

CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

A STUDY OF THE STRUGGLE OF THE HABSBURG LINE DURING THE FINAL  
CHAPTER OF THE GREAT WAR

A RESEARCH STUDY SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT

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“Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The statesman who yields to war fever must realize that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events.”<sup>1</sup>

The same can be true for the Austro-Hungarian Empire as it embarked on the Great War as part of the Central Powers with the German and Ottoman Empires. The First World War was one of the chief reasons for the collapse of the Hapsburg line and had their been no war, the Empire would have lived.<sup>2</sup> The Habsburg family ruled the present day lands of Austria, Hungary and much of Central Europe for hundreds of years and at the conclusion of World War I, as part of the Treaty of Versailles, the Empire was dismantled and the throne was lost to the Habsburg family.

The Austrian Empire was at its very nature a strong state, where the society was both “dynamic and productive.”<sup>3</sup> The monarchy which rules the Empire was “not a ramshackle state but one of surprisingly strong bonds of adhesion.”<sup>4</sup> It is through this adhesion that the family is able to hold onto its possessions which range from present day Hungary, southern Poland, Romania, Slovenia and northern Italy. Over 11 languages were spoken throughout the Empire, while the official language was German, until the Compromise of 1867, which created the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The

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<sup>1</sup>Winston Churchill, “Classic Quotes,” in The Quotations Page, (<http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/27333.html>).

<sup>2</sup>Albert Parry, *The Multinational Empire: Nationalism and National Report in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1848-1918*, in *American Slavic and East European Review* 11:1 (February 1952), 79.

<sup>3</sup>Gerald H. Davis, *The Fall of the House of Habsburg*, in *The Journal of Modern History* 36:2. (June 1964), 209.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

official language remained German, however several other languages were granted forms of legal status within the territories.<sup>5</sup> The Compromise of 1867 was a stumbling block for the Habsburg line, in particular Emperor Franz Joseph. However, noticing all of the ethnic groups which make up the Empire, the compromise was also a means to maintain the monarchy. “The Revolutions of 1848 certainly shoot it up, but after regaining composure, the Empire of Franz Joseph solidified its position in Central Europe and worked out a deal with Hungary that would create a stable governing structure lasting until 1918.”<sup>6</sup> The Habsburg line by its very nature was a family of German elites. The Habsburg line had created a dynasty formulated by Maria Theresa and Joseph II which “strove to hold the creaking fabric together.”<sup>7</sup>

The Austrian state had existed for several centuries, even as nationalism within the Empire became an organized force. However, the state had survived the onslaught of nationalism for close to two generations.<sup>8</sup> The Czechs remained part of the Empire because of fears of a growing Russian Empire to the east. “If the Austrian imperial state had not existed for ages, it would be necessary to create such a state, in the interest of Europe and humanity in general.”<sup>9</sup> The same was true for Romania, who in 1906 wrote a letter to the Emperor stating that remaining part of the Empire was in the best

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<sup>5</sup>George Barrany, *The Passing of the Hapsburg Monarchy, 1914-1918*, in the *Slavic Review* 28:3. (September 1969), 493.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Goedeken, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire, 1815-1918*, in *The History Teacher* 23, (August 1990), 466.

<sup>7</sup>G.P. Gooch, *The Hapsburg Monarchy 1867-1914*, in *The English Historical Review* 68:266, (January 1953), 103.

<sup>8</sup>*The Multinational Empire: Nationalism and National Report in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1848-1918*, 77.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

national interests of the Romanian people.<sup>10</sup> The central theme to ruling the vast nationalities within the Austrian state was to use the Habsburg “divide and rule” theory, which gives centralized control to the Emperor for all external affairs, yet allows for great autonomy throughout the regions.<sup>11</sup>

It was the greater autonomy of the regions which started the Austrian Empire down the path towards World War. Part of the Austrian Empire was the region of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a Slavic region. Outside the Empire on the border of this region was the Kingdom of Serbia, which was a Slavic nation-state. The idea on Archduke Francis Ferdinand, the crown prince and heir to the Habsburg throne, was to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina equal status with the Austrians and Hungarians, replacing the dual monarchy with a triad.<sup>12</sup> The elites of the region were impressed with the idea, however, the ultranationalists had always wanted a union with the smaller Kingdom of Serbia, and believed the Archduke to be dangerous. They believed that if the Archduke was successful in appeasing the Slavic people within the Empire, their dream of a union with the Kingdom of Serbia would be destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

The stage was set. On the Sunday morning of June 28, 1914, the Archduke, along with his wife, visited the capital of the Bosnia and Herzegovina region. It was this day when one ultranationalist attempted to assassinate the royal family by tossing a bomb in

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Arthur J. May, *The Habsburg Monarchy. Toward a Multinational Empire or National States?*, in the *American Slavic and East European Review* 19:4, (December 1960), 595.

<sup>12</sup>Cyril Falls, *The Great War: 1914-1918*, (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), 21.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

their car as it approached the Governors mansion.<sup>14</sup> This attempt failed. However, the second attempt on their lives did not fail, as on their way out of the city limits, the driver stopped to car and a man by the name of Princip jumped out of the crowd and shot both the Archduke and his wife, where they both died on impact.<sup>15</sup> The heir to the Austrian Empire was assassinated, which sent shockwaves into Europe. The stage was now set for war, as Austria sent demands to the Kingdom of Serbia, which was an ally of the Russian Empire. The German Empire stood behind the Austrians, while the French and British stood behind the Russians. Europe was now divided and ready for war.

