

1914: The old world, the new world, and the end of the world

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Introduction

Apocalyptic text production is closely related to certain events: The earthquake of Lisbon (1755), the Eruption of Mount Tambora (1815) and the year without a summer (1816) are incidents which stimulated apocalypticism in European poetry. The year 1914 usually stands for Sarajevo and the catastrophe of the First World War. In the same period, on the other side of the Atlantic, the United States was celebrating a tremendous success: The opening of the Panama Canal. Between these two distant points we can observe an incredible boom of apocalyptic literature. The purpose of this brief article is to highlight the connection between the events of Sarajevo and Panama in German apocalyptic literature.

Austria-Hungary and the United States: Three-quarter enemies[1]

Even decades after the end of the monarchy, Austrian poets tend to paint an idealized picture of the pre World War I Austria. The novelist Stefan Zweig (1882 – 1942) uses an unmistakable metonymy for *World of Yesterday*[2] when describing the summer of 1914, the last days in peace in the old empire of Austria-Hungary: “*Throughout the days and nights the heavens were silky blue, the air soft yet not sultry, the meadows fragrant and warm, the forests dark and profuse in their tender green*”[3].

The whole work has the style of memoirs of the author, but more precisely should be described as memories of a lost home country. The first version of *The World of Yesterday* was finalized in 1940, in the author’s US-American exile.

On July 28 th 1914 Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia after the murder of crown prince Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo. Four days later, on August 1 st, Germany waged war on Russia, which was supporting Serbia. At the same day Russian troops

crossed German borders. On August 3rd France entered the war, followed by the United Kingdom on August 4th. At the same time the White House was preparing a document for the Senate, which contained *the Declaration of Neutrality* and would at least delay the American participation in the First World War for almost three years[4]. Although this decision was in accordance with the U.S. Neutrality Act of 1794, it might seem to be conflicting with the tight relations between Washington and London. Consequently the declaration reflects the tension between the official policy of neutrality and the anticipated favoring of one side by the American people. So it has to some extent the character of an appeal to its own people: “*I venture, therefore, my fellow countrymen, to speak a solemn word of warning to you against that deepest, most subtle, most essential breach of neutrality which may spring out of partisanship, out of passionately taking sides.*”[5]

In fact, the American status should be more precisely described as non-belligerent than as neutral, as the *realpolitik* of the Wilson administration itself was clearly favoring the *Entente* to the *Central Powers*[6]. And that was exactly how the role of the U.S. was perceived in the German speaking countries, namely in Austria. Frederic C. Penfield, then ambassador to Austria, described the Austrian sentiment towards America as considering the United States as “*three quarter enemies*”[7]. While the Austrian-Hungarian Empire was facing its final challenge, which led into an even then predictable end, the United States was on the rise. Roman Puff stresses that “*the antagonism between Austria-Hungary and the United States*”[8] already had been a relevant factor in the 19th century and “*that it derived mainly from the fact that the one understood itself as representing an older, aristocratic tradition, whereas the other thought of itself as being a part of a younger, enlightened movement*”[9]. The two countries seem to have represented two irreconcilable concepts.

The U.S. approach to empire

In this hostile atmosphere it's not surprising that American achievements of any nature would be object of jealousy and resentment in Austria-Hungary and Germany. And it was certainly not a minor success when the U.S. Canal Society declared the opening of the Panama Canal on August 15th 1914, less than three weeks after World War I had broken out. Firstly, the construction of the Panama Canal must be considered as a scientific and technological masterpiece. The connection of the Atlantic and the Pacific is an old dream of mankind[10]: In 1534 the King of Spain, Carlos V. first ordered plans for a route through the Isthmus of Panama. Later thinkers, poets, and statesmen such as Humboldt, Goethe, and Jefferson made their own plans on a Canal. The first serious attempt to build a Canal through Panama was made by the French. Ferdinand de Lesseps, who had successfully built the Suez Canal in Egypt; he was also the head of the Canal Corporation, founded in 1876. The construction work started in 1881. Between 1881 and 1889 the construction workers paid a high price for their ambitions: In this period of time, only one sixth of the canal was finished, but already 22.000 people had lost their life. Diseases such as malaria and yellow fever were prevalent. The construction techniques, which were successful in the dessert of Egypt, were nearly unusable in the tropical forest. In 1887 Gustave Eiffel, the builder of the Eiffel-Tower in Paris, was involved. Despite his support,

the results were marginal: After 13 years of planning and eight years of construction work only 13 out of 81 km were completed. The Canal Corporation went bankrupt. Corruption and investment fraud were the side effects. The French government fell into a deep crisis.

