

# The Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918

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Why did the Habsburg Monarchy fall? Could it have been saved, and if so would it have been worthwhile? Taylor decides that it was moribund, if not from the start, so at least after the Napoleonic Wars. As to whether it had been worthwhile to preserve it, the answer is obviously not in the moribund state, and as to any other Taylor sees there having really been any sign of. The book is a very long argument for his thesis, and as most long arguments rather tedious. The author presents a long, rather detailed list, of ups and downs, with a long succession of names which fade into oblivion almost as fast as they are temporarily brought into the lime light. Taylor does not even attempt to give a wider context and to really explain what it all means, just one damned thing after another. The book is a result of a lot of reading, much of it presenting a rather frustrating experience according to his comments in his guide to the literature attached at the very end. Taylor is usually associated with lively historical accounts, in this case his heart does not seem to be in it, unlike the case when he turns his attention to England. He does not know enough, he does not care enough, as a consequence the book does not rise above a historically competent summary of mostly secondary sources. Taylor has done his homework and can move on to other things. The book only comes to life at the very end when he discusses the foreplay to the First World War (or as he prefers to call it the First German War) and the following aftermath in an epilogue, which may be the most readable part of the book. The reason is rather obvious, it concerns a time with which we have a greater familiarity, and it also gives immediate background, and helpful as such I have to admit, to a political situation with which we are quite familiar. Thus the book, the first version written in 1941, the second augmented one in 1947, almost appears prophetic.

To begin from the beginning, which Taylor does not really do, there is the once very powerful Habsburg dynasty, emerging from Switzerland sometime during the 13th century. A medieval force which through strategic alliances, mostly through bed chambers, acquired an unprecedented power, at one time putting under the same umbrella the Western Iberian lands, with its huge colonial empire and the Eastern estates. A union of no natural affinity, except of course the Catholic Church for which it appeared to be the principal political proponent, its secular arm so to speak. Spain was paramount during the 16th century, coming to grief through the debacle of the great Armada in 1588 which showed the limitations of its power on the European scene, and hence the beginning of its end, from then on it would but play a marginal role in European affairs. The empire divided and its center of gravity moved to the East. Here it played a central role during the 17th century during the wars of religion. The main force behind the Catholic Counter revolution as well as the bulwark against the Turks who was on the offensive extending its foothold on the Balkans, conquering Hungary and threatened Vienna itself<sup>1</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> There was a Siege of Vienna as early as 1529, and there was another attack fought off as late as 1683

Thirty Years War, religious as it may have been, was foremost a political struggle where an ascending and Catholic France sought to challenge and break the power monopoly of the Habsburgs, enlisting the help of the Swedes, who as a consequence enjoyed for a brief period great power status. By the 18th century France was the predominant continental power with the Austrian lands, the Empire of the East, solidly ensconced in the East but still maintaining the authority of supplying the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire, and with Russia and Prussia emerging players on the scene, the consequence of which was the erasure from the map of the old powers of Poland and Lithuania<sup>2</sup>, the former by the three notorious partitions at the end of the century. Austria in the 18th century was still an undifferentiated block, an illiterate and politically unconscious peasantry ruled by an elite. Basically a feudal society based on an agricultural economy, potentially lasting for ever. The general reader does not know very much of the country during this period, except vague references to Maria Theresa, that buxomy Empress<sup>3</sup> devoted to needlepoint. To that Taylor adds a few able emperors by names of Joseph and Leopold devoted to the unification of the empire preparing it for modern times. Those came faster than anticipated through the Napoleonic catastrophe, which completely for a few years gloriously redraw the map of Europe, pushing aside Russia and Austria and for all intents and purposes obliterating the regional power of Prussia. Napoleon was eventually defeated by a grand coalition with Russia taking the leading part. And here Taylor's story starts, with the resurrection of the Old Order under Metternich in 1815 and onwards.

The 19th century was not the 18th. While the latter may be thought of the first modern century with the emergence of the Enlightenment, the latter did not, as with the case of science, have any practical consequences until the concomitant industrialization of the next. In short, Austria, now formally an Empire did not keep up in the modern development, even if Joseph I had been in the forefront of embracing the ideas of Enlightenment and helped to establish a modern, efficient and most likely rather uncorrupted bureaucracy which would become the Hallmark of the Empire until its very dissolution. It was an Empire, but the designation is misleading, it was more like a family corporation, a hereditary dynasty, with a huge holding of diverse geographical entities with concomitant subject people. A corporation must have a mission, a *raison d'être*, beyond that of mere self-perpetuation, and it had, although those tended to be thrown upon it, not the result of an active search. As noted before it served as a bulwark against the Turks in the 16th century, as the pillar of the counter-reformation in the 17th, while at the 18th it is not too clear what its mission was, nevertheless it was considered as a necessary fixture. So come the 19th century, the century following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. One of the new great ideas were that of Nations and Nationhood and the concomitant notion of Nationality, or more ominously people or 'Volk'. Such an idea requires a modicum of education, it does not make sense to an illiterate peasant living within a narrow circle, thus it is acquired by a growing middle class of school-teachers, lawyers, artisans and others somewhat divorced from the soil and hence more liable to take a sentimental and romantic view. One may also note that the same stratum of society was responsible for the growth of Socialism, a movement which in spite of its obvious international spirit

