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Conclusions

Samuël Kruizinga and Karen Gram-Skjoldager

The politics of smallness

Over the more than three years we have been working on this book, the following scenario has played out countless times when discussing its slow but steady progress with co-workers, friends and family members. Having explained that the book is about smallness in European history and in the present, the reply would often go something like: 'Oh, you mean it's about European small states!' The confusion is understandable.¹ Not only is small state studies a recognizable field of study, but the notion that some states are small and others are 'big' or 'great' is widespread, both inside and outside academia. But this book has not been about small states – or about a discrete set of states that share a set of commonly agreed-upon characteristics that set it apart from other categories of states. It is, rather, about what people thought or think a small state is. And, to repeat a key phrase from this volume's introduction, it focuses on the effects of such an attribution, on what smallness 'does': What sorts of things should a small state, once so identified, do or not do? What is its proper place, its appropriate behaviour? What rights and duties accompany its diminutive size? Through several case studies, this volume's authors have set out to operationalize smallness as a new way of understanding how something perceptual and malleable – ideas about size – can and does influence outlook and thereby policy. The ensuing insights entail more than just a new way of saying that 'small states behave differently than great powers', because smallness means different things to different actors. Moreover, individual and group beliefs about what constitutes a given size, and what size in fact means, change over time. Thus this book has explored both how smallness is constructed politically and how smallness influences international politics.

The book's individual essays have focused on a range of case studies spanning the nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. By intervening in and contributing substantially to important scholarly and contemporary debates, they have demonstrated the utility of an explicit research focus on issues of smallness. Moreover, these essays invite us to explore a wider variety of source materials than is common in either political history or political science.

We have found implicit and explicit references to smallness not only in the minutes of political bodies, in opinion pieces, and in the ego-documents of politicians but also

in the works of literary canons, in newspaper advertisements, and in the files of non-Government Organisations (NGO) and scientific bodies. Through these sources, this volume's chapters have pointed to new ways of understanding the nineteenth-century 'belittlement' of Spain – based on much older stereotyping – the way political elites framed the relationships of smaller national units within the larger multinational European empires before 1914, and the construction by Romanian politicians of a national identity for Romania as the small Belgium-of-the-East, in the process allowing us to seriously question the supposed divergence of eastern nationalisms from their Western counterparts. Others contributions offered analyses of how a gendered 'smallness' was instrumental in mobilizing 'great' American support for the relief of small, dependent Belgium during the First World War, and then for military intervention against Belgium's oppressors, or how American think-tanks and funding agents quite differently perceived the possibilities and limits of the smallness of Czechoslovakia and Denmark, respectively – and how such perceptions shaped their attempts to influence each country's scientific and public health agenda. Still others highlighted how the nexus between smallness and neutrality inspired governments and businesses to create press agencies tasked with providing news that was 'neutral' in more than one sense of the word: they were intended not only to break up existing cartels but also to make the international case that their home states had the right to exist and should help foster international understanding.

'Smallness' also emerged as a long-running current in Serbian political culture, serving chiefly as a focal point for fears that the nation would be imprisoned, submerged or destroyed within a hostile political, cultural or ethnic environment. In Icelandic political culture, smallness served a similarly negative function, but there it is conspicuous by its absence. Smallness was seen as the antithesis to Icelandic independence and sovereignty, and references to its modest size or its possible consequences were and remain anathema for most of its mainstream political parties. Much more evident was the use of smallness in the re-imaging and reconfiguration of political relations within the British Isles after the Brexit vote of 2016, as the countries that make up the UK and the Republic of Ireland, which remains part of the European Union, refer to size to discuss perceived asymmetries in the relationships within their constituent territorial, national and political communities. Finally, Israeli smallness in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was constructed out of the notion that its Jewishness, its ability to provide security for its inhabitants and its democracy were embattled due to the state's precarious existence within a hostile regional environment dominated by autocracies. However, these three pillars of Israeli identity formation have increasingly been at odds with one another and with smallness – particularly because of debates on the pros and cons of decreasing or increasing Israel's size as part of either a peace settlement or related to security arrangements with the Palestinians – and have exposed deep schisms.

