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Book Review: Post-World War One Plebiscites and Their Legacies: Exploring the Right of Self- Determination

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*Post-World War One Plebiscites and Their Legacies:
Exploring the Right of Self-Determination*

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Post-World War One Plebiscites and Their Legacies: Exploring the Right of Self-Determination examines not only the plebiscites decreed in Paris, but also issues involving self-determination and minority rights which resulted from these plebiscites. Thirteen scholars (including the volume's editor, Sergiusz Bober) address several (but, curiously, not all) of the post-World War One plebiscites, their legacies on both sides of these new borders, and how the results of these plebiscites and minority treaties continue to echo in today's world.

Part One, “The Right to Self-Determination and Plebiscites,” serves as an introduction to plebiscites and their history in general and the specific circumstances in which the five post-World War One plebiscites were determined and held. Matt Qvortrup examines the history and causes of “right-sizing referendums,” which he defines as “making changes so that the borders match national or ethnic sentiments” (p. 23). Qvortrup questions the circumstances right-sizing referendums occur in, testing the theory that they are more likely in times of great conflict or upheaval. In answering this, his argument becomes a bit bogged down in statistical analysis that is, at times, difficult to parse through. His evidence concludes that right-sizing referendums are perhaps most likely to occur after a major conflict, but the major conflict itself does not necessitate a referendum. Volker Prott discusses the post-World War One plebiscites and the main obstacles hindering plebiscites continued success. Plebiscites are viewed as the most direct form of democracy; in that sense, they are incredibly idealistic. But these ideals of self-determination, as Prott demonstrates, came up against the realities and practicalities of the Allied Powers’ own interests. Plebiscites were only held in areas where the defeated – namely, Germany and Austria – stood to lose territory. In addition, the people were only given the “national” option, in areas in which regional identity often trumped the national. This national indifference resulted in people seeming to vote against their “national” interests, as occurred in Upper Silesia and Carinthia.

Part Two, “Plebiscites and Minority Rights in the Aftermath of the Paris Peace Conference,” explores specific issues pertaining to the plebiscites in Schleswig and Carinthia and the implementation of minority rights. Ryan J. Gesme argues that German and Danish activists in Schleswig combined historical precedents with the new Wilsonian language of self-determination to argue against the division of the region. Peter Thaler discusses the similarities between the Schleswig and Carinthia plebiscites. He notes that both regions were divided into two sections, each with their own plebiscite: the first mainly rural and home to either a Danish- or Slovene-speaking majority; the second including a large city with a German-speaking majority. The thought, among Danes, Yugoslavs and the Allied Powers, was that once the first plebiscite went for their respective nation, the Germans of Flensburg and Klagenfurt would choose economic over national interests and vote to keep their territories united. In both cases, they were proven wrong; a large majority in Schleswig’s Zone 2 voted to remain in Germany, while Carinthia’s first plebiscite resulted in a vote for Austria, rendering the second plebiscite unnecessary. Finally, Kristin Henrard discusses different definitions of citizenship and its place in the various Minority Treaties. However, given that the previous two chapters were so

grounded in the actual events of the plebiscites, Henrard's largely legal analysis seems an odd fit.

The chapters in Part Three, "Post-Plebiscitary Territories as Living Spaces between the Two World Wars," examine the immediate legacies of the plebiscites. Béla Rásky discusses the delayed plebiscite in Ödenburg/Sopron in western Hungary. The vote itself was plagued with reports of fraud and voter harassment. While Hungary won the plebiscite, Hungarian and Austrian nationalists would stress and mourn the loss of western Hungary and Ödenburg/Sopron for years to come. Harald V. Keudell examines the Marienwerder plebiscite, which the Germans won by a large majority. Despite this, the nationalist focus was on the loss of West Prussia, with the new border taking on new meaning as activists hoped for a reunification. Both during the plebiscite and after, the Germans harkened back to the legacy of the Teutonic Knights and their defense of Germandom against the Slavic hordes. Under the Nazis, clashes between Germans and the Polish minority became increasingly violent, culminating in the deportation of millions of Poles during the Second World War, and millions of Germans after 1945. Tina Bahovec offers a gendered view of the Carinthian plebiscite, focusing on the works of two Slovene women. Both during and after the plebiscite, women were urged to participate politically – but only in certain, set roles that revolved around the home. Good Slovene women voted for the national party – but also made sure their children grew up knowing the Slovene language and national culture. Thus women were asked to participate in politics – but only in supporting roles, never as candidates or leaders.

Finally, Part Four, "The Post-World War I Plebiscites in the *Longue Durée*," takes a longer view of the consequences of the plebiscites. Martin Klatt returns to the Schleswig plebiscite, which is often viewed as the most successful of the plebiscites held. Klatt notes that Schleswig's reputation comes about by forgetting the challenges made by both Germans and Danes until the mid-1950s and only in the context of the Cold War. Robert Knight argues that the continued militarization of Carinthian culture after the plebiscite resulted in intense Germanization of the region, one which emphasized German cultural and, later, racial superiority over the Slovene minority. This continued even after the Second World War and still finds echoes to this day. Detlev Rein uses a 2018 inheritance case to explore how Minority Treaties, written over a century ago, are still influencing the law – and sometimes conflicting with it and each other. Finally, Jørgen Kühl brings the volume into the present day, discussing the fraudulent referendums held in Crimea and eastern Ukraine as a part of Russian president Vladimir Putin's justification for invading the country. He examines why, after having a

moment after the First World War, plebiscites have rarely been used since to settle border disputes and concludes that, while plebiscites are good for rewriting borders, they seldom offer solutions for the minority issues they leave in their wake.

On the whole, this volume lives up to its stated goal of examining the “unique, yet shared, experience[s]” (p. 3) of the plebiscite regions. While the Schleswig plebiscite gets the most coverage, the other plebiscites all have their own chapters and analysis – all save one. In a volume about plebiscites, Upper Silesia’s absence from the volume is quite conspicuous. This was, by far, the largest plebiscite held; indeed, more people voted in Upper Silesia alone than in the five other plebiscites combined. Despite this omission, the volume provides scholars of the period with new examinations of the plebiscites and their legacies while also being accessible to those who are new to the topic. *Post-World War One Plebiscites* is a welcome addition to the historiography of the plebiscites.