Emperor Franz Joseph held a distain for his heir, which was evident when he refused to attend Archduke Francis Ferdinand's wedding, as well as his refusal to attend his funeral after the assassination. The complexities of the family blood line show that while the Emperor made Archduke Francis Ferdinand his heir, his distain hurt family ties and state affairs.<sup>16</sup> Two years into the war, on November 21, 1916, Emperor Franz Joseph died. He was the longest serving Habsburg to rule the Austrian Empire, and the second longest reigning monarch of Europe. Again complications within the family line took form, as the heir apparent was the grand nephew of Franz Joseph, Karl I.<sup>17</sup>

Attempts are now made through the new Emperor to save the Austrian Empire. He realized the war was going badly, as the German war plan called for a swift war, and

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>*The Passing of the Hapsburg Monarchy, 1914-1918*, 494.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

it was now nearing its third year.<sup>18</sup> Secretly, behind the back of his allies Germany and the Ottomans, the new Emperor was negotiating peace settlements with France and Britain. To get to the president of the French Republic, Karl negotiated through his brother-in-law, Prince Sixte de Bourbon.<sup>19</sup> The negotiations were long and tedious, and produced no results, as the Austrians would not accept a peace settlement which would also appease the Italians, who had joined with the allies in hopes of obtaining a portion of the Austrian Empire. Unfortunately for Europe, the secret peace accords failed, which would have saved the Austrian Empire and over a million lives.<sup>20</sup> Also unfortunate for the Austrian Emperor was the secret negotiations, as they became known to the German Kaiser. The Kaiser, no longer trusting his Austrian allies, forced the Austrians to follow German commanders for the remainder of the war.<sup>21</sup>

Emperor Karl understood the complexities of the Great War. He understood the reasoning behind the war. It was not the fault of the Austrian Empire for the outbreak of the Great War, rather, the blame rested with the German Empire. When the ultimatum was sent to the Kingdom of Serbia, all the key points were accepted by the government.<sup>22</sup> Why then did the Great War begin? “An ironic anticlimax saw Austria, that starting point of the trouble, pushed by Germany into war with Russia as late as August 6.”<sup>23</sup> At the time, no love loss was felt by the late Austrian Emperor, Franz

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<sup>18</sup>*The Great War: 1914-1918*, 33.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid*, 259.

<sup>20</sup>Arturo Beeche, *The Fall of Eagles: The Collapse of European Monarchy in November 1918*, (<http://www.eurohistory.com/Falleagles.html>).

<sup>21</sup> *The Great War: 1914-1918*, 259.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

Joseph. He had never cared for Francis Ferdinand, but he did care about his Empire. He had been pushing through reforms aimed at appeasing the varying nationalities within the Empire, from Magyar to Czech to Slovak. Again, the monarchy had created a stable governing structure.

“Explosive nationalisms, stressing, nevertheless, that the often recommended cure for the disease, federalism, could have been applied after abrogation of the Compromise of 1867.”<sup>24</sup> The Compromise of 1867 gave greater recognition to the Magyar population, the second largest ethnic grouping within the Austrian Empire. This was meant to be a first step towards national regions in a single Austrian state. Once the Magyars received greater recognition, however, the test failed as they used their new influence to hinder other populations within the Empire.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately for the Slavic people within the Empire, the Magyar internal leadership ran the internal affairs for their region, and were treated poorly through their new authority.<sup>26</sup> “Her dominant nationalities, German and Magyar, and her upper classes of whatever nationality, as well as her individual leaders, could have done much more toward regionalism.”<sup>27</sup> One act the Emperor instated was the creation of the Minister of Nationalities, meant to bring the concerns of all the regions to the imperial court. This

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 31.

<sup>24</sup>*The Passing of the Hapsburg Monarchy, 1914-1918*, 494.

<sup>25</sup>F.L. Carsten, *The Fall of the House of Habsburg: From Empire to Republic*, in *International Affairs* 40:2, (1944), 295.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>*The Multinational Empire: Nationalism and National Report in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1848-1918*, 77.

idea, while good at the time, was too late in its implementation to slow the growing nationalism which would eventually break apart the Empire.<sup>28</sup>

“Measured in perspective, the disruption of Austria-Hungary represents a consequence of the First World War.”<sup>29</sup> Both Emperors, Franz Joseph and Karl, realized a prolonged war would not witness victories for the Central powers. Both Emperors attempted to stop the war, whether through honoring the ultimatum made to the Kingdom of Serbia or through secret peace gestures to the allied powers. While national identity was of importance to the various peoples of the Austrian Empire, life in the Empire was not rough. Every area held a crucial role in the functionality of the Empire, and each region had the ability for internal self rule. “The Habsburg Empire fell because it lost a major war, not because of any insurmountable internal problems. If Germany had won World War I, Austro-Hungary would have survived in some form.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>*The Habsburg Monarchy. Toward a Multinational Empire or National States?*, 596.

<sup>29</sup>*The Passing of the Hapsburg Monarchy, 1914-1918*, 494.

<sup>30</sup>*The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire, 1815-1918*, 466.

## Outline

- I. Introduction
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## Images



## Legend

**Cisleithania:** 1. Bohemia, 2. Bukovina, 3. Carinthia, 4. Carniola, 5. Dalmatia, 6. Galicia, 7. Kustenland, 8. Lower Austria, 9. Moravia, 10. Salzburg, 11. Silesia, 12. Styria, 13. Tirol, 14. Upper Austria, 15. Vorarlberg; **Transleithania:** 16. Hungary, 17. Croatia and Slavonia; 18. **Bosnia and Herzegovina**

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<sup>31</sup>Map of the Austrian Empire, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Austria-Hungary\\_map.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Austria-Hungary_map.svg)

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