

Bettina Braun (Hg.), Konkurrenz und Transfer. Das preußisch-österreichische Verhältnis im 18. Jahrhundert, Bielefeld (transcript) 2023, 370 S., 1 s/w Abb. (Mainzer Studien zur Frühen Neuzeit, 3), ISBN 978-3-8376-6777-6, DOI [10.14361/9783839467770](https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839467770), EUR 55,00.

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The Borussian tradition of historiography famously interpreted the intense and often bloody rivalry between Austria and Prussia as an essential element of a German nationalist narrative culminating, ultimately, in the unification of 1871. The Holy Roman Empire had a mere walk-on role in this story: as a sclerotic relic of an inglorious past standing in the way of national rebirth. The scholarship of the last half-century has upturned many old assumptions about the Empire regarding its nature, functionality, and staying power. But a re-evaluation of the Austro-Prussian relationship in the light of the new findings has been lacking. The attempt to fill this gap is the laudable goal of this volume, which places the relationship squarely within the framework of the Holy Roman Empire. Not only did the Empire endure for more than two generations after Frederick II's surprise attack on Maria Theresa in late 1740, but large areas of both the Austrian and Prussian monarchies remained part of it until the dissolution of 1806.

As its title – »competition and transfer« – indicates, the volume addresses two areas of classical interest to the question of Austro-Prussian rivalry. As the editor herself concedes in the introduction, many aspects of the relationship could not be taken into account due to the current state of research or the lack of expertise. The inclusion of an article on the transmission of Johann Ignaz von Felbiger's educational ideas to Russia is perhaps indicative of the difficulties faced. In total the volume contains 11 contributions divided into two sections. The emphasis lies on the agency of the state, with little attention given to actors below the official institutional plain. A notable strongpoint of the volume is that nearly every author surmounted the challenge of keeping both Austria and Prussia in view.

Half of the contributions convey the results of substantially new research, while the rest survey the state of research, in some cases posing questions for future study. The military historian Michael Hochedlinger recapitulates his well-known thesis that the Austrian monarchy underwent a fundamental Prussification under the shock of defeat. In view of the »hardly encouraging« state of the source material, the question of how the »trade secrets of the Prussian military machine« (85) actually arrived in Vienna still remains unanswered. In a comparative essay on the issue of confessional plurality, Frank Kleinehogenbrock sees the Empire's



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long experience in the handling of religious difference as a possible ulterior influence on the policies of toleration pursued in both Vienna and Berlin.

Two contributions call attention to the Empire's institutions as significant arenas of conflict, demonstrating that these were hardly the *quantité négligeable* earlier assumed. Anette Baumann outlines the recent research findings on how Austria and Prussia used one the Empire's two high courts, the Imperial Chamber Court (Reichskammergericht), in their power-political calculations. The »Perpetual Diet« served similar purposes, as Michael Rohrschneider shows in his own article. Thanks to the composite character of the two monarchies, both were entitled to keep several diplomatic missions in Regensburg and both used this advantage to exploit the diet as a platform for cultivating clientele and parties, contributing to the polarization that increasingly characterized the Empire after mid-century.

Two other authors consider how the Austro-Prussian rivalry played out in relation to the Empire's lesser states. In one of the volume's most stimulating contributions, Bettina Braun considers the extent to which Prussia and Austria exploited the elections of ruling prince-bishops to their own purposes. Berlin faced a series of drawbacks in any competition in this area, not least »the lack of familiarity of the Prussian actors with the Imperial Church and Church law« (263), while Austria disposed of many advantages, among which was a comprehensive diplomatic network in the Imperial Circles. Although Frederick II tended to exaggerate the danger of Austrian dominance, he was not prepared to invest the resources to oppose it. Hence Braun concludes that the Imperial Church »hardly and only very late constituted an arena of competition between Austria and Prussia« (274). By contrast, as Jacek Kordel demonstrates, few of the Empire's lesser states felt the brunt of Austro-Prussian competition with greater force than Saxony, which for many decades stood in personal union with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In addition to occupying an unenviable geopolitical position, its leaders consistently showed little talent in playing a weak hand.

The phenomenon of »transfer« in a notably material rather than cultural sense is addressed by Ellinor Forster in a contribution based on new research in the local archives at Opava (Czech Republic). After the Prussian conquest of most of Silesia, the Austrians and Prussians found themselves having to work together to disentangle the administration. This involved the delivering up of public records, a process that itself was marked by delaying tactics and conflict. In most historical accounts, Austria appears on the receiving end of innovations first tried out in Prussia. Yet in a comparative examination of the Prussian and Austrian Chambers of Accounts (Rechenkammer), Simon Adler concludes that Frederick II not only knew of the successes of the new institution in Vienna, but also tried to emulate them. With respect to the rise of another eighteenth-century institution – the »cabinet« – Wolfgang Neugebauer sees »parallel developments« (25) rather



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than a process of transfer at work. The common terminology in fact obscures the very real differences between these bodies.

On balance, this volume succeeds in deepening and widening our knowledge of the settings in which the Austro-Prussian rivalry transpired. At the same time, there is no indication that the common framework of the Holy Roman Empire contributed to defusing the conflict in any way or that the traditional image of the Empire as helpless in the face of the Austro-Prussian antagonism needs to be reconsidered.

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