

A Distinguished Dynasty Extinguished

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The House of Habsburg was arguably one of Europe's most powerful royal houses throughout the later medieval period and nearly all of the early modern period. But it became increasingly obvious in the nineteenth century that the monarchy was fading away and had no place in the new world of European politics. However, determining the exact point at which the Habsburgs began their decline is problematic. There were several difficulties faced by the Habsburg monarchy in the second half of the nineteenth century and the years leading up to the First World War. Due to the nature of alliances among the European powers during the long nineteenth century, political manoeuvring was such that even the slightest miscalculation had the potential to produce catastrophic consequences. Additionally, the nineteenth century was a century in which nationalism took hold in much of Europe, primarily among the numerous ethnic groups in the Habsburg Monarchy. The fact that Franz Ferdinand, Crown Prince to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated did not in itself set off the First World War or the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy; these events were the result of reactions to a very complex situation. This essay will argue that the fundamental causes of the collapse of the House of Habsburg were Balkan nationalism, a decline in their relationship with Russia which pushed Austria-Hungary into a war that the Habsburgs lost and could not recover from, and most importantly, an alliance with Germany which none of the other European powers were willing to tolerate.

As early as 1866 Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph could see that the future was grim for the House of Habsburg, as is evident in a letter written to his mother in which he stated that the best possible outcome for him would be to "resist as long as possible" and to "perish with honour."¹ The emperor presented further knowledge of the strong possibility he anticipated of the end of the empire when he, in his will, strongly advised his daughter that it would be in her best interest to live in Germany and not in Vienna.² Due to the extensive history of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, its extent and the numerous ethnicities incorporated, the thought of the empire collapsing must have brought to mind a number of disastrous possibilities.

¹ Alan Sked, "Historians, the Nationality Question, and the Downfall of the Habsburg Empire," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 31 (1981): 189.

² *Ibid.*

As Alan Sked points out, in the nineteenth century when the Habsburgs ruled over the Austro-Hungarian Empire and not the Holy Roman Empire, their possessions were still remarkable as they included 37.5 million people and a landmass of 257,478 mi².³ Yet, as previously mentioned, as early as 1866 Emperor Franz Joseph saw signs that the empire was in decline. In order for an Empire with a dynasty so storied and a landmass that constituted a considerable portion of mainland Europe to be in decline, events of drastic proportion must have occurred. As Robert Kann affirms, the years 1848–1918 were years in which monarchical government came into competition with the principles of constitutional government.⁴ Therefore, even if the collapse of the dynasty was largely due to losing the First World War, the Habsburgs had faced other considerable conflicts and tension in their last half century as a European ruling house.

The Habsburg lands were not immune from the liberal ideas that were prevalent in nineteenth century Europe and due to the fact that the Habsburgs ruled over a vast number of ethnic groups they were not immune from nationalist aspirations either. The way that the Habsburg Monarchy dealt with these ideas was simply to repress them.⁵ This was perhaps not the best plan; however, there was still a chance and a hope by those that held hereditary positions of power that suppression of anything liberal and challenging to the pre-French Revolution status quo could work. As John Merriman points out, when Habsburg Emperor Franz Joseph came to the Austrian throne in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848 and the inability of his predecessor to correctly deal with these problems, the monarchy entered a period of “neo-absolutism.”⁶ There is much speculation by historians on how much of a role the events related to the revolutionary era of 1848 played in the downfall of the Habsburg monarchy. However it is possible to argue that the events that took place at the Congress of Berlin, in which, Bosnia-

³ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

⁴ Robert A. Kann, “Dynastic Relations and European Power Politics (1848–1918),” *Journal of Modern History* 45, no. 3 (1973): 2.