Images of Smallness

The individual chapters of this book have also demonstrated how the relationship between the politics of smallness on the one hand, and discourses on smallness on

the other, is mutually constitutive. To once again repeat a phrase from this volume's introduction: 'small' politics rely upon representations of 'small' identity, which is in turn produced and reproduced through political action. In an effort to capture something of this dynamic, we have introduced the metaphoric language of auto-, hetero- and meta-images of smallness.

Auto-images refer to common themes in discourses and policies related to one's own polity or another form of collective Self. Political elites in Habsburg Bohemia, Ottoman Albania and Tsarist Georgia, for example, understood the position of their own respective nations within larger empires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as constituting a necessary compensation for weaknesses – expressed in geopolitical, economic and/or cultural terms – and therefore argued against the creation of a separate nation-state and for the maintenance of the status quo. But certain figures in these elites, notably including the future Czechoslovak leader Tomáš Masaryk, changed tack during the First World War, arguing that the war had provided indisputable proof that the great imperial centre no longer served to shield the small nation from the dangers of the outside world but had instead dragged it to an unwanted destination. Freed from what was now domination rather than protection, the independent small states of central Europe, Czechoslovakia first and foremost, had a duty, according to postwar elites, to give voice to their innate progressiveness and love of freedom and democracy. Similarly, in the Netherlands of the late 1930s, Dutch auto-images focusing on the country's smallness and its neutrality propelled the formation of a transnational news network dedicated to neutral news, both to safeguard the Netherlands' precarious independence and to bring a disinterested ('neutral', and therefore 'typically' Dutch) voice to an overheated war of words between the Allies and the Axis powers.

Hetero-images, for their part, are common themes in discourses on and policies aimed at Others. British and Dutch hetero-images of the Spanish, for example, were influenced by the Black Legend, which painted Spain and its inhabitants as intolerant, fanatical and therefore incapable of contributing anything to European culture or civilization; the narrative consistently generated was of an ever-shrinking, negligible country. Nineteenth-century Romanian elites, by way of contrast, had a much more positive impression of small Belgium. These elites connected its smallness to its ability to function, apparently quite successfully, as at once a bridge between civilizations and a barrier against various forms of barbarism, inhabiting a dual identity that Romania could aspire to and, it was hoped, one day achieve. The relentless press campaign waged in the United States during the First World War saw less agency amongst the Belgians than the Romanian elites did. Instead, what was highlighted was a hetero-image of Belgium that depicted the country as unable to withstand the onslaught of war generally, or its German occupier specifically, without American help. Belgium's portrayal as great America's 'little sister', moreover, helped to evoke a sense of 'brotherly' devotion and commitment. Just a few years later, American philanthropists imagined two kinds of smallness existing side by side in Europe: developed, and therefore well-charted, Denmark was portrayed as an ideal laboratory environment-in-miniature, whereas newly created Czechoslovakia seemed to offer itself up as a small, empty canvas that could be painted upon quickly.

Meta-images, our third category, are second-order projections. They refer to discourses and policies related not to the (collective) Self or the Other but instead based on *expectations* of what the Other thinks of the Self. In the Serbian media landscape, for example, we can detect a persistent thread of meta-images related to purported designs of Others – the Habsburgs, Germans, NATO and most recently the European Union – on Serbian statehood or even the Serbians' right to exist. These, in turn, influenced auto-images, strengthening narratives of Serbia as a state continually on the verge of becoming smaller, thus complicating Serbian-EU accession talks. Similarly, in Israel, the notion that, by and large, the outside world cannot or refuses to grasp the complexities of its unique security situation and draws unfair conclusions from biased media representations – painting it as a lumbering, aggressive Goliath rather than 'little guy' David fighting the good fight against all odds – has resulted in domestic shifts away from conciliatory politics vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

Finally, this volume has included several examples of discourse and policy appearing to be at odds with each other. In Iceland, for example, the most prominent strand of (political) identity construction emphasized independence and autonomy, even if in practice Icelandic politicians throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries have sought shelter so as to protect the country against the geopolitical, economic and financial storms that its political elites apparently believe the country cannot hope to weather alone. This dichotomy between identity and foreign policy has made 'smallness' a taboo subject, and debate about Icelandic dependence on other political entities became, and remains, a bridge too far for the country's major political groupings. And on the British Isles, Brexit enflamed rhetoric about who is great and who is small – even as the overlapping and competing allegiances owed by the isles' inhabitants to a multitude of communities, nations and states muddies the waters significantly. Here, we see smallness 'acted out' in practice rather than being the explicit subject of, and something sustained by, political discourse.

