Austrian Victory in 1866 (Helmut Walser Smith)

Course Information

Instructor:	Prof. Brandon Bloch (bjbloch@wisc.edu)
Office Hours:	Wed. 12-3 p.m. or by appointment (5118 Humanities or online)
Semester:	Spring 2026
Meeting Time:	Mon. 3:30-5:25 p.m.
Meeting Location:	Humanities 5257
Modality:	In-person
Credits:	3
Requisites:	Consent of instructor
Course Designation:	Grad 50% - Counts toward 50% graduate coursework requirement
Canvas Site:	TBD

Course Description

The transnational turn in historical writing over the past two decades has transformed the study of modern Central Europe. If the field once focused on German national history, framed around the question of Germany’s “special path” to modernity, today’s historians of Central Europe are more likely to emphasize the porousness of national borders, the instability of identities, and the legacies of empire. Recent scholarship has blurred the boundaries of German, Central European, and East European histories, and brought into focus their interactions with the wider world—through commerce, imperialism, colonialism, and migration. But the recent upsurge of populist, xenophobic, and Eurosceptic movements across the region—and not least the ongoing war in Ukraine—makes clear that questions of national sovereignty have hardly disappeared. As the historian Helmut Walser Smith has recently noted, “Despite globalization, we lived in a world where precisely mapped countries occupy more than 95 percent of the inhabited surface of the earth, and roughly 97 percent of the world’s people will die in the nation of their birth.”¹

This graduate-level seminar takes stock of the impact of transnational and global approaches to Central European historiography, while asking what role nationalism and the nation (should) continue to play. Are empires and nation-states mutually exclusive, or do they overlap? How do these categories relate to other political geographies such as borderland, region, and city? In what ways have historians of Central Europe rethought their scales of analysis in response to challenges from transnational and global history? The course conceives of “Central Europe” broadly to encompass German-speaking Europe as well as the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its successor states. The course also spotlights the region’s interactions with the world beyond Europe, in particular the legacies of colonialism. We will focus on the period since 1850. However, graduate students specializing other regions and periods, including students in adjacent departments, are welcome to enroll. There is wide flexibility in selecting a topic and format for the final paper. The seminar will be enriched by bringing together participants from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and approaches.

In addition to introducing graduate students to major recent works of Central European historiography, many of them based on the authors’ dissertations, this course places significant emphasis on building professional skills. A portion of each meeting will be devoted to discussion of professional development and workshopping relevant documents. The assignments, including a publishable book review and a final paper related to a potential master’s thesis or dissertation topic, are designed to produce tangible benefits for your graduate career.

¹ Helmut Walser Smith, *Germany: A Nation In Its Time: Before, During, and After Nationalism, 1500-2000* (New York: Norton, 2020), xvi.

Please note: Graduate students planning to complete a preliminary exam field with me in modern German and/or Central European history during the next three years (through Spring 2028) are expected to enroll in this course. I will be available to schedule additional independent studies, but this course will serve as the foundation for the exam field.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Explain major trends in modern German and Central European historiography over the past two decades, with particular attention to questions of nationalism, empire, borderlands, and mobility
- Develop an empathetic approach to historiographic analysis that asks what a book or article contributes and how an author builds their argument
- Define your academic profile through professional documents, personal reflection, and an online presence
- Identify key primary sources in your field available at UW-Madison and (if applicable) in archives abroad
- Write a publishable book review
- Produce a final paper that advances your graduate career by analyzing primary sources and/or secondary literatures relevant to a potential master's thesis or dissertation topic

Course Requirements

1. Seminar Participation

Attendance and active participation in discussions are crucial to the success of the course. We will aim to foster a classroom environment based on generosity and constructive engagement, toward both one another and the readings. We will have a conversation about discussion norms during the first class.

2. Professional Development Assignments

An important goal of this course is to help you develop your professional profile as a scholar. While I recognize the importance of preparing graduate students for a wide range of careers, the skills of an academic professional are foundational to the work you

will do in graduate school. Moreover, building professional skills early in graduate school is critical for success in both academic and non-academic careers.

With this in mind, there are several brief assignments designed to help you place yourself in your subfield, and to prepare you for entering the academic and professional world beyond UW-Madison.

