

Introduction: Austria and Modernity

The Habsburg Monarchy in its last century was one of the largest European polities by area and population, and was, as we shall see, a major player, a ‘great power’, at least in theory, until its demise in 1918. Yet it is not often studied at the forefront of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European History.

There are several reasons for this. It was not a successful nation-state, unlike France, Germany or Britain, or, in various forms, Russia. In its nineteenth-century manifestation the ‘Monarchy’ was the archetypal Central European state, so it did not fare well as a subject during the Cold War, when there was no Central Europe, only binary ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ halves. There is also the consideration that after 1918 it no longer existed, and it is always an extra reach to study something that has no obvious and significant successor, as is the case with the Habsburg Monarchy. There is even some reason to think that neither students nor professors are particularly attracted to study a subject with such an atavistic, ‘feudal’ moniker. In a world where democracies and republics are the norm (even when the most successful democracies tend to be constitutional monarchies), and empires, such as the Habsburg Monarchy was, are frowned upon, getting anyone to pay attention to a Monarchy named after an aged, and by now rather obscure, dynasty is always going to be a hard sell.

The fact that the very identity of the subject is the cause of all sorts of confusion cannot help either. The history of the lands ruled by the Habsburg dynasty (from 1780, Habsburg-Lorraine) is such a long and convoluted one that it is best to call them by its ruling agent, hence the rather anodyne title of ‘the Habsburg Monarchy’ used by both Charles W. Ingrao, the author of the first volume, covering the early modern period of 1618–1815, and by myself in the sequel for the more ‘modern’ period of 1815–1918. Yet that territory and that history are also often named ‘Austria’ and ‘Austrian’, partly because the Habsburg dynasty had adopted the name of the House of Austria centuries before, when its main territory had indeed been in what is now part of the Austrian Republic,

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and partly because that is what contemporaries called this political entity for most of its premodern and modern career. So both Ingrao and I often use such ‘Austrian’ terminology to describe what was, more accurately, ‘the Habsburg Monarchy’ and ‘Habsburg’: that is, such things pertaining to the Habsburg Monarchy.

The ‘Monarchy’, moreover, should not be thought of merely as the hierarchical and dynastic political authority of the Habsburg family and its servants, but rather the whole political, social, economic and cultural nexus of a vast territory and populace in the middle of the European continent. One could call it ‘Habsburgia’, or more scatologically but with fine literary precedent, ‘Kakania’,¹ to get away from overemphasising the ‘monarchical’ aspect, or one could call it, somewhat inaccurately, the ‘Habsburg Empire’, because it was after all the empire ruled by the Habsburgs, except for the fact that the political leadership in parts of the Habsburg realm came to resent and deny that they were part of an ‘empire’, or at least the Habsburg one. Indeed, up until 1806 there had been a crucial ambivalence in the imperial status of the Habsburg lands, because their imperial title had not derived from the Habsburgs’ territorial possessions, but rather from their having effectively made the office of emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (which extended over what is now largely Germany) hereditary in the House of Habsburg/Austria (-Lorraine). So perhaps it is just all too confusing to take the Habsburg Monarchy seriously.

In the first half of the period covered by this book, the irony was that there was really no such problem. From 1804 (which did admittedly overlap for a couple of fraught years with the Holy Roman imperial title), the polity and territories under study were known simply as the Austrian Empire, or ‘Austria’. Yet it is a central event in the history of the Habsburg Monarchy that the crisis of the 1860s led, from 1867, to ‘Austria’ being renamed as ‘Austria-Hungary’, or, informally, the Dual Monarchy, and the official appellation of ‘Austria’ ceased as a formal name for any territory in the Monarchy, let alone the whole empire, to the extent that it still was one. It became the informal name of the ‘Austrian’ half of the Dual Monarchy, but even then disputes over the nature of the new political establishment meant that the ‘Austrian’ half was known officially but informally as ‘Cisleithania’ (the lands this side of the Leitha River), but formally, and tautologically, as ‘the lands represented in the *Reichsrat*’. It was only during the First World War that the Austrian

¹ Robert Musil’s witty, if scatological, nickname for the Monarchy based on the acronym ‘k.k.’, ‘kaiserlich-königlich’, imperial-royal. For further explanation, see the section Squaring the Circle II in Chapter 3.