⁵ John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe*, vol. 2 of *From the French Revolution to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 678.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Herzegovina became part of the Habsburg political agenda—which put them at odds with the Russian Empire—were the start of a chain reaction that would lead to war in 1914.⁷

In addition to the nationalist political turmoil and political climate prevalent in the Balkans at the end of the nineteenth century, its geographic location made it a vital point of interest in the politics of the great European powers. As Vladimir Dedijer pointed out, the Balkans served as a linking point between Europe, Asia and Africa making it an area where the great powers clashed.⁸ This issue became relevant at the Congress of Berlin, convened by Otto von Bismarck, to discuss the disagreement over control of Bulgaria in June 1878.⁹ The end result of the Congress of Berlin gave Austria the right to occupy and fully administer Bosnia-Herzegovina for an undetermined amount of time, which, as Robert Kann notes, put a strain on Austro-Russian relations and led to a greater Austrian dependency on German protection.¹⁰ Although there were economic ramifications involved, this issue could not ignore the fact that nationality played a role in the aggressions as the South Slavs were Slavs, as were the Russians.¹¹ Therefore, both economic and nationalist rivalries combined to produce tension as Austria-Hungary under the Habsburgs moved into territory coveted by Russia.

The last few years of the nineteenth century saw significant strains on the alliance system.¹² In the year 1903, Alexander I of the House of Obrenovich, the pro-Habsburg and corrupt King of Serbia, was murdered and replaced by the pro-Russian house of Karadjordjevic. This was bad for the Habsburgs because not only did this change the balance of power in Europe, but from this point onward both Serbian national feelings and foreign policy became openly hostile to the Habsburg Monarchy.¹³ Austria's actions would further upset the political situation in Europe when Austria made a political move that agitated both Russia and the Serbian

⁷ Kann, *History*, 279.

⁸ Vladimir Dedijer, *The Road to Sarajevo* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 18. The powers listed by Dedijer were Germany, Austria and Turkey standing in conflict with France, Russia and Great Britain.

⁹ Kann, *Habsburg Empire*, 279.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹¹ Kann, *Dynastic Relationships*, 17.

¹² Kann, *History*, 411. The years 1897 and 1903 both saw Russia and Austria-Hungary agree to preserve the status quo of the Balkans. Additionally, in 1894 an alliance was made between France and Russia and in 1904 the British and French agreed to an Entente. These alliances would both be against the Habsburg Monarchy during the First World War.

¹³ Kann, *History*, 411. Z. A. B. Zeman, *The Break Up of the Habsburg Empire: 1914–1918* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 25.

population. In 1908 a group in Turkey called the Young Turks took power in Constantinople and forced the Sultan to convene a Parliament, in which Bosnia-Herzegovina would have representation.¹⁴ As Kann notes, Austrian Foreign Minister Baron von Aerenthal used the situation in Turkey as grounds for moving from occupation to annexation in Bosnia-Herzegovina even though his primary concern was the Southern Slavs.¹⁵

In particular, Baron von Aerenthal was concerned about Serbs spreading propaganda for the cause of creating a Yugoslav state out of the Slav territories in the Balkans. The annexation caused many of the Southern Slavs, particularly Serbs, to become even more angered with Austria-Hungary and anti-Austrian propaganda which had diplomatic support from Russia increased.¹⁶ Thus Austria-Hungary's annexation of the territory angered the European powers, including Germany, as this was a violation of the Treaty of Berlin; Austria-Hungary was only supposed to occupy Bosnia-Herzegovina.¹⁷ At this point, the Russians, who did not desire war, agreed to abandon all support of Serbia and in return Austria was to give assurance that they would not attack Serbia.¹⁸ After being humiliated by Austria and not being in any position to respond, Russia must have been infuriated by the annexation. Unfortunately for all parties involved, this issue would become more of a future issue of contention. In fact, as L.C.B. Seaman indicated, the Balkans, like Alsace-Lorraine, had the potential to make any diplomatic solution impossible.¹⁹ As later events unfolded, this proved correct.

It is important to point out that after the violation of the Treaty of Berlin with the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, both France and Britain saw Austria as an aggressor. France was even on unofficial friendly terms with the Slavic population within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.²⁰ Austrian politicians undoubtedly would have viewed this with reservation, had they known about the secret relationship and the thoughts of Great Britain and France. One may wonder if the Austrians felt as Bismarck once did- surrounded by hostile nations.