Patterns of smallness

The essays that make up this book thus demonstrate the utility of our approach by showing how a focus on the politics of smallness questions assumptions, introduces new research questions, allows for a focus on new types of source materials and leads to key new insights while introducing a new metaphorical language to help analyse 'smallness'. In what remains of this final chapter, we will first explore the various ways that smallness itself has been imaged in European political and identity discourses since the early nineteenth century. Crucially, this endeavour is a first attempt to move beyond single instances or comparative case studies and to look at the broader patterns evident as the politics of smallness have played out over the last two centuries.

First of all, it is important to distinguish situations in which smallness is contested – or when smallness is seen to not accurately reflect a state's proper status within a size-based hierarchy – from those where it is not. When accepted or even embraced, smallness seems to be a much more stable element of identity formation, and something that is also more readily recognized in 'like-minded' others. Those peers form part of

a reference group and are then held to similar standards with the expectation that they will act and/or respond to particular situations in similar ways.² The Scandinavian experience of smallness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, offers prime examples here. However, in late nineteenth-century Spain, twentieth-century Iceland, and twenty-first-century Serbia, smallness was contested in each instance as being at odds with the country's historical achievements, its sovereignty and/or its future prospects.

Likewise, smallness is experienced differently in a situation experienced as adversarial or asymmetrical. If the international system is perceived ultimately to be driven by a preponderance of military or economic power, smallness will be seen as a liability or will be reconfigured to increase its defensive potential. Small states' press agencies, as we have seen, were first formed out of an increasing sense of vulnerability and would continually stress the right of smallness to exist in a world increasingly dominated by the force of arms. But such vulnerability can also lead smallness to be rejected outright, or, as in the case of Serbia, contribute to situations involving costly military offensives and ethnic cleansing campaigns.

Third, smallness seems to be intimately connected to imagined geography, and more specifically to the perception of centrality. Whether a state is thought to occupy a 'central' position or is instead placed on the 'periphery' will co-determine a state's size on the mental maps of those considering such a state and its position vis-à-vis other states. Obviously, the inevitability of such judgements is aligned with the idea that size is perceptual and subjective. But it also ties into the notion that the international system is made up of changing and overlapping hierarchies: and these hierarchies, in determining our mental maps of the globe and influencing our conceptions of what is central and peripheral within them, also help shape our ideas of (relative) size, and what these gradations of size mean. The attraction of Belgium's smallness was, for nineteenth-century Romanian elites, closely related to its centrality, which is to say its position near the cultural and political power centres of Europe, over which it could wield a benign influence. And during the First World War, Americans saw in diminutive Belgium a country central to European culture and civilization, its smallness making it both incapable of helping itself in times of war and invasion and eminently worthy of aid when its borders were violated. And in the 1930s, small, peripheral Czechoslovakia was imagined by American donors as a blank slate, and later as little more than an annex to Germany, whereas Denmark was seen as an established, older state, more modern and therefore closer to the 'centre'. Imagined geography also played key roles, as we have seen, in the reconfiguration of relations amongst the various political entities occupying the British Isles, as questions of centrality and peripherality as well as 'natural' connections and axes are affected by the political event of Britain's exit from the European Union.

Fourth, there seems to be a close connection between smallness and spheres of action. Of course, hetero- and meta-images abounded that cast small states as essentially passive. American aid appeals painted First World War-era Belgium, for example, as a nation almost devoid of agency: rendered powerless by the invading Germans, its population, which seemed to consist nearly exclusively of women and children, simply needed American men to swoop in and rescue them. And in

twenty-first-century Israel, a foreign policy and an internal defence policy both seen as being too active – too violent, too expansionist – have been at odds with conscious attempts to portray the country as small. A kind of necessary, inherent passivity on the part of small states has been one key reason why neutrality was so long thought to be a perfect fit for them. And yet the connection between passivity and smallness is far from automatic: smallness might be accompanied by spurious activity, but this has never been so across the full political spectrum. What exactly the ‘right’ areas were, in which agency and smallness could go hand in hand, differed according to (changing perceptions of) the shape of the international system.

