

## WAR AND STATE: NATIONALISM, CONFLICT, AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN EUROPE

### 1. *Introduction*

*Terrible! The Almighty cannot be provoked! A Higher Power has restored that order, which unfortunately, I was unable to maintain.*

– Emperor Franz Joseph, 1914.

Much of the instability that arose in Europe during the twentieth century can be explained in terms of ethnic nationalism. Nationalism has long since been a powerful force as competing groups asserted their authority over others in an attempt to establish new orders of self-determination. Hundreds of years of dynastic rule came to an end in November 1918, when, at the close of World War I, the Habsburg Monarchy was abolished and its territories of Austria-Hungary were dismembered. Historians have long debated the reasons for the demise of this once powerful Monarchy. Some argue that it had been disintegrating since the mid-nineteenth century as nationalist and political conflicts eroded its capacity to maintain cohesive rule. Others point out that the decisive blow that shattered the frail foundations of the multi-ethnic empire and brought the shaky structure crashing down came with its defeat in the Great War. Others assert that the Allied countries dismembered the dynasty. Thus, that it was a victim of victorious powers wishing to cripple the German Reich and execute the principle of self-determination on an empire of which they cared little.

The dissolution of Austria-Hungary is too complex to be attributed solely to nationalist ambitions or Allied intrigues. While the Allied powers were cardinal elements in the dissection of the dynasty's territories, other factors played a role in the Monarchy's downfall. Domestic factions had destabilized Habsburg rule and established a volatile environment that convinced the victors of its necessary dismemberment. The Habsburg Monarchy was undermined by internal nationalist conflicts and the enmity of the victorious powers: two factors in a symbiotic relationship that ultimately resulted in the dynasty's complete dissolution.

### 2. *Nationalism and the House of Habsburg*

After the First World War, a general consensus view emerged that the Habsburg Monarchy had been disintegrating for many years from conflicts among the nationalities and within the government. These internal tensions served to erode the effectiveness of the Monarchy and the First World War simply precipitated its breakdown. Within the enormous territory were roughly fifty-one million inhabitants, consisting of ethnic

Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenes, Romanians, Ruthenians, Croatians, Poles, Serbians, Magyars (Hungarians), Albanians, Italians, Ukrainians and Bulgarians.<sup>1</sup>

One theory asserts that nationalism complemented political unrest, as unanswered calls for rights and sovereignty brought about feelings of dissatisfaction with the Monarchy. Unfortunately, this theory runs into difficulty when attempting to determine the historical moment when the effects of nationalism began to chip away at the political effectiveness of the régime. The awakening of national consciousness could be traced back to Joseph II's centralizing policies in the late eighteenth century, the revolutionary movements of 1848, or to the 1878 Congress of Berlin when Romania, Montenegro and Serbia were recognized as independent states. Regardless, throughout its control of East-Central Europe, the Habsburg Empire was challenged assiduously by its diverse populace. Examples of Habsburg attempts to alleviate national problems can be seen in 1905 and 1910 with two Compromises, in Moravia and Bukovina respectively, which agreed to give the ethnic Czechs, Germans, Romanians, Ruthenes and Poles the right to vote separately for the local Diet in order to temper the national rivalry that had dominated such elections unremittingly.<sup>2</sup>

The strongest nationalist sentiments, however, were brewing in Hungary. Franz Joseph's acceptance of *Ausgleich* gave Hungary considerable parliamentary and self-governing power, which ultimately granted it control over its own ethnic minorities. This is evident in the subjection of non-Magyars to the process of Magyarization or assimilation into the dominant Hungarian culture. Nevertheless, the majority of such efforts were ultimately fruitless. While some Slovaks, Romanians and Serbs gained opportunities by becoming Magyarized, a large portion chose not to conform. This also gave rise to a strengthened resentment among the Slav populations in the Balkan regions of South-Central Europe. The number of political parties formed post-1867 exemplifies the number of nations that resisted this process. National parties had been growing within the Hungarian parliament in the early twentieth century as non-Magyars numbered only 40.4 per-cent of the electorate in Hungary by 1910.<sup>3</sup>

Many scholars claiming that the Habsburg Monarchy eroded because of nationalist movements were themselves victims of the division.<sup>4</sup> This is illustrated by historian Oszkár Jászi in his book entitled *Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, in which the

