

The Vulnerable Knight on the Kaiser's Chessboard, Part I

Waltzing to an Inevitable Demise?

In this article Francis Stapleton examines the decline and fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The historian Robert Wolfson has said that the greatest benefit of studying the Habsburg Empire is that it provides 'an opportunity to consider the concept of the "weakness" of a state'. This depressing determinist viewpoint has dominated our perceptions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire between 1850 and its formal termination in 1918. Historians like Oscar Jaszi and A.J.P. Taylor painted a seductively convincing picture of an out-of-date empire waltzing its way to an inevitable demise.

Determinist historiographical argument

The traditional view of Austria-Hungary's decline placed huge emphasis on its in-built contradictions. The forces that held the Empire together for 400 years (centripetal forces) — loyalty to the emperor, an efficient state bureaucracy, the confidence of the armed forces, international support for the Empire, the ability of the Church to unify the duality of the dynasty, and the intelligentsia's and aristocracy's satisfaction with the status quo — were all in a state of perpetual decay. Moreover, the Empire was also doomed due to two undermining forces, the nationalities issue and adventurous foreign policy designed to avert looming chaos at home (centrifugal forces).

However, many revisionist historians have challenged this once seemingly obvious historical line of argument. C.A. Macartney, A. Sked, W.M. Johnson and A. Wheatcroft have all questioned the determinist agenda. They argue that far from decaying, the Empire up to 1914 showed its characteristic ability to adapt and renew itself. This chameleonesque quality produced a vibrant but idiosyncratic Habsburg Empire between 1850 and 1914.

Emperor Franz Joseph (1830–1916).

Furthermore, Habsburg foreign policy during most of this period did far more to add stability to this politically volcanic part of Europe than to destabilise it. That the Empire's foreign policy became a fuse for international war in 1914 was due to its 'hijack' by Kaiser Wilhelm II, and the state's ultimate demise rests at the gates of Hohenzollern Berlin rather than Habsburg Vienna. Let us test, then, this proposition in more detail.

A state well led? — the great juggler

In the past, Emperor Franz Joseph found very few apologists. He has often been characterised as an ultra-conservative, rigid, pedantic and ultimately too long-serving emperor (1848–1916). Critics have pointed to his nineteenth-century pre-industrial mind. By 1900, personal loss (his brother Maximilian's execution in 1867, Prince Rudolf's suicide in 1889, his brother Karl Ludwig's death

from infected water in Palestine in 1895, Empress Elizabeth's assassination in 1898) had made him bitter, morose and introverted.

This in turn left Franz Joseph uninterested in change at a time when the Empire desperately needed reform. A man who turned his back on the modern world, refusing even to permit the telephone and the typewriter to be employed in his private office. An emperor who could be sent into a tirade of anger if an officer had no buttons on his uniform but who failed to perceive the potential disaster for the dynasty in the aftermath of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo. The 'Last Cavalier' of a dying society.

Revisionist research, however, has emphasised that this portrait is flawed and unrepresentative. Andrew Wheatcroft has turned these images *volte-face*. A closer look at the Emperor shows him in many ways to be an exceptional ruler. Three main criteria may be highlighted to support this alternative interpretation.

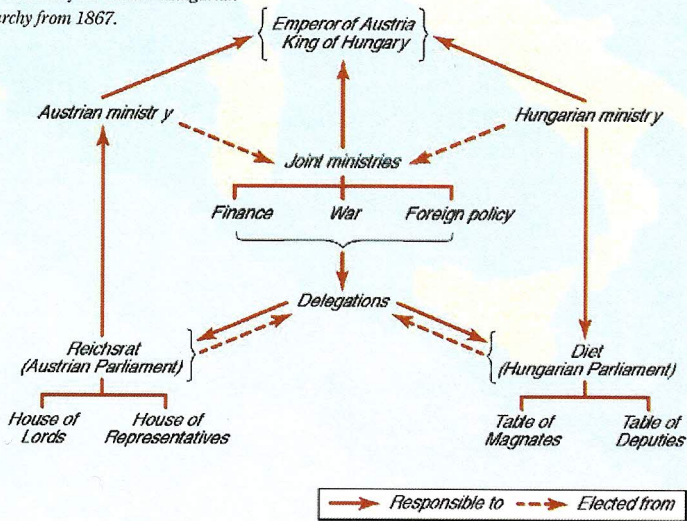
Firstly, it is clear that Franz Joseph was a very early convert to the popularisation of the dynasty by all the available media. In the earlier part of his reign the romantic artistic portraits by court painters like Franz Winterhalter were reproduced on a gargantuan scale. The regime ensured that every peasant, in the humblest homes in the furthestmost parts of the Empire, could afford to have a 'postcard proof' of his or her loyalty to the Emperor nailed to the wall. The Emperor was at the forefront of dynastic images in popular porcelain figurines, photographs, currency and even 'sponsored' biographies.