¹⁴ C. A. Macartney, *The Habsburg Empire: 1790–1918* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1969) 781–782.

¹⁵ Kann, *History*, 413.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Macartney, *Empire*, 782.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 783.

¹⁹ L.C.B. Seaman, *From Vienna to Versailles* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1955), 131.

²⁰ Macartney, *Empire*, 784.

At this time nationalism was gaining even greater momentum in the Balkans and one group in particular would make their appearance on the world stage: the Black Hand.²¹ The assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand did not cause too many people to grieve on a personal level, as, according to Dedijer, “few men have had so many enemies, within their own countries and abroad, as the Heir Apparent to the Habsburg throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand.”²² Indeed, this is not seen by most historians to be the root cause of the First World War. The reason Austria took action was because the Austrian government believed that Gavrilo Princip, the student who had assassinated Franz Ferdinand was an agent of Belgrade, thus giving Austria the perfect excuse to solve the Serbian nationalist problem once and for all.²³

In order to fully understand the chain of events that occurred once an ultimatum was made to Serbia and war was declared, attention must be brought to the alliance system and in particular the Dual Monarchy’s alliance with Germany. Germany under Bismarck was determined not to go to war with Russia, evidenced by Bismarck’s initiation of the Three Emperor’s league in 1873 and again in 1881.²⁴ However, when Kaiser Wilhelm II came to power and dismissed Bismarck, Germany’s position towards Russia was modified and the Reinsurance Treaty was not renewed.²⁵

Although the treaty was not renewed, Germany did not show signs that they were too eager for war. In fact, Kaiser Wilhelm II wrote a letter to Archduke Franz Ferdinand, cautioning him against getting too heavily involved in the Balkans, stating that Panslavism was a danger to the Habsburg Monarchy.²⁶ However, these letters were written in 1908 and 1909.²⁷

²¹ *Ibid.*, 786–787.

²² Dedijer, *Sarajevo*, 88.

²³ Sked, *Decline*, 255. Sked notes that not only was there lack of evidence that those perceived responsible for the assassination were working from Belgrade, the Serbian Prime Minister when he got wind of this plot made an attempt to notify Vienna to no avail.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

²⁵ Kann, *Dynastic Relations*, 398.

²⁶ Kann, *Correspondence*, 326, 327, 331.

²⁷ Seaman, *Vienna*, 174.

Soon after, Germany showed an increased interest in the Balkans as pertaining to Austria's involvement there.²⁸ After the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Wilhelm II urged Austria to react stating, that he was willing to fight a "world war" for the sake of Austria's prestige and that the Slavs were "born to serve."²⁹ Once assured of German support, Vienna began to execute their plans, first issuing an ultimatum to Serbia and then in declaring war.³⁰

Interestingly, when preparing for war with Serbia - which was seen as only a possibility albeit a very strong one before war was actually declared - only Emperor Franz Joseph and one of his advisors, Hungarian Prime Minister, Count Istvan Tiza, were not wholeheartedly wishing for military retaliation towards Serbia as an immediate action.³¹ The emperor simply felt that the time for war was not "ripe."³² Count Tiza feared that declaring war on Serbia would bring about Russian intervention and therefore a world war.³³ As Macartney pointed out, all of the powers should have seen that the system of European alliances was constructed in a manner which made a localized war impossible.³⁴ On the 28 July, 1914 when Austria declared war on Serbia, Count Tiza's prediction would prove correct less than a month later as all the major powers declared war on each other.³⁵

The war that ensued was undoubtedly a terrible war for all parties involved. As Seaman noted, the war in itself was not an anti-Habsburg war until Italy—once an ally of Austria-Hungary—entered the conflict, and the dismemberment of the Habsburg Empire became a war aim once Romania joined in the fight.³⁶ This fact was in perfect keeping with anti-Habsburg sentiments, as both countries entered the war due to nationalist interests.³⁷ The House of Habsburg's control over the lands within their empire started to cave during the final years of the war. Emperor Franz Joseph passed away on 21 November, 1916 after sixty-eight years on the

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Kann, *History*, 418.