The individual assignments are as follows (see the course schedule below for due dates):

- CV and/or resume
- Academic Vision Statement: In about 1,000 words, describe the core questions that motivate your research, what you hope to contribute in your prospective master's thesis and/or dissertation, and your long-term goals for graduate school and beyond. You can see this document as a starting point for the research statement or personal statement that is typically required by grant applications.
- Primary Source Bibliography (1-2 pp.): Submit a bibliography of key primary sources in your field that are available through the UW-Madison Libraries, interlibrary loan, or online. If you work in a field that involves archival research, you can also include archival sources. The bibliography might serve as the basis of a seminar paper, master's thesis, or dissertation prospectus; or, feel free to use this assignment to explore possible topics for the final paper for this course.
- Statement of research interests for the website of your department or program, or draft of professional website

3. H-Net Book Review

Choose a recent book in your field (published in the past three years) and write a review of 1200-1500 words for publication on a relevant H-Net site (e.g. H-German, H-Habsburg, H-Nationalism, H-Transnational German Studies.). The book review is due in class on March 9. After peer reviewing your draft, I would encourage you to revise and submit your review to an H-Net editor. Book reviews are an essential tool of academic communication, and also a great way to start publishing as an early-career scholar. We will discuss conventions for academic book reviews in class.

4. Final Paper

The final paper is due on Wed. May 6 at 11:59 p.m. A one-page proposal is due in class on March 16. Your final paper can take a variety of possible formats; please consult with me and your primary adviser to choose a format that will best serve your academic goals. You are encouraged to use the final paper as an opportunity to explore primary sources and/or secondary literatures relevant to a potential master's thesis or dissertation topic. You may choose to draw on the class readings, but this is not expected or required. The only requirements are that the paper engages with the historiography of modern Central Europe, broadly defined, and that it is at least 15 pages (double-spaced) in length, excluding the bibliography.

Possibilities for the final paper include:

- Research paper (may be a chapter or section of a master's thesis or dissertation)
- Historiographic review essay (discuss at least 4 books in an emergent subfield)
- Conference paper and abstract (ideally to be submitted to an upcoming conference)
- Master's thesis or dissertation prospectus (including project description, literature review, provisional outline, research plan, and preliminary bibliography)
- Grant application (including abstract, project description, literature review, methodology, research schedule, budget, and bibliography)

During the final class meeting (April 27), you will be asked to give a ten-minute talk on your final paper, as if presenting at an academic conference.

Grading

The course grade will be determined as follows: 30% seminar participation, 10% professional development assignments, 15% book review, 10% preliminary assignments for the final paper (including the in-class presentation), and 35% final paper. I will provide written feedback on all assignments; if you do not receive a letter grade, then you are on track to earn an A. I am happy to have a conversation about strategies for success in the course, and in graduate school more broadly. (Please note that assignments will be marked Complete/Incomplete in the Canvas gradebook; when necessary, grades will be provided in the comments.)

Credit Hours

The credit standard for this 3-credit course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course's learning activities (45 hours per credit, or 9 hours per week). This includes scheduled class meetings, reading, writing, individual consultations with the instructor, and other work as described in the syllabus. Since the seminar meets for **2 hours of direct instruction per week**, you should plan to allot an average of at least 7 hours per week outside of class for course-related activities.

Attendance and Late Work

Please make every effort to attend all seminar meetings and submit the assignments on time, since discussions and peer workshops are crucial to achieving the course learning outcomes. Unexcused absences and late work will impact the seminar participation portion of your grade. Of course, flexibility with deadlines will be provided under extenuating circumstances.

Please note that I am not able to accept any written work for this course after Friday, May 8, the official last day of the semester. Taking a grade of Incomplete is not to your benefit, since it will stall your progress in the graduate program and could hinder your applications for internal and external fellowships. Therefore, I ask that you submit your final paper, and all other assignments, by the end of this semester. Incompletes will only be granted in case of a personal or family emergency.

Academic Integrity

Proper citation is crucial to the practice of history. Please let me know if you have any questions about citing sources. Citations are not required for the academic vision statement, and we will discuss how to cite sources in a book review. It goes without saying that the consequences for plagiarism in graduate school are serious.