Figure 1. Poster advertising service by the Austrian State Railways to Ragusa (Dubrovnik). Note the map showing how to get there from as far away as London, and showing routes either by sea via Trieste or overland by railway, with connection through Bosnia, via Sarajevo. (Published with permission of the Austrian National Library.)

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half was once more formally called ‘Austria’, as a concession to Hungary, but this ‘Austria’ included parts of what is now southern Poland and Ukraine, and much of the eastern Adriatic coast. Beautiful Dubrovnik (Ragusa), in southern Dalmatia, was in ‘Austria’.

Such confusions and indeterminacies should not perhaps take such a prominent place in the introduction to a book which is intended to provide a straightforward (if stimulating) history of its subject. The more one investigates just how confusing the very name of the subject is, perhaps the more one realises why it is not such a popular topic of academic teaching and research. It is easy to be scared away. Yet that is not the intention, and in many ways this meandering excursus into the subject’s very name is an appropriate introduction to the topic, for it gives a taste of what is to come, the history of one of the most complex, and complicated, but also diverse, pluralistic and indeed significant polities in European history. It is the history of how a polyglot and supranational polity faced up to the challenges of a modernity where such polyglot, supranational entities were regarded as premodern holdovers from a feudal *ancien régime*, which had no place in the modern age of nation-states and representative, even democratic, governments. It is also the history of a region which produced – because of, or in spite of, its polyglot, supranational, premodern characteristics? – a remarkable amount of the culture and thought that has shaped our modern world.

Whether it be Vienna 1900, Budapest 1900, Kafka’s Prague or even James Joyce’s Trieste, the old, fusty, dynastic ‘Habsburg Monarchy’ was also home to much of what made up global modern culture, and hence modernity, into our own age. It was also the birthplace of the worst aspects of modernity, of the racist nationalism that led to Nazism and political antisemitism. Ludwig Wittgenstein was one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century; as a teenager he attended the same school in Linz, for a brief period, as Adolf Hitler. Both were born and grew up subjects of the Habsburg Monarchy. Nor should it be forgotten that it was the Habsburg monarch himself, Franz Joseph, who officially started the First World War that was to bring about not only the collapse of the Monarchy, but also the self-destruction of much of European civilisation for the next three decades or more. Yet the same polity also presaged much of the antidote to this, in the form of the rationale and logic of the European Union, which, at writing, was still a large part of our current diverse, pluralistic and multinational, multicultural modernity (or post-modernity).

Finding out how this area of the world, how its political and social structures, its economic and cultural development, rose to the challenges of modernity, or not, and how it in turn shaped that modernity, is

something that should be central to understanding modern European history, and modern Europe, indeed the modern world, in a way in which current academic syllabi normally do not acknowledge. The claim of this book is that the Central Europe of the Habsburg Monarchy was indeed not something to be ignored in a rush to divide between West and East or categorise in terms of discrete national histories, but rather was, as the name suggests, *central* to modern history, and hence to our modernity.

The Habsburg Paradox: The Relevance of an Irrelevant Empire

So much about what made the Habsburg Monarchy distinctive resides in its paradoxical contrariness. The norms of modern European history point westward, towards the Atlantic, but, as Claudio Magris so poetically described, the greatest geographic symbol of Habsburg Central Europe, the River Danube, starts in the Black Forest, far to the west of the source of the Rhine, yet ends up thousands of miles to the east, flowing into the Black Sea. The river, and the Monarchy it once flowed through, go against the current, if you will, of modern European history.² Studying Habsburg Central Europe is studying the ‘other’ Europe that did not quite follow the narrative of modernisation through the nation-state that was the norm all around it (and that includes the Russian Empire and the Balkans).