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<sup>2</sup> Instrumental in the defeat of the Ottoman invaders at the end of the 17th century.

<sup>3</sup> In fact not formally true, the country did not become an empire until after 1804

was closely related to nationalism. In fact without the tangibility of the latter it may have been hard to relate to the abstract features of the former. And once we are talking about Socialism we are led to consider the more general notion of liberalism, which also, at least until the 20th century was wedded as well to nationalism. Now, nationalism once developed may take root among the land-owning classes, provided that it was to their advantage and hence acquire more political clout.

Once there was nationalism there were an awareness of ethnic identity, and that set up the stage for a disintegration of the Austrian Empire. The first, and as it would turn out, the enduring challenge was that of Hungary, a country with an actual historic tradition and which hence was ripe for nationhood, especially as it had been, if slowly, liberated from the Turks by the Austrians. The Hungarians demanded a special position, in fact an equal position with the Austrians, both Germans and Hungarians (or more precisely the Magyars) being in a sense the master-races of the Empire. German was the language of the bureaucracy, and hence it was the lingua-franca of the governing bodies. This was natural, in the sense that a lingua franca being a language of convenience, is not imposed by fiat. Thus German spread all over the empire, and thus many of the big cities, in this predominantly agrarian country, were to a large extent German speaking. That held for Prague but also, maybe more surprisingly for Budapest. This does not necessarily mean that those who spoke German identified themselves as German, once there is a well-established lingua franca, by the same principle of convenience, the extent of its use may even encroach on the private sphere. It all set up rumblings and eventually ended up as a major quake shaking a large part of the continent, going from major city in one country to the major one in an adjacent. It all came to a climax in 1848, and is one of the major dates of European 19th century history. The quake shook governments and dynasties, but did not dismantle them as the French one had done some sixty years earlier. It shook enough for the court to escape from Vienna, where there were serious disturbances, but return a few months later. Anyway a new special relation was established with Hungary, which were busy to extend itself as much as possible, with Croatia and Transylvania part of its territory. Further complications ensued and in 1867 the dual monarchy was born, the 'K.u.K. to which Taylor makes no explicit reference. But then of course we are fast forwarding on the tape, there being so many ups and downs going on that it is hard to keep track of them in memory. One may note that in 1848 the young nephew of the abdicating emperor, (a mere imbecille, according to the author, it being unclear how literally to take that in a clinical sense) - Franz Joseph - became the new emperor at eighteen, a position he would maintain for almost seventy years. It was hoped that he would infuse fresh blood into the dynasty, maybe a mission to overwhelming for the young man. During the next eighteen years or so, the relationship to the emerging unification of German States, was being worked out. As noted earlier, Austria was the natural leader of the Holy Roman Empire, an anachronistic entity stemming from Medieval times, but with limited practical importance, and there was the question of whether the unification would proceed along Greater or Smaller German lines. The former meant the inclusion of Austria, and thus under its tutelage, the latter meant its exclusion and hence the leadership of Prussia, for all intents and purposes of Bismarck. Now we see the difference between the young Prussia and the old Austria. In Prussia we find a dynamic minister who has visions and

gets things done, while in Austria there is a succession of ministers all muddling along, like the empire at large. In Prussia Bismarck has taken over, riding the king like a horse, while in Austria policies is very much up to the emperor, who of course does not have the intellectual capacity to conceive and follow them through, nor the sense not to meddle. Now, the Greater German solution is clearly impractical, with German Austria proper, as far as the term has any meaning, there is a host of non-German populations in the package. To include them would be to compromise the vision of a unified Germany under the banner of one 'Volk' and one language: but to exclude them would be to either excise them, as being more or less the private property of the dynasty, or to leave them in a kind of limbo, with the German part of Austria both part of Germany and the traditional Habsburg transnational empire. The Austrians did not conduct a consistent policy, the initiative was with Bismarck, they were even denied access to the Zoll-Verein which was formed as a preliminary. A battle in 1867 settled the matter once and for all, and led to a imperial crises, the establishment of the dual monarchy, as above, being one of the consequences.