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<sup>1</sup> Oszkár Jászi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1929, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Cornwall, "The Dissolution of Austria-Hungary", *The Last Years of Austria-Hungary*, ed. Mark Cornwall, 1990, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Tibor Zsuppán, "The Hungarian Political Scene 1908-1918", *The Last Years of Austria Hungary*, ed. Mark Cornwall, 1990, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Z. A. B. Zeman, *The Break-up of the Habsburg Empire*, London, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. xii.

author argues that the Empire was on its way to being vanquished as a result of two-hundred years of disparaging and corrosive social causes. Published a decade after the end of the First World War, Jászi contends that his Hungarian origins do not affect his partiality. However, historian Z. A. B. Zeman disputes this, stating that regardless of what Jászi asserts, his ideas are influenced by his experience with the Empire's downfall.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, Jászi argues that the causes of the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy were organic. He points to Switzerland and Belgium, countries that were successful at being united by a consciousness of state community and maintains that the problems encountered by the Habsburgs were "[...] perfectly solvable".<sup>6</sup> Arguing that the decline was inevitable, while simultaneously professing that better governmental management could have merged the factions into a common federation, presents a problematic logic. It would not be an exaggeration to state that subsequent evolution of the nationalism theory was influenced by the ever-increasing strains occurring in the successor states that were born from the death of Austria-Hungary. Nationalist tensions would continuously boil during the interwar period and even throughout the rest of the century and this theory offered historical explanation for such conflicts.

The case can be made that if nationalism were the primary cause for the disintegration of the Habsburg Monarchy, the consequences for the dynasty after the revolutions in 1848 would have been far more disastrous. Although the various revolts were widely regarded as failures, they illustrate how the Monarchy responded quite liberally to threatening conditions. Certainly oppression and terror were implemented, as shown by the execution of nationalists by the Hungarian government, yet concessions were made as serfdom was abolished and more recognition was given to national languages. Furthermore, other political changes ensued, allowing a restricted degree of sovereignty to the nationalities. The most significant example of this occurred two decades after the revolutions when a dual monarchy was formed out of Austrian and Hungarian territories. In 1867, Emperor Franz Joseph agreed to this "Compromise" with Hungary, whereby the two countries maintained separate ministries, parliaments and provincial diets, yet co-operated in the joint ministries of finance, war and foreign affairs. Most importantly for the Habsburgs, Franz Joseph retained his recognition as the sole emperor of the nations. While concessions were made to quell dissent, nationalism was affecting the structural components of the Monarchy while undermining its integrity in the process.

In spite of those who would argue against it, nationalism was nevertheless a seminal factor in destabilizing Austro-Hungarian society. In the early twentieth century, calls for federalization of the territories were being made both in Austria and Hungary as

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xii.

<sup>6</sup> Jászi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, p. 3.

nationalities began to demand the right to self-govern. Emperor Franz Joseph was against federalization because he thought it would lead to a weakened Monarchy, particularly in terms of increasing political impotence within its own borders.<sup>7</sup> It has been argued that by giving national territories this right it would have fulfilled national ambitions, which ultimately could have prevented the total disintegration of the Habsburgs at the end of World War I.<sup>8</sup> However, federalization was not a reasonable demand as it ignored the fact that what ethnic lines there were seldom coincided with historic, geographic or economic boundaries.<sup>9</sup> Equally significant is the fact that the most problematic regions of the Habsburg territories were those in which nationalities already had local autonomy: in Hungary and Galicia minorities were greatly oppressed, while in territories controlled from Vienna, such discrimination was less rampant.<sup>10</sup> Even in 1918 when entering into new political agreements, the emperors of Germany and Austria-Hungary did not take into consideration the position of the nationalities: the Spa Convention, in which Germany and Austria-Hungary agreed to unite in a military, political, customs and economic union, while largely ignoring nationalist demands, resulted in the nationalities becoming increasingly radicalized.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. *Dismembering the Monarchy*

Although scholars argue that it was this radicalization and resultant anti-Habsburg posture that was responsible for the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy, modern historians are increasingly turning away from this nationalist theory. Instead, they are arguing that the Habsburg Empire was dismembered by Allied nations, as it was decided to be the best method by which to incapacitate Germany after the First World War. While self-determination was the principle implemented in the division of the lands, by examining the final composition of the territories, it becomes evident that national self-determination was a haphazard justification for carving-up the Empire. Of the countries that were to be freed from the yoke of Habsburg oppression few were consulted and of those that were consulted the, majority were merely ignored. As a result of being defeated, German-Austrians were allowed no say in their future, and the desires of the Slovaks, Ruthenes, and Croatians were largely overlooked.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Carinthian Slovenes had voted in a plebiscite to join Austria, yet they became part of the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce F. Pauley, *The Habsburg Legacy, 1867-1939*, Malabar, R. E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1972, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> Zeman, *The Break-up of the Habsburg Empire*, p. 162.