Finally, and flowing from all that has been stated above, the politics of smallness differs not only from place to place but also from era to era. For example, the political and intellectual elites of the self-proclaimed proto-nations embedded within the larger central European empires seemed, prior to 1914, content to exist within the given political framework of the time, since (so the argument went) their smallness left no room for true sovereignty. That perception started to change in 1914 and decisively altered at the end of the First World War, when these same elites reconfigured their politics of smallness so as to align with new understandings of the (changed) hierarchies of the international system: they now saw their nations as having the space to inhabit independent political units. We see here a distinction emerging between established and new small states, as the twin examples of Czechoslovakia’s and Denmark’s experience with their American benefactors show. In the Netherlands, meanwhile, smallness and neutrality were considered to be two sides of the same coin throughout the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries. However, the experience of occupation during the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War convinced subsequent governments and voters alike that Dutch smallness needed to be divorced from a stance of neutrality, which was to be replaced with participation in European and Atlantic security arrangements. Tellingly, however, in Sweden the foreign policy elites interpreted their geopolitical circumstances differently, opting to continue their policy of neutrality as the two superpower-based blocs emerged post-1945.³ In Iceland, moreover, foreign policy elites sought shelter to compensate for their smallness where they could, displaying an eagerness to replace American with Chinese or Russian aid that is (as yet) unknown in other European states, whereas policy elites in the UK and Ireland (Northern Ireland as part of but distinct within the UK, and the Republic) continue their existential debates about what smallness means either within Europe or globally up through the time of this writing.

Smallness, size, hierarchies and institutions

In this last section, we will consider some of the avenues of further research that this volume has opened up. We would like to point to three possible strands of future research in particular, namely those related to *size*, *hierarchies* and *institutions*.

Smallness, first, is but one size-class, and size is an integral part of the construction of any state’s identity. We suggest therefore that it would yield real benefits to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how these debates and processes play out

in relation to other size categories – be they ‘great powers’, ‘superpowers’, ‘medium powers’ or ‘microstates’ – in much the same way that this volume has done with regard to ‘small states’. The approach of this volume, at its core, is not about specific issues or policies but about new ways of reconstructing and analysing size-related mental maps based primarily on beliefs. In essence, such an orientation connects with and reinvigorates much older notions that international relations are primarily concerned with beliefs about Self and Other and their proper relation to each other.⁴ This linkage, in turn, helps us to anchor debates about specific issues and policies in much deeper, more stable (but not immobile!) debates about worldviews and identity.⁵

Second, we suggest looking not simply at the analysis of size-based state categories but more specifically at the relationships amongst them. If all states are not created equal and state size (however constructed) is widely understood to enable and limit certain spheres of international political activity, then the questions of which hierarchies exist that order (and often subordinate) these states, and how they are reproduced, contested, and renegotiated become signally important. Whether a particular size category and status are accepted or rejected can be attributed to one’s own state or to that of another – these deliberations play out in a relational and hierarchical context where considerations about the comparative size and status of a state is important and has implications for the possibilities and the limits of interstate interactions. For these reasons, future research on state size and size-based categorization might benefit from engaging with the concept of hierarchy, drawing inspiration from the rich field of hierarchy studies that has gained prominence in international relations studies over the last two decades. Hierarchy studies, in challenging neorealism’s fundamental assumption that the ordering principle of the international system is anarchy, disputes the inference that since an international system is anarchic, all relations within that system must also be so.⁶ Rather, so the argument goes, hierarchies governing units are consistent with and possible within an anarchic system – whether these hierarchies are organized around social norms, status or authority.⁷ Without going into too much detail, a couple of observations from this literature can be used to demonstrate the potential of engaging with this scholarship in future historical work on state size and its role in international politics. As David A. Lake points out in his succinct overview of the field, it is productive to distinguish broad hierarchies based on social norms from more specific hierarchies based on status. According to Lake, what defines a broad hierarchy is its foundation upon social norms of inequality ‘that are often beyond consciousness, or at least have been so thoroughly “normalized” that they typically are left unexamined’.⁸ Racial hierarchies and hierarchies of gender are two core examples of these pervasive and implicit forms of hierarchy.⁹ Status hierarchies, by contrast, are the types of hierarchies that evolve around diplomats’ and scholars’ typologies of international actors – such as the concepts of small states and great powers that are addressed in this volume. This strand of literature takes as given that collectives of individuals organized into states have the same psychological propensity as individuals do for ranking other groups relative to themselves in order to establish how these groups should be regarded and treated in social interactions. In IR, as in small state studies, status most often appears as a characteristic associated with the distribution of

capabilities. However, an alternative strain of literature, more constructivist in its orientation, examines strategies for building and subverting hierarchy.¹⁰