In 1902 the American Canal Society bought the rights on the plans for building a Canal through Panama. The United States believed in their technological capability, but faced a political dilemma: Panama was part of the Republic of Columbia, the former Bolivarian Gran Columbia. In 1903 the United States provoked a rebellion of Panama against the Columbian authorities and supported their war for independence. The conflict between the official policy of neutrality since the early days of the US-American independency and the primacy of American interests results into a compromise, which Julia Greene calls the “*US approach to empire*”[11] and contains the “*rejection of formal colonialism in favour of economic, political and industrial management combined with the military engagement as needed*”[12]. So secondly, the Canal represents a new paradigm in US foreign policy and finally a narcissistic slight for Europe.

The Panama Canal in German science fiction literature

The success of the Americans in building the Panama Canal becomes a metaphor for the American strengths and the European failures. Defiantly many of the German authors (i.e. Hans-Ludwig Rosegger[13], Alexander von Thayer[14], and in a modified variation Hans Dominik[15]) implement a figure in their Canal building story, which puts the American superiority into perspective: Unlike in the real situation, in German fiction it tends to be a German engineer who designs the Canal.

There are plenty of examples for German literature production concerning the Panama Canal. The most outstanding ones in terms of a cultural and political analysis are those of the young German science fiction genre. Three characteristic examples will be analyzed here. As the texts are rather unknown to a bigger audience, it seems to be most efficient to briefly paraphrase the content of the works:

First, there is Hans Ludwig Rosegger’s (1880 – 1929) novel *Golfstrom* (gulf stream), an apocalyptic vision of a transatlantic war and an ecological disaster. The author is an Austrian national and son of the better known regional poet Peter Rosegger (1843 – 1918).

Golfstrom was published in 1913 in Berlin, one year before the completion of the Panama Canal. The opening of the Canal is the starting point of the plot. Unlike the historic situation, in which the opening was overshadowed by the Austrian-Hungarian aggression towards Serbia, the Americans in the text are euphoric and having an ecstatic, chauvinistic opening celebration: “*America forever! At the top of the civilized nations! The future belongs to it.*”[16]_But the next project of the U.S. is already in the on the way: “[...] *The Panama Canal be just the prelude of a more tremendous play, the United States would orchestrate.*”[17]

In order to bypass the Gulf of Mexico, the U.S. administration plans to remove the peninsula of Florida. The Europeans know well, if this plan succeeded, Europe would fall into an ice age, while the United States would benefit from the warm flow of the water. That's why the Europeans start a punitive expedition over the Atlantic Ocean. Once more in militaristic German speaking fiction of this period, the Europeans are disunited and weakened: Democracy has a negative influence on the character of the so called *white race* of Europe. Women's rights confuse the people. And the overheated Southern Europeans throw a spanner in the works of the army: Suffering from swelteringly hot summers they would appreciate a slight cooling down. So the European fleet sinks under the fire of the Americans. The United States are free to change the climate.

Unlike in Julia Greene's concept of "*the US approach to empire*", the U.S. government in the text creates a conventional colonial empire and includes Latin American countries into the United States of America. The warm climate boosts American agriculture and results in enormous prosperity. Due to Rosegger's race theory, which is closely related to Arthur de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*[18] (*Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*), high temperatures lead to an uprising of the black American Community. Finally the American people vote for their first black president, Tom-Tom.

At the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Europe is freezing. The eternal ice and snow cover the old continent. Mass mortality is the result. But in the midst of the catastrophe, a sharp evolutionary selection produces a new human being: After all week elements of the so called *white race* have died out, the superior, *pure Germanic Europeans* succeed.

In the meantime the United States starts to suffer from the more and more unpleasant overheated climate. The weak race characteristics, according to Rosegger's concept, of the black and Asians win over the whites. Anarchy and chaos are the result.

So the suffering Americans decide to rebuild the peninsula of Florida. The Europeans, who got used to the rough conditions of the new ice age, try to prevent this project. They start a new transatlantic battle and this time they defeat the Americans fundamentally.

A further dystopic vision regarding the Panama Canal is *Atlantis*[19] by Hans Dominik (1872 – 1945). In the novel the Americans blast the Isthmus of Panama in order to improve the economical capability of the connection between the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean. Similar as in Rosegger's *Golfstrom*, this results into a new ice age in Europe. The antipodes are represented by the unscrupulous American capitalist Rouse and the philanthropic German industrialist Uhlenkort, supported by the unconventional German engineer Tredrup. Rouse is the president of the canal society and head of a conspiracy. He is the secret ruler of the United States: "*He controls the nation and its soul...People and government are his tools. Invisible for the masses, uninfluenced by moral aspects [...]*"[20]

Thanks to the energetic healing power of a wise man, based in the deep north of Europe, the damage caused by the Americans finally can be minimized. Furthermore, the *white Europeans* get a new place to live, as the sunken continent of Atlantis reappears:

“Atlantis! Once the queen, the empress of the world. Sunk at fate. Resurrected, revived for humankind by your hand!”[21]

In 1905, three years after the Americans had bought the rights on the construction of the Canal, the German author Ferdinand Grautoff (1789 – 1932) published the novel *1906*[22], in which he describes a disastrous war between Germany and Great Britain, which just benefits the enemies of Europe, namely the United States of America.