<sup>12</sup> Pauley, *The Habsburg Legacy*, p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

Similarly, Poles of East Prussia were not allowed to join the country of their choice, Germany, and instead were lumped into Poland.<sup>14</sup> In effect, the Allies were encountering the same problems the Habsburgs had when they had explored federalization, yet the former disregarded any responsibility toward the new states they were about to create.

It is quite clear that during the course of World War I, the leaders of Great Britain, Italy, France, and the United States – the so-called Big Four – set out to destroy the Hohenzollern and Habsburg Monarchies. With the treaties of Versailles, St. Germain and Trianon, they achieved their ultimate goal. Versailles was punishment for Germany and was characterized by the varying personalities of the leaders who designed and implemented it. For example, Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau of France was determined to cripple Germany as the latter dominated France in terms of population and economic capacity.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, France sought to drastically reduce Germany's military capabilities as well as gain the Rhineland to use as a military buffer. Large reparations served to make it difficult for nay rebuilding of post-war Germany to take place and the war guilt cause further demoralized German citizens. The Treaty of St. Germain forbade Austrian union with Germany; furthermore, it stripped Austria of much of its territory, leaving Vienna an "[...]oversized capital of a small country".<sup>16</sup> Although its army drastically reduced in size, it was allowed to keep its foreign assets and its reparation payments were quite low in comparison to Germany's.

Finally, the harshest punishment was left for Hungary. The Treaty of Trianon of June 1920 stripped the country of 70 per-cent of its historical territory, and 63.6 per-cent of its population.<sup>17</sup> As much as 90 per-cent of Hungary's water-power, as well as the majority of its ore deposits and natural forests were also lost in the transfer of territory.<sup>18</sup> While the carving-up of the lands were done in the name of President Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination, it is evident that with the miniscule amount of resources left to the Hungarians, it was only the self-determination of non-Magyars that was of concern to the Allies.<sup>19</sup>

Western ignorance of Central Europe is significant in understanding its treatment as Zeman argues that "The men who had devoted their political skills and energies to the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe: From the French Revolution to the Present*, vol. 2, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1996, p. 1144.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1152.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen B. Várdy, "The Impact of Trianon upon the Hungarian Mind: Irredentialism and Hungary's Path to War", *Hungary in the Age of Total War (1938-1948)*, ed. Nándor Dreisziger, 1998, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Nándor Dreisziger, *Hungary's Way to World War II*, Toronto, Hungarian Helicon Society, 1968, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

task of destroying the Habsburg Monarchy had given but little thought to the hazards of the future in the area vacated by Habsburg power [ ... ] this 'central Europe of Austria-Hungary was traditionally a territory of no special interest'.<sup>20</sup> It was only when Russia exited from the conflict and German troops were rerouted to the western front that the Allied powers began to encourage the national ambitions of those within the Habsburg territories because they recognized its power in destabilizing the régime as well as its will to fight.<sup>21</sup>

It cannot be assumed that the western powers could have fathomed the nationalist tensions that they were about to exacerbate by dividing the Habsburg Monarchy; the fact that nationalism did play an important role in the Allies' decision cannot be gainsaid. The Allies had been persuaded by nationalist émigrés who asserted that the Austro-Hungarian Empire must be broken-up. Important figures were the Czechs Masaryk and Beneš, Supilo and Trumbić from Yugoslavia and the Polish radicals Dmowski and Zaleski. These nationalists sought linguistic and political independence from Austro-Hungary and their opinions were much louder than of those living within the régime. As historian Bruce Pauley points-out, "Slovaks and Ruthenes who agitated for independence were nearly all emigrants living in the United States!"<sup>22</sup>