From now on the empire was on the decline. Internally it was riddled by the nationality issues. There was Hungary, a mini-empire on its own, which was intent upon subjugation of its national minorities, at the same time being anxious that the dynasty would not acknowledge national claims of any other populations, and thereby weakening the special status of Hungary. Now the only serious case was Bohemia which had some claim to a previous history, but which also wanted to include Moravia and Silesia. Prague was predominantly German speaking, but there were demands on Czech getting locally the same status. The German speakers resented the idea, its bureaucrats also having to learn a foreign tongue. In Galicia there was a strong Polish minority, and the Poles certainly has a historical claim on nationhood, yet for political reasons they were reluctant to exit the empire for fear of being subjugated by the Russians. But there were also many Ukrainians, who did not have the same kind of claim, there really never having been a Ukrainian nation, and then we had the Little Russians, or the Rutheneans, who nationwide were trivial and easily ignored. The Croatians were under the thumbs of the ruthless Hungary, (just as all small nations are striving for dominance and expansion), and did not really have a developed national sense yet. Basically the small minorities very much preferred the power of the dynasty as a protection against stronger ones, such as Hungary.

Politically Austria and Russia came more and more under the threat of conflict as the Russians had designs on the Black Sea, ultimately on Constantinople, the ultimate prize to seize from the disintegrating Ottoman empire, the sick man of Europe. During the 19th century many Christian, meaning Greek Orthodox, countries had been liberated from the Turks, Greece, during the early 19th century being the most romantic case, later on to be joined by Bulgaria under Russian tutelage. Thus ultimately there were contradicting interests on the Balkan. Initially those were kept in check by the Triple Alliance between Prussia, Austria-Hungary and Russia, and Bismarck after the liberation of Bulgaria orchestrated a conference in Berlin where matters were at least temporarily settled and Austria-Hungary was saved from Russian confrontation by Bismarck's machinations. As a result Austria recieved the stewardship of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but insisted that it remained under Ottoman suzerainty.

Eventually the situation became more and more untenable. After the dismissal of Bismarck German policies were conceived and conducted with less skill and authority, and Russia left the Triple Alliance (which meant that Austria-Hungary became even more closely tied to Germany) and established fateful ties with France, which would by the Germans, rightly or wrongly be felt as an encirclement.

The 19th century flowed into the 20th, the international scene became more complicated as well as the diplomatic game. Austria-Hungary finally annexed Bosnia and Hercegovina in 1908 which led to a crisis with Russia. There were Balkan wars, involving Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria, just before the final defusion in 1914. The role of Austria-Hungary versus belligerent Serbia comes under severe criticism by the author, the situation could have been handled much more skillfully, had not the Empire felt the need to show itself to be a major player, major powers need not to prove themselves, their status being tacitly understood. By this time the Empire was the junior partner of Germany, unable to conduct an independant foreign policy. One thing led to another, and then in 1916 the old emperor died and his successor Karl, different from Franz Ferdinand whose assasination two years earlier is conveniently seen as the starting shot of the First World War<sup>4</sup>. The new emperor Karl was helpless when it came to negotiating the war the whole empire being a mere adjunct to Germany. So when the war ended, there was nothing to prop up the old dynasty and the holdings, as with an auction after a divestment, were carried off in all directions. Of the large Hungary, the region of Transylvania was given to Rumania, one of the major territorial winners of the war, although its active participation could be measured in days at end of the war. Through the skilled negotiations of Masaryk, an intellectual and university professor, yet a skilled politician, a Czechoslovakian nation was formed. The amalgamation of Czech with Slovakia, or better still Bohemia with Moravia, was not altogether a very natural or fortunate one, and would in the early 90's split up. Now the creation of a South Slavic confederation was initially a mere paper product causing very little enthusiasm on the ground. The Serbs and the Croatsians hated each other and the Slovenes as a small population would have prefered the protection of a Dynasty. To this mixture was added Bosnia and Hercegovina along a string of smaller entities along the Greek border. Albania though, was left out of it. The formation of Yugoslavia was never a solid one. It managed to survive the split ups during the War and German occupation, when the Croats (as Slovakia) aligned themselves with the occupiers. Thanks to the authority of Tito, a general during the partisan war, the country was held together, if barely. He died in 1980, and ten years later it all disintegrated, something which might already have been obvious some seventy odd years later<sup>5</sup>. Thus at the very end the account acquires a liveliness and topicality it had previously lacked.

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<sup>4</sup> About Franz Ferdinand the author has few appreciative things to say, and the emperor himself had never forgiven him his marriage to non-royalty.

<sup>5</sup> The tenure of Yugoslavia was roughly as long, and did roughly cover the same time span as that of Soviet Union