The distinction between broad hierarchies of social norms and the more specific and explicit hierarchies of status may be analytically useful, as it prompts us to be more attentive to the types of hierarchies that are sublimated and normalized and thus form the subtext to the explicit and politically conscious forms of status-building in international politics. This will be particularly helpful as we move the exploration of size in international politics beyond the Anglo-European sphere and venture into a terrain where other forms of hierarchies – for example, those created by the legacies of Empire and other structures of dependency – still linger.¹¹ Likewise, the constructivist approaches to status hierarchies prompt us to supplement the mappings of images in international politics with attempts to trace and conceptualize the active status-seeking strategies employed by states in order to maintain and improve their standing in the international system.¹²

Finally, the contributions in this volume have focused mainly on inter-state relationships and perceptions, whether bilateral or multilateral. They have discussed how the international system and its composite parts have been imagined but have done so almost exclusively from the vantage point of, and in between, state (or sub-state) units, mainly in and around Europe. A logical next step would be to bring the analytical lens introduced in this book to the institutions where these multiple hierarchies overlap, intersect and crystallize, namely international organizations and international law. Although there is a rich literature on the codification of the status and hierarchies of states in diplomatic law and practice,¹³ systematic historical studies of how international organizations and international public law reflect and reproduce various kinds of state typologies and hierarchies through formal procedure and informal day-to-day practices still await scholars to delve into them.

Each of these avenues, we believe, is worth pursuing. We hope that this book has not only demonstrated new ways to conceptualize and understand the nexus linking size, politics and identity but has also provided an impetus and encouragement to ongoing discussion on how states are seen to differ from each other, and how the formation and constant re-creation of the international system connect to patterns of identity construction. This book will definitely not be the last word on ‘smallness’, or even on ‘small states’. But we do hope that we have reframed the discussions about smallness and, in doing so, have opened up new avenues for studying ‘size’ and its importance in understanding the ways states ‘see’ themselves, others and their place amongst them.

Notes

- 1 Inspired by Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914–1918*, 267.
- 2 Cf. Clunan, ‘Status Is Cultural’, 294.
- 3 Erlandsson, *Window of opportunity*.
- 4 E.g. Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, esp. 4–5, 14.
- 5 Although this is an argument that needs to be developed much further, a key reason to embark on such a project could be to help solve what has been a key issue in the

study of international relations (history): the connection between policy on the one hand and 'public opinion' on the other. It has been very hard, even for time periods and locales where regular polls were conducted and are available for study, to establish firm links between what people thought about international politics and the international conduct of a country, or of transnational organizations and NGOs. See Hucker, *Public Opinion and Twentieth-Century Diplomacy*; Eichenberg, 'Public Opinion on Foreign Policy Issues'; Bishop, *The Illusion of Public Opinion*.

- 6 Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, 17–43.
- 7 Lake, 'Hierarchy and International Relations'.
- 8 Lake, 3.
- 9 For one prominent example of this approach, see: Towns, *Women and States*. In international history there is a rich tradition for analysing the role of cultural assumptions and norms in the making of foreign policy, see for instance Costigliola, 'Unceasing Pressure for Penetration'; Costigliola, 'The Nuclear Family'.
- 10 Lake, 'Hierarchy and International Relations', 4–5. Lake 2017 p. 4–5.
- 11 On the relationship between authority and hierarchy, see Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, 45ff.
- 12 For a few example of this approach, see Renshon, *Fighting for Status. Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics*; Zarakolu, *After Defeat*.
- 13 See for instance Satow, *A Guide to Diplomatic Practice*. Satow's guide has been published in consecutive editions since 1917.