One might argue that these radicals – irrespective of where they were located or lived – bore great influence on the populace, inciting national sentiments and consequently eroding the capacity for the Habsburgs to rule, as they could not effectively manage all these internal conflicts. However, while it is true that loyalty to the dynasty was ebbing considerably by the summer of 1917, it cannot be attributed exclusively to a rise in national attitudes: people were turning away from the Monarchy at that time because of extreme food and fuel shortages as well as the slow progress of peace talks with Russia.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the Bolshevik Revolution proved to be another facet of conflict. While Zeman refutes the view that the socialist revolution had any significant bearing on the national character of the Habsburg Monarchy, the tensions or support conjured up by socialist factions increased the radicalization of political life.<sup>24</sup> Still, it is unreasonable to ignore the significance of the cooperation between the nationalist revolutionaries and the governments of the Allied countries. Consequently, this fact undermines the argument that the downfall of the Habsburgs was due solely to the hard-handed punishment of the Allies.

#### 4. Conclusion

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<sup>20</sup> Zeman, *The Break-up of the Habsburg Empire*, p. x.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. x.

<sup>22</sup> Pauley, *The Habsburg Legacy*, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 62.

<sup>24</sup> Zeman, *The Break-up of the Habsburg Empire*, p. 145.

Great difficulty exists in assigning either nationalism or the division of spoils as the causes of Habsburg dissolution, for both factors are mutually exclusive. Whether better governmental organization and management could have handled the eternal conflicts and national uprising is a moot point. The fact remains that the variegated empire was divided after its defeat in World War I as a consequence of both political and nationalist forces. The Big Four's decision was influenced by the need to punish the Central Powers as well as to implement the principle of self-determination, a policy that nationalist émigrés were pushing for. Nationalism had been a divisive force within the Habsburg Monarchy for many years; however, it was not solely responsible for its demise. In its final years, the House of Habsburg rested on a fragile foundation eroded by national and political tension. Certainly it was a weak structure, but despite years of internal disintegration, it did not collapse. Instead, the Allied powers and nationalist radicals, who believed its dismemberment was in their best interest, selfishly destroyed it.

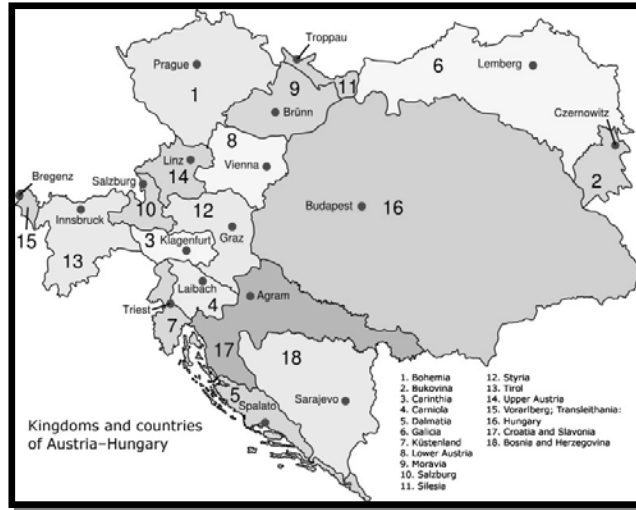
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RĂZBOI ȘI STAT: NAȚIONALISM, CONFLICT  
ȘI AUTO-DETERMINARE ÎN EUROPA

Rezumat

Naționalismul a remodelat și restructurat peisajul socio-politic al țărilor europene. Această forță a fost considerată responsabilă de declinul și dispariția statelor supranaționale, concomitent cu stimularea tendințelor de auto-determinare a grupurilor etnice cuprinse în cadrul unor largi și puternice imperii. Cu toate că naționalismului i-a revenit un rol crucial în disoluția Monarhiei habsburgice, dispariția acestei structuri statale este prea complexă pentru a fi atribuită exclusiv tendințelor de tip naționalist. Acest articol discută argumentul potrivit căruia factorii interni au destabilizat guvernarea habsburgică, grăbind luarea hotărârii, de către învingătorii Primului Război Mondial, că Imperiul austro-ungar trebuie să dispară de pe harta politică a Europei. Monarhia habsburgică a fost subminată de conflictele naționaliste din interior și de acerba rivalitate a puterilor victorioase: doi factori, a căror relaționare simbiotică dă o imagine întregită cu privire la disoluția dinastiei habsburgice.

Cuvinte cheie: Europa, Monarhia habsburgică, maghiari, maghiarizare, naționalism, revoluții, autodeterminare, război.



Map 1



Map 2