Franz Joseph used 'state theatre' like a showman. His marriage to Elizabeth in 1853, his coronation as King of Hungary in 1867, his son Rudolf's marriage in 1881, the commemoration of



The Austro-Hungarian Empire: the main national groups.

The structure of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy from 1867.



1,000 years of Hungarian monarchy in 1867, the 1898 Jubilee and the '60 glorious years' celebrations of 1908 were all brilliantly stage-managed to enhance the monarchy.

Secondly, the Emperor proved even in his eighties that he could be politically astute, far-sighted and intuitively in touch with whatever policy would gain the greatest consensus. As Wheatcroft puts it, 'He amazed his ministers by his elasticity and shrewdness'. Though by nature an autocrat throughout his reign, he always knew when to promote change. Revolution in 1848 had placed him on the throne. He was determined that revolution would not take it from him. In total contrast to the Romanov Dynasty, he accepted political reform if proven necessary to hold the Empire together.

It is true that circumstances, be they a failed

war or internal dissent, may have forced his naturally 'absolutist hand', but nevertheless he accepted the changes and tried to work with them once made. The February Patent of 1861, the *Ausgleich* of 1867, the extension of (1896) and granting of universal (1907) suffrage for Austria were all assented to by the imperial signature. Moreover, this supposedly rather dim autocrat could even use the popularisation of the vote to achieve what he wanted, be it to move the Austrian political obsession from race to class in 1907 or to retain a reformed German-dominated Imperial Army by threatening Hungary with democracy in 1908.

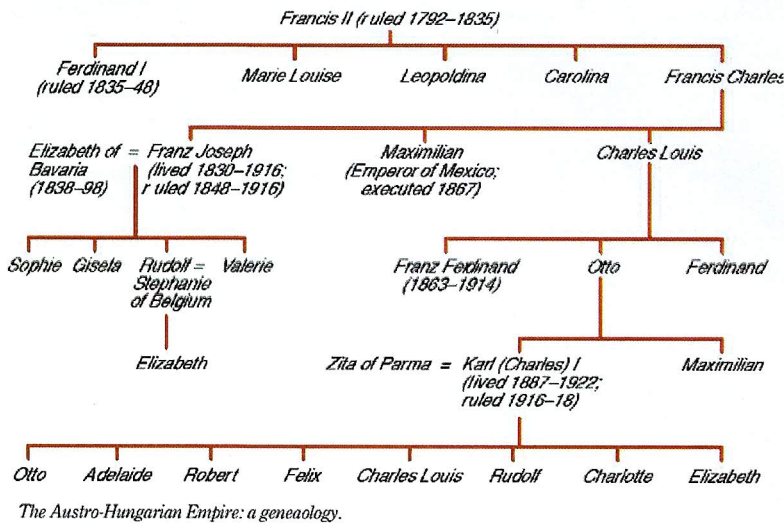
Thirdly, Franz Joseph continued to hover above party politics in an age of ever-increasing mass suffrage. The evolving political scene from the 1890s was riddled with class, racial and socio-

economic interest divisions. The Emperor genuinely believed that he remained a fatherlike arbiter, a buffer against extremism.

When the machinery of government periodically ground to a halt it was he that oiled the wheels. No one else could invoke Article XIV (rule by decree) without unleashing the potentiality of civil war. Franz Joseph always made his minorities feel an equal member of the Empire, be he urging Polish rights in Galicia, upbraiding Budapest for ignoring Croatian traditional liberties or refusing seven times to accept Karl Leugar as mayor of Vienna because he hated his anti-Semitism. No anti-Semitic pogroms of the Romanov variety for 'Papa Franz'.

Imperial government — the art of 'Fortwurstein'

The diagram above left shows the structure of the dual monarchy built on the 1867 *Ausgleich* model. This ostensibly created two separate but equal kingdoms on the western and eastern banks of the river Leitha. Thus the Austrian kingdom was Cisleithania and the Hungarian kingdom Transleithania. The capital of the west was Vienna, where the *Reichsrat* governed the domestic policy of Austria, the Tyrol, Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Galicia and Bukovina. The capital of the east was Budapest, where the Hungarian Diet (Parliament) provided the same service to Hungary, Transylvania, Slovakia and semi-autonomous Croatia.



Events that helped contribute to the downfall of the Empire: Emperor Maximilian of Mexico (Franz Joseph's brother) before his execution, 19 June 1867 (top left); and (above) Archduke Ferdinand and his wife moments before their assassination in Sarajevo, 28 June 1914.

Franz Joseph was Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary (separately crowned in each capital). The state had 16 provinces and was the second largest empire in Europe after Russia, its borders running from Switzerland in the west to Romania in the east. Both Cisleithania and Transleithania had their own ministries and bureaucracy, but there were joint ministries to control finance, taxation, war, the Army and foreign policy.