³¹ Joseph Redlich, *Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1929), 525–526.

³² Macartney, *Empire*, 807.

³³ *Ibid.*, 808.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Seaman, *Vienna*, 186–187.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Seaman points out that the interest if Italy, the only country of the allies to have a claim to land held by the Habsburgs, was aiming to gain the Adriatic Coast while Romania was after Transylvania.

throne, succeeded by his great-nephew, Emperor Karl I.³⁸ After such a long reign entailing much political and personal tragedy, it seems fitting that Franz Joseph be spared the sight of the end of the House of Habsburg as a ruling power in Europe. Convinced advocates of revolutionary change had, for the most part, put on hold their plans for national and social change as it seemed very probable at the time that after the death of Franz Joseph the aspirations of different national groups would both gain momentum and be supported by Karl I who did not wish to rule with an iron hand.³⁹ The next two years would see nationalities within the empire expressing nationalist incentives and the war effort significantly deteriorating.

The different factors in which the Habsburg Monarchy came to an end lead to differing opinions among historians in regards to the question of whether or not the downfall of the House of Habsburg was an internal or external collapse. Robert A. Kann believes that the breakdown came from within the monarchy while Alan Sked asserts that the monarchy fell because it lost a major war.⁴⁰ Z. A. B. Zeman recognized that there were many factors that brought an end to the Habsburgs of which radical nationalism was the most disruptive.⁴¹ Zeman explains that after the outbreak of the First World War, radicals inside the monarchy became increasingly dependent on support from the Entente Powers.⁴² The Entente powers fighting against the Austro-Hungarian Empire were also fighting Germany, and were not especially keen on seeing Germany remain a military power. Emperor Karl I, who did not possess the political intellect of his predecessor was seeking peace and did so behind the back of Germany, going so far as to promise French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau support for the French claim to Alsace and Lorraine.⁴³ The importance of this in the downfall of the Habsburg's is vital because as a repercussion Karl I had to beg for German forgiveness, which he received only after promising that the Habsburg Monarchy would become a German satellite - thereby increasing Germany's power base.⁴⁴ As Seaman points out, having a German power block that stretched from the Baltic to the Balkans was the last thing that any of the Entente powers wanted to see.⁴⁵

³⁸ Macartney, *Empire*, 820.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Kann, *History*, 519. Sked, *Decline*, 264.

⁴¹ Zeman, *Break Up*, xiv–xv.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Macartney, *Empire*, 829.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Seaman, *Vienna*, 200.

After eight hundred years of rule, a very long and turbulent nineteenth century and a devastating World War, the Habsburg Empire came to an end when Karl I abdicated on 11 November, 1918.⁴⁶ The Empire had taken part in a two-fold conflict. On the one hand it had battled with the nationalist aspirations of various groups, in particular the South Slavs of the Balkans which brought it into its second conflict - with Russia. The fact that the Serbs tried so hard to gain an independent state gives weight to the notion that the Habsburgs fell from the inside. Conversely, the conflict fought with Russia and the Entente powers that won the war validates the notion that the Habsburgs fell because they were on the losing side of a war, leading one to the conclusion that the reason the monarchy fell from power was not one or the other, but both. The third major reason that the Habsburgs fell from power was not connected with Serbia, Russia or any of the peoples it ruled over, but its alliance with Germany. Since Karl I had betrayed Germany by going behind their back to make agreements with France, he had to agree that the Monarchy would be a satellite for Germany which would have increased German power. Since France hated and feared German military might and they happened to be on the side that won the war, this would have proved impossible. Therefore the Habsburg Monarchy fell because of nationalistic tendencies in and out of their control and because of the alliance system pulling Russia into the war that they had declared on Serbia.

⁴⁶ Zeman, *Break Up*, 246.

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