

Samuël Kruizinga (Ed.). (2022). *The politics of smallness in Modern Europe: Size, identity and international relations since 1800*. Bloomsbury. 264pp. ISBN: 978-1-3502-9991-7. Hbk £90, pbk £28.99, ebook £26.09.

The study of small states in international relations (IR) has long been fixated on defining its object of analysis; so much so that some scholars have effectively thrown up their hands, insisting there is nothing left to say on the subject. This volume, however, breathes new life into this old and often stale debate. Largely written by historians and not IR scholars, it does so by shifting the reader's perspective away from the notion of what a small state *is* to what people understood smallness to be and do. Size clearly matters in international politics, editor Samuël Kruizinga agrees in his introduction, but it is "perceptual and subjective" (p. 6). The book's substantive chapters show just how different the implications of smallness and the "size hierarchy" of international relations can be, depending on the context, audience, and purpose. The book unpacks "smallness" in contexts rarely considered by IR.

In one such departure (and fittingly for this journal), the book detaches the adjective "small" from its frequent companion, "state." It also denaturalizes IR's frequent assumption that polities' primary referent is the state system. For some of the volume's subjects, imperial dynamics were the primary referents. In Chapter 2, Adrian Brisku examines the meanings of size within the Habsburg empire, comparing three polities that would eventually emerge as states: Albania, Czechoslovakia and Georgia. However, their politicians did not always see statehood as the *sine qua non*. The conundrum was how to manage being a "small nation within an empire," seeking to maximize autonomy, influence, or benefits vis-à-vis the imperial centre (p. 36). Later independence did not eliminate the challenges of asymmetry, instead underscoring a growing emphasis and rearticulation of smallness (pp. 50-51).

In dialogue with this chapter, Christian Axboe Nielsen shows how Serbian elites often rebuffed the charge of smallness (Chapter 7). Serbia experienced dramatic geographic alterations, both as an independent entity and as part of the Ottoman Empire and later Yugoslavia. Perceived and ascribed size thus became something of a fixation. Nielsen suggests that size remains central to Serbia's fractured political identity: should the nation "reconcile itself to smallness and focus on improving the welfare of its population? Or should it, instead, push for the creation of a Great Serbia at the expense of its neighbours?" (p. 133). A similar dilemma recurs in the case of Israel in Chapter 5, by Alexei Tsinovoi. For a time, Israeli elites often narrated their security position as a David against neighbouring Goliaths. But conservative counternarratives arose, defining smallness as a problem to be overcome through military and geographical expansion. Beyond the strategic terms, some figures offered a religiously infused vision of a biblical, "greater Israel" (p. 195). Size, then, is intimately related to the matters roiling the country's politics and international position.

The book masterfully demonstrates that size is dynamic, not static. This contribution coincides with the relational and contextual approach that has gained prominence in IR's study of small states. It also goes beyond it, showing how meanings of size are deployed politically and culturally, as both boon and bane. This is clear from the choice to start the book with a chapter on Spain. Despite being a case in Annette Baker Fox's landmark 1959 *The power of small states*, the Iberian kingdom is rarely considered to be a "small state". But here, the chapter's author, Yolanda Rodríguez Pérez, describes how a once globe-spanning empire was "belittled" politically, historiographically, and culturally during the 18th and 19th centuries. Catholic Spain's largely Protestant rivals recast the country not only as a militarily enfeebled power but as "pre-rationalist, religious and barbaric" in culture terms (p. 23).

If exploring Spain’s “smallness” might initially confound IR scholars, that anyone would doubt Iceland’s slight size could be equally surprising. Yet, Thorhallsson and Hálfdanarson (Chapter 8) show how domestic politicians have avoided that designation, favouring instead a self-image as a “fully sovereign member of the international community” (pp. 151-152). This narrative coexists with a quiet assumption among the island’s foreign policy elite that smallness indeed defines Iceland’s international position, creating a corollary need for “shelter”. Both sides of this coin are rooted in pre-independence debates over the polity’s ability to stand apart from the Kingdom of Denmark; the theme recurred in relation to the country’s integration into the post-World War II U.S. security sphere, and as a result of the deep shock inflicted by the 2008-09 global financial crisis.

Smallness was not always negative, however. It was often associated with peacefulness, and sometimes with modernity. Like today, small states positioned themselves as bridges or as “suited to mediate” between divergent larger powers (p. 57). For Czechoslovakia’s founding father, Tomáš Masaryk, “Smallness entailed disengagement from power politics defined by war and military alliances” (p. 37). Similarly, Belgium was born as a mandated neutral state and thus “turned smallness from a liability into a boon” (pp. 57-58), argue Carstocea and Van Ginderachter in Chapter 3. (Although Belgium’s King Leopold II despised his kingdom’s smallness, animating the imperial violence he inflicted upon Central Africa.) Embracing this image of Belgian modernity, Romanian elites viewed the Western European country as a model. Their “highly selective importation of certain models” shows how leaders might learn from one another about how to manage the challenges of asymmetry (p. 62).

Smallness is not just a matter of a polity’s self-image. Several chapters examine the perception of size by external state and non-state actors. U.S. foundations linked smallness with their own agendas as they developed initiatives in science, public health, and humanitarian aid. Small states were “empirically manageable” laboratories to test new programmes; small states like Czechoslovakia and Denmark could be tracked and remade, illustrate Van Meer, Andersen, and Goldschmidt Pedersen (Chapter 5).

This volume will be of interest to international historians and IR scholars alike. It makes important contributions to the understanding of small states, territories and polities. Although most of the authors come from history and area-studies, the book’s central questions are intimately connected to international relations. First, it offers a new way to think about smallness by historicizing concepts in a way that nods to Quentin Skinner and recent global intellectual history. Second, the book makes size dynamic and political, breaking with material and categorical approaches in a way that advances IR’s relational turn. Finally, it extracts smallness from the state system. In combination, this work casts real doubt on attempts to apply the “small state” concept trans-historically or (more critically) ahistorically.

This book enhances the study of small states in many ways. Globally, we have much to learn about the historical politics of smallness removed from the assumed centrality of the state and the static treatment of size. Such an approach could displace Eurocentric expansionist narratives of the state-system by highlighting mutability and context, as well as the implications of the imperial and local politics of size. Indeed, it is outside Europe that many of the book’s perceptual and conceptual shifts may yet have the greatest payoff.

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