Critics have pointed out, however, that this system was fundamentally unstable due to the fact that:

- there was no evolution of cabinet government;
- ministries were dominated by narrow elite social groups;

- the Emperor's choice of chief minister held back party political development and accountability;
- the bureaucracy was inefficient and failed to obtain a centralised authority over the provinces, which resulted in a paucity of good tax returns and appallingly inaccurate statistical evidence;
- policy was *ad hoc* and temporary, thus the Empire had no cohesive plan of action from which to grow and develop.

Criticism could be encompassed in the term 'Fortwursteln' ('muddling along'): a desirable policy of expediency that eventually would run out of 'quick fixes' and direct the government to the final opt-out of war in 1914.

But what western historiography seems to have missed is that for the Habsburgs, *Fortwursteln* was a political 'art form', not proof of governmental confusion and desperation. Since the reign of Joseph II in the eighteenth century the dynasty had understood the dangers of over-centralisation and enforced equitable taxation. In 1848, 1859 and 1866 the Empire recovered specifically because of its constitutional liquidity. The taxation system was roughly a 70% to 30% breakdown between Austria and Hungary, and though industrialists in Austria periodically complained about the 'subsidising' of Magyar nobles, as an issue it never threatened the fabric of the Empire. Moreover, the ministries of Taaffe, Badeni and Korber did have successes in the western parts of the Empire.

For example, the Taaffe administration, between 1879 and 1893, brought stability to the Austrian Kingdom at a time when demands for

radical Independence Party under Francis Kossuth won power in 1905, it was constantly politically neutralised by the Emperor's usage of direct imperial rule. By 1908 the more dualist-orientated Tiza was back in power, and — although with Magyar safeguards — universal suffrage was introduced in the same year.

It is thus absurd to suggest that progressive government was negated by the system. Its subtlety was its ability to obtain change in such a way as always to prevent the polarisation of forces that either wanted autocratic stagnation or radical revolutionary reform. Even during periods of 'direct rule' the population of the Empire, by and large, paid their taxes, respected the judiciary, refrained from mass pogroms, allowed their children to join the Imperial Army, used the education system and, when permitted, used their right to vote.

In the next issue F.G. Stapleton turns to those factors that many believe sealed the fate of Austria-Hungary — the minorities issues and its adventurous foreign policy.

Further reading

- Macartney, C.A. (1969) *The Habsburg Empire 1790–1918*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
 Palmer, A. (1994) *Twilight of the Habsburgs*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
 Pelling, N. (1996) *The Habsburg Empire 1815–1918*, Hodder & Stoughton.
 Taylor, A.J.P. (1948) *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809–1918*, Penguin.
 Wheatcroft, A. (1995) *The Habsburgs: Embodying Empire*, Viking.

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Chronology — Part I

- 1848** Accession of Emperor Franz Joseph.
1860 October Diploma (promise of reform).
1867 *Ausgleich* (Austria-Hungary created).
1879–93 Taaffe administration ('Iron Ring').
1889 Suicide of Crown Prince Rudolf.
1896–97 Badeni administration (Czech crisis).
1898 Assassination of Empress Elizabeth.
1900 Korber administration.
1903–06 Constitutional crisis in Austria and Hungary; Emperor rules by decree until compromise found.
1906–08 Economic war with Serbia.
1907 Universal suffrage for Austria.
1908 Universal suffrage for Hungary (Magyar safeguards).
1909–14 Period of relative constitutional peace.

support of Polish, Czech and German conservatives in an 'Iron Ring'. He gently stepped around the trialist issue by granting language rights, opening up local government posts and recognising the Czech culture by establishing a university in Prague. In June 1895 the Celje grammar schools gained Slovene linguistic rights.

Badeni's administration (1896–97) extended the franchise in 1896 and called the Germans' bluff. They did use 'Parnellite tactics', however, to stop the Czech language bill going through in 1897. Badeni fell and his language laws were repealed in 1899, but again the Emperor's rule by decree provided a breathing space until 1900.

These issues were not just Habsburg problems, as Home Rule in Britain and demands for rights to Alsace-Lorraine in Germany prove. Moreover, the Korber administration, after 1900, was quite willing to play cat and mouse with the *Reichsrat*, but ultimately outmanoeuvred the crises between 1903 and 1906. It finally passed universal suffrage in 1907, 11 years before it was to be the case in Britain.

In the Hungarian Kingdom the political situation was less frenetic in constitutional terms. The Tiza administration, between 1874 and 1890, provided enormous stability. Even when the

trialism to incorporate Bohemian autonomy could have rent the Empire apart. (Trialism was the move to re-form the dual-centred empire [Vienna and Budapest] into a three-centred one to incorporate the Kingdom of Bohemia based on the third capital, Prague.) Taaffe maintained the

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