Accessibility

I am committed to ensuring that all students receive equal access to the course materials and equitable opportunities to achieve the course learning goals. If you experience or anticipate any challenges related to the format, materials, or requirements of this course, please let me know as soon as possible. I am happy to explore a range of options for removing barriers to your learning, including official accommodations. All communications regarding accessibility will remain confidential.

Advice on Graduate Study

You may find the following resources helpful for this course and your graduate career more broadly.

Karen Kelsky, *The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your PhD into a Job* (2015)

Oriented toward career preparation for academic positions; see also Kelsky's blog, <https://theprofessorisin.com>, which includes resources on careers outside the academy.

Jessica McCrory Calarco, *A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum* (2020)

Advice on navigating the unspoken ins-and-outs of graduate school, including working with advisers, completing degree requirements, reading and research, attending conferences, and work-life balance.

Gregory Colón Semanza, *Graduate Study for the 21st Century: How to Build an Academic Career in the Humanities*, 2nd ed. (2010)

Similar to Calarco, but with a greater focus on writing conventions in the humanities.

American Historical Association Graduate Education Resources

<https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/professional-life/resources-for-graduate-students>

Christopher S. Rose, “Grad School Survival Guide: How to Read” (2019)

<https://christophersrose.com/2019/05/15/grad-school-survival-guide-how-to-read/>

Rose received his PhD in History from the University of Texas at Austin in 2019; the posts in his “grad school survival guide” are useful and very readable!

Shia Lurie, “How to Read a Book in Two Hours or Less” (2014)

<https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker/how-read-book-two-hours-or-less>

More helpful advice on reading strategies—though two hours is, hopefully, exaggerated! (See the note on Credit Hours above.)

Thomas Mullaney, “How Academia Works”

<https://www.youtube.com/@tsmullaney>

YouTube channel by a Stanford historian covering grad school survival skills, funding applications, research and writing, presenting your work, academic politics, and more.

Additional Resources

The UW-Madison Graduate School and the History Department make available a wide range of resources to foster the success and wellbeing of graduate students. It's a good idea to familiarize (or re-familiarize) yourself with the following:

UW-Madison Graduate School Resources

<https://grad.wisc.edu/current-students/>

Information on academic and professional development; reporting hostile and intimidating behavior; graduate school policies; wellness; and student life.

DiscoverPD

<https://grad.wisc.edu/professional-development/#discoverpd>

Professional development resources for UW-Madison master's and doctoral students, including events calendar of Professional Development Programming on campus.

University Writing Center

<http://www.writing.wisc.edu/>

Individual consultations and workshops on academic writing, as well as Graduate Writing Groups (<https://writing.wisc.edu/writinggroups/>) to foster accountability and community.

McBurney Disability Resource Center

<https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>

Contact the McBurney Center if you have or think you may have a disability to discuss a range of possible accommodations.

History Department Graduate Program Handbook

<http://www.history.wisc.edu/our-graduate-program/current-students/graduate-program-handbook/>

Course Schedule

Readings and assignments are due by the beginning of class, unless otherwise indicated. All readings are available online and are linked through the modules on Canvas. Readings listed as “Additional Resources” are optional, and are intended to provide further guidance for the assignments. There is no need to spend money on this course (though I highly recommend the \$15 investment in Karen Kelsky’s *The Professor Is In*). Guidelines for assignments are posted on Canvas. I have not indicated page numbers for most of the assigned books, but graduate school involves learning to read efficiently for argument, intervention, and evidence. We will discuss reading strategies during the first weeks of class. We can also decide on chapter selections if necessary.

Week 1 (Jan. 26): What is a Nation?

Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?” (1882 lecture at the Sorbonne University, Paris)

Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” in *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (1990)

Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, “Identity,” in Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (2005)

A. Dirk Moses, “The German Catechism” (2021)

Week 2 (Feb. 2): The Nation in Central European History

Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (1990), chs. 1-3

Till van Rahden, “Germans of the Jewish Stamm: Visions of Community between Nationalism and Particularism, 1850-1933,” in *German History from the Margins*, eds. Neil Gregor, Nils Roemer, and Mark Roseman (2006)

Tara Zahra, “Imagined Non-Communities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 69 (2010): 93-119

Additional Resources:

Karen Kelsky, “Rules of the Academic CV,” in *The Professor Is In* (2015)

Assignment: CV and/or resume

Week 3 (Feb. 9) Imperial Germany/German Imperialism

David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (2011)

Adam Blackler, “From Boondoggle to Settlement Colony: Hendrik Witbooi and the Evolution of Germany’s Imperial Project in Southwest Africa,” *Central European History* 50 (2017): 449-470

Larry McEnerny, “The Craft of Writing Effectively” (2014 lecture),
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtIzMaLkCaM&t=1362s>

Assignment: After viewing McEnerny’s lecture, go through the introduction to Blackler’s article and underline the words that make the article valuable.

Week 4 (Feb. 16): Empire and Nation in Habsburg Central Europe

Natasha Wheatley, *The Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty* (2023)

Assignment: Draft of Academic Vision Statement

Week 5 (Feb. 23): War and Postwar

Dominique Reill, *The Fiume Crisis: Life in the Wake of the Habsburg Empire* (2020)

Erin Hochman, “*Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Eine Republik: Großdeutsch Nationalism and Democratic Politics in the Weimar and First Austrian Republics*,” *German History* 32 (2014): 29-52

Week 6 (March 2): The Question Question

Holly Case, *The Age of Questions: Or, A First Attempt at an Aggregate History of the Eastern, Social, Woman, American, Jewish, Polish, Bullion, Tuberculosis, and Many Other Questions over the Nineteenth Century, and Beyond* (2018)

Assignment: Bibliography of key primary sources in your field

Week 7 (March 9): Book Review Workshop

Read a book in your field that has appeared during the past three years and write a book review formatted for publication in H-Net

Assignment: H-Net Book Review

Additional Resources:

Wendy Laura Belcher, “How to Write an Academic Book Review” (2015)

Casey Brienza, “Writing Academic Book Reviews” (2015)

Week 8 (March 16): Interwar Borderlands

Kathryn Ciancia, *On Civilization’s Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World* (2020)

Assignment: One-page proposal for final project, including one-sentence research question

Week 9 (March 23): Beyond Totalitarianism

Nicole Eaton, *German Blood, Slavic Soil: How Nazi Königsberg Became Soviet Kaliningrad* (2023)

Mark Roseman, “Racial Discourse, Nazi Violence, and the Limits of the Racial State Model,” in *Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany*, eds. Devin Pendas, Mark Roseman, and Richard Wetzell (2017), pp. 31-57

Optional: Revised H-Net Book Review, in preparation for submission

*SPRING BREAK

Week 10 (April 6): Transnational and Local in Holocaust History

Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (2020)

Omer Bartov, “Historical Uniqueness and Integrated History,” in *Genocide, the Holocaust, and Israel-Palestine: First-Person History in Times of Crisis* (2023)

Assignment: Up-to-date statement of research interests for publication on the website of your department or program, or draft of professional website

Week 11 (April 13): Cold War Borderlands and Internationalism

Astrid M. Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain: Environment, Economy, and Culture in the Borderlands* (2019)

Eagle Glassheim, “Unsettled Landscapes: Czech and German Conceptions of Social and Ecological Decline in the Postwar Czechoslovak Borderlands,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 50 (2015): 318-336

Week 12 (April 20): Nation and Race after Nazism

Brandon Bloch, *Reinventing Protestant Germany: Religious Nationalists and the Contest for Post-Nazi Democracy* (2025), intro, chs. 3, 6, epilogue

Michelle Lynn Kahn, *Foreign in Two Homelands: Racism, Return Migration, and Turkish-German History* (2024), intro, chs. 4-6

Week 13 (April 27): Presentations on Final Papers

Additional Resources:

Paul N. Edwards, “How to Give an Academic Talk” (2015)

Linda K. Kerber, “Conference Rules: How to Present a Scholarly Paper” (2008)

Assignment: Ten-minute “conference talk” on your final paper

Final Paper due on Wed. May 6 at 11:59 p.m.