The book has a remarkable prehistory: Following a research of Lars U. Scholl[23] Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, the founder of the German fleet, instructs Lieutenant Carl Hollweg to publish a brochure which contains a story in which the German and British troops fight a war without a winner. The purpose for this publication is *“to clarify to a German audience, that the danger of a war on England is underestimated”*[24] and in this way it contains an *“indirect appeal to enlarge the German fleet”*[25]. On the other hand, the English audience should be convinced, that *“after the destruction of Germany the political and military position of England became much worse”*[26]. Tirpitz furthermore demands, that *“the book has to be readable for a large number of people, thus being interesting and in places amusing, stylistically not necessarily superior.”*[27] The title *1906* should remind of the battle of Jena and Auerstedt in 1806, in which Napoleon had defeated the troops of Frederick Wilhelm III. of Prussia.

Unfortunately for the project, the minister of foreign affairs, Bernhard von Bülow, and Undersecretary Oswald von Richthofen, were not as enthusiastic as Tirpitz and declined the proposal. Nevertheless, Grautoff published his work in November 1905 under the pseudonym *Seestern* (starfish) in due time of the notable year 1906. How this could happen after the express rejection of von Bülow and von Richthofen is uncertain. At least in an official statement Tirpitz was not amused. Notwithstanding the irritations at the highest level, the book sold heavily and was a success.

The Panama Canal in the text once more represents the American superiority in terms of technological and strategic matters. Following Tirpitz’ concept, the Europeans in Grautoff’s novel are deeply divided. Germany and Great Britain enter an ill-fated war. Both sides fail to win a decisive battle and while Europe weakens itself, the Americans remain the only maritime super power: *“Today there is just one great fleet left at the ocean, which is the fleet of the United States.”*[28].

The new military hegemony enables the United States to request the Europeans to leave their colonies in the Atlantic Ocean in order to get free access to the Panama Canal and South America. The paralysed Europeans are unable to put up resistance. The New World wins over the Old World.

Apocalyptic visions

The apocalyptic visions of German speaking literature concerning the world political events of the year 1914, especially the successful construction and opening of the Panama Canal, are diverse and inconsistent. Without wanting to disguise these incoherencies, it is necessary to focus on a couple of reoccurring thoughts in these works:

(1) The producibility of the apocalypse

The apocalypse is *producibile in a scientific-technical sense*. In the same way as the end may be produced, it is also possible to avoid it. In this context, thinking the end is no longer restricted to religious categories. Apocalypse here simply means “*the total and final destruction of mankind and the end of the world*” as Klaus Vondung states in his book “*The apocalypse in Germany*”[29]. He then concludes that this use of the term apocalypse would be a “*docked apocalypse*”[30]. “*We mean thereby only the first half of the traditional apocalyptic vision; the second half, the establishment of a new, perfect world, which earlier gave meaning and purpose to the end of the world, has disappeared.*”[31] I do agree with Vondung that the aspect of a divine salvation is usually not part of fictional apocalypses in this period of time any more. But I argue that the sphere of restoration, healing and a utopian turn to some extent still exists: It’s the vision of a new world within the existing world, a new world on the ruins of the old world: In Rosegger’s *Golfstrom* the *Germanic Europe* returns purified and strengthened, in Dominik’s *Atlantis* the Europeans, who had lost their habitat discover the Continent of Atlantis. Only in Grautoff’s *1906* the end really seems to be hopeless, which might be explained with the didactical approach of the text.

(2) From the world war to the race war

Many of the works in the first half of the 20 th century are anticipating a world war and assume the deeper conflict as a war of so called human races. Grautoff frames his apocalyptic vision with an inner-European war within a global conflict of super-powers. He follows Tirpitz’ concept of “a decline of the protestant-Germanic world in Europe”[32]. Rosegger chooses the motif of a transatlantic war. America is dominated by the blacks and their president Tom-Tom. The victims are once more the Germanic white Europeans, which are weakened by their inferior Roman allies. Hans Dominik creates a direct connection between the United States and Africa: The American billionaire Rouse organizes a conspiracy with an African emperor.

