

Oil Empire: Visions of Prosperity in Austrian Galicia. *By Alison Fleig Frank*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. xx + 343 pp. Maps, photographs, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-674-01887-7.

Reviewed by Holly Case

At a time when oil production, refinement, and transport so transparently affect the exigencies of politics, Alison Frank's *Oil Empire* is a reminder that oil's past is as deep and dark as its geological home. The focus of her masterful and engaging historical study, Austrian Galicia, is not a place we now associate with oil production, but during the second half of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, Galicia was consistently among the world's top ten producers. Nevertheless, oil did not ultimately accomplish for Austria or Galicia what it succeeded in doing for the United States and other industrialized nations. Despite being dubbed the "Galician California" by contemporaries—a comparison that seemed apt both in terms of the abundance of oil and because of the boom-town, frontier-style settlements, complete with liquor and loose women, that it created—Galicia was seen, even by its advocates, as a backward province dominated by agriculture and populated by an illiterate and uncivilized peasantry. Frank uses Galicia's historical backwater status to add to the body of recent work that chips away at the notion of modernization as a one-way path, one that is invariably characterized by "the triumph of state building and nation building, of capitalism and industrialization, of class-based societies, of globalization, and of imperialism" (p. 7). By the end of her story, the wells have dried up, the empire that was supposed to have exploited the region for its natural resources has collapsed under the weight of its own decentralizing concessions to provincial elites, and one nation has been built at the expense of another. An idyllic photograph of the region today shows no sign that anything like industrialization ever happened there.

Frank tells a story of international trade and investment, worker mobility, nationalism, socialism, and diplomacy. It is a story of tensions between the centralizing and decentralizing forces within a state and their impact on industry. But above all it is a story about the making and unmaking of boundaries, fortunes, and narratives about the

past. With engaging prose and an impressive array of sources, Frank shows how Galicia's oil industry grew up in a province of such marginal status that the Austrian emperor himself only visited it twice during the thirty years between 1850 and 1880. It is with this latter visit that Frank begins her story, showing how Galicia's unique place in the empire and its incredible diversity—home as it was to Poles, Ukrainians (or Ruthenians), and Jews, among others—made it an unlikely stage for the modernization drama that was unfolding. Among the protagonists in the narrative are a Canadian driller who, by World War I, considered himself Galician; a Ukrainian poet and novelist with a political message about worker organization; and a Polish entrepreneur and idealist whose efforts to bring Galicia into an enlightened age of oil ended in personal disaster and raised suspicions about the Polish nationalist agenda. Frank shows how the local nobility jealously guarded its private property from attempts by the state to control the budding industry, with the result that oil companies were often either too small to invest in vertical integration or too lacking in infrastructure, such as railroads and waterways, to turn a decent profit. The workers were mostly peasants seeking a little extra money during periods of inactivity in the agricultural calendar. Despite the dangers they faced in the mines and the inadequacy of their barracks, strikes were rare until the twentieth century. Even these, Frank argues, were not the product of class conflict or indicators of class consciousness, but were either expressions of sectarian animosity or perpetrated in opposition to mandatory insurance payments.

During World War I, Frank argues that the lack of infrastructure for transporting and storing oil hurt Austria's wartime performance. Cut off from all other sources of oil—including the rich oilfields of Romania—Austria was forced not only to be self-sufficient but also to supply its ally Germany with oil. The situation was exacerbated by the Russian army's occupation of the Galician oilfields for a few months, forcing Austria to rely on rapidly dwindling prewar stockpiles to fuel an increasingly oil-powered naval fleet and military vehicles.

After the war, Galicia remained a critical bone of contention during the negotiations for the postwar peace settlement. The collapse of Austria-Hungary was accompanied by agitation for the creation of new nation-states. In the thirteenth of his fourteen points, Woodrow Wilson included a provision for the creation of an independent

Poland. This measure conflicted with the interests of the newly formed Ukrainian state, which had taken control of Galicia's oilfields. Both Polish and Ukrainian delegates to the peace conference argued that oil-rich Galicia was critical to their existence and should serve as compensation for their parts in acting as buffers between Western Europe and Bolshevik Russia. The matter was settled more or less by the Poles, who launched a military action and captured the oilfields in May of 1919. Nevertheless, the promise of abundance was misleading, as the wells were drying up, foreshadowed by a decline in production that had begun in 1909.

Frank addresses a number of themes that still resonate today with an eerie topicality. Her descriptions of mine owners and operators who dodged safety regulations, "judging the payment of penalties to be less expensive than the structural changes that would have been necessary to meet new safety requirements" (p. 115), coupled with stories of sabotaged equipment and oilfields set in flames (p. 161), show how oil and politics seem to be immutably conjoined. However, most of the book is not about the universal aspects of the Galician oil industry but is more concerned with its uniqueness and with the local, regional, and global factors that set its course.

Frank's arguments are most convincing when they stick closely to the sources on which they are based, sources that reveal her skill and expertise as a researcher and her polyglot linguistic agility. Her larger claims and conclusions are less convincing, if only because they too often overstate and oversimplify the results of her careful and detailed analysis, the real and worthy core of this project. The "failed modernization" framework imperfectly captures the complexity and unpredictability of oil's trajectory through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but this should in no way detract from the brilliance and groundbreaking importance of Frank's work. Her achievement should inspire other historians to consider studying the reciprocal relations between industry, on the one hand, and politics and society, on the other. There is no question that historical studies of salt, silver, iron, and other oil industries—both within and beyond East-Central Europe—would enrich our understanding of the politics of minerals and provide alternative frameworks for discussing a variety of phenomena, from nationalism to globalization, from science to high finance. In this respect, Frank's study succeeds in bringing Galicia out of its historical ghetto.

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