The position towards the anticipated ultimate war is ambivalent: At one side the dangers are described drastically, at the other side, war is still seen as a legitimate political means and further more as an instrument to improve and correct humankind: “*some [...] at times were even longing for cruel battles, for the steel ferule of war, which solely seemed to be able to whip the six hundred degenerated Europeans.*”[33]

(3) Social decline

Using a pseudo-Darwinian rhetoric, the end is evoked by a social decline, a survival of the unfittest. Despite the superiority of the white German and British Europeans, the Americans and Russians, the blacks and Asians finally rule the world in Grautoff’s work. Rosegger follows Gobineau’s system[34] of bad influences on civilizations: fanaticism, luxury, effeminacy, moral decline, loss of religion, and errors of governments and their leaders weaken the society in *Golfstrom*, while the so called mixture of races finally destroys it. Dominik’s scenario is exemplified by the struggle of the German industrialist with the ruthless American capitalist.

Résumé: 1914 – From Sarajevo to Panama

The shifts in power of the early 20th century cause a massive uncertainty which results into an enormous production of catastrophic and apocalyptic literature. Even decades after the war, the pre-1914 status is partly being described as an ideal world. In this context 1914 is emblematically identified with *Sarajevo* and the disastrous developments which are attributed to it. If we leave this conventional perspective on 1914 for a moment and turn to the event of the completion and opening of the Panama Canal, clearly a comparably minor event in world history, we will get a quite different picture of the apocalyptic hysteria of this time: The Panama Canal is a focal point, which illustrates the strengths of the emerging New World and the decline of the Old World. The German speaking Europe is still obsessed with its idea of superiority and justifies this illusion with more and more bizarre constructions such as the race theory, a pseudo-Darwinian argumentation, and crudely-drawn stereotypes of the enemies. Unlike the differentiated works of the so called high literature, popular literature, namely science fiction, gives an unvarnished view of the discourse and the popular belief. From this point of view it seems to be a promising experiment for future researchers to move the perspective from Sarajevo to Panama, in order to get some fresh insights on the apocalyptic year of 1914.

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Notes:

1. Cf. Roman Puff: Three Quarter Enemies: Anti-Americanism in Austria-Hungary during World War I. In: Michael Draxlbauer et. al.. [Ed.]: (Anti-)Americanisms. Vienna (2004), pp. 130 – 139.

2. Stefan Zweig: The World of Yesterday. An autobiography. London (1944).

3. Stefan Zweig (1944), p. 167

4. Compare Anne Cipriano Venzon, Paul L. Miles: The United States in the First World War. An Encyclopedia. New York, London (1995).

5. Mario R. Dinunzio: Woodrow Wilson. Essential Writings and Speeches of the scholar-president. New York (2006), p. 391.

6. Cf. John N. Petrie: American Neutrality in the 20 th Century. The Impossible Dream . Washington (1995).

7. Roman Puff: Three Quarter Enemies: Anti-Americanism in Austria-Hungary during World War I. In: Michael Draxlbauer et. al. [Ed.]: (Anti-)Americanisms. Wien (LIT Verlag) 2004, p 131.

8. Ibid, p. 130.

9. Ibid, p. 130.

10. Comp. Julia Greene: The Canal Builders. Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal. New York (2009).

11. Julia Greene (2009), p. 363.

12. Ibid, p. 366

13. Hans-Ludwig Rosegger: Golfstrom. Berlin (1913)

14. Alexander von Thayer: Hölle am Panama-Kanal. Dresden (1943).
15. Hans Dominik: Atlantis. Leipzig (1925).
16. Hans Ludwig Rosegger: Golfstrom. Berlin (1913), p. 5. [Translated from German by Leopold Schlöndorff]
17. Rosegger (1913), p. 5.
18. Arthur de Gobineau: Essai sur l'inegalité des races humaines. Paris (1854).
19. Hans Dominik: Atlantis. Leipzig (1925). [Translated from German by Leopold Schlöndorff]
20. Dominik 1925, p. 30.
21. Dominik 1925, p. 295.
22. Seestern [pseud. of Ferdinand Grautoff]: 1906. Zusammenbruch der Alten Welt. Leipzig (1905). [Translated from German by Leopold Schlöndorff].
23. Compare Lars U. Scholl: London unter den Hohenzollern. Saki und die Kriegsantizipation. In: Thomas Kuhlmann et al (Ed): Geschichtsbilder. Festschrift für Michael Salewski zum 65. Geburtstag. Stuttgart (2003), p. 237. [Translated from the German by Leopold Schlöndorff]
24. Ibid, p. 237.
25. Ibid, p. 237.
26. Ibid, p. 237.
27. Lars U. Scholl (2003), p. 237.
28. Seestern (1905), p. 199.
29. Klaus Vondung: The apocalypse in Germany. Translated from German by Stephen D. Ricks. Columbia (2000), p. 5.
30. Ibid, p. 5.
31. Ibid, p. 5.
32. Lars U. Scholl (2003), p. 237.
33. Rosegger (1913), p. 31.
34. Compare Gobineau (1854).

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