Yet this eastward-looking contrariness should not be regarded as the whole story. As it happens, there were other rivers in the Monarchy that led elsewhere and had their own symbolic power. The Moldau (Vltava), the Czech national river, flows north from the southern Bohemian border with Upper Austria, into the Elbe, and thence the Atlantic at Hamburg. The Vistula, the Polish national river, has its source in the mountains that were the border between Silesia, a Bohemian crownland, western Galicia (now both in Poland), and Hungary (now Slovakia). As fate would have it, the river flows through Auschwitz, then the Polish capitals of Cracow and Warsaw, before entering the Baltic at Danzig. There are yet more riverine fates for the Monarchy. The Rhine itself touched Habsburg territory at Lake Constance, and until 1866 the Po, the great river of northern Italy, flowing through Lombardy and Venetia, was largely a Habsburg river. Even after that date, rivers such as the Adige and the Isonzo flowed from Habsburg territory into the Mediterranean, where the Monarchy had its major ports: Trieste – for Austria – and Fiume (now

² Claudio Magris, *Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea* (London, 1989).

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Rijeka) – for Hungary. The whole east coast of the Adriatic was Habsburg territory.

The Monarchy was not just one going against the stream of history, but at the same time was open to influences from the Atlantic west, Baltic north and Mediterranean south. It was in many aspects a quite modern state, and saw itself as such, as a modernising force in Central and Eastern Europe. It was both inward and outward looking. Again, geography, while not necessarily fate, was symbolic of the Monarchy's complexity. At the Monarchy's core was the Danubian Plain nestling in the protective embrace of the Alps and their Carpathian extension. Yet the Monarchy's industrial centre was to the north of this range, in the Bohemian crownlands, as was agriculturally important Galicia, and, until the engineering masterpiece of the Southern Railway, the southern extension of the Alps blocked easy communication with the Monarchy's main port at Trieste. Mountains might protect the Monarchy, strategically, but they also got in the way of making it cohere. This might explain why it remained such a diverse region, economically, culturally and also in terms of its ethnic composition. It faced not two ways but four, and was never able to impose a real uniformity on its lands and population for long enough.

This led to some strange paradoxes. For much of its existence the Habsburg Monarchy had been the imperial power in Germany, and had gained much of its prestige and (soft) power from this role, and even up until 1866 it was the premier, presiding power within the German political world. The executive centre of both the Holy Roman Empire and the German Confederation had been Vienna, not Frankfurt-am-Main, let alone Berlin. And yet Germans comprised only about a quarter of the Monarchy's population in the nineteenth century, with the rest of the population being comprised of a most diverse group of ethnicities, or 'nationalities' as they came to be called. The Monarchy was hence the great polyglot, supranational/multinational polity of Europe.

At the same time, the geographically most coherent part of the Monarchy, the Kingdom of Hungary, was regarded throughout our period as a Hungarian nation-state by the Hungarian political nation. This was so even when, as late as the 1860s, only 39 per cent of the population spoke the national Hungarian language (Magyar). The supranational Monarchy thus contained within it one of the most aggressively nationalising (and successfully so) nation-states in nineteenth-century Europe. Yet overall the Monarchy never seemed able to gain a coherent *national* identity, so that what was 'Austrian' or 'Austro-Hungarian' was always rather ambivalent, as we have discussed. That was what made it appear a dynastic, supranational holdover in an era of national integration, and hence an irrelevant relic; yet that is also what ended up making it so

relevant from the perspective of today's complex, multinational, globalised modern world.

The strangest paradox of all, however, is how a polity that is increasingly seen by its historians as so successful in encouraging pluralist cultural innovation formally started the war that destroyed that same pluralist culture.

To understand how this distinctively 'Austrian' situation had arisen by 1815 requires a recap of the (inevitably) complex and spectacular history of the Monarchy and its dynasty, the Habsburgs, up until that point.³

The Indispensable Power?

The Habsburg dynasty was one of the most powerful and prestigious powers in Europe in the late medieval and early modern periods, and even in the nineteenth century the Habsburg Monarchy still held a special status close to being the sort of 'indispensable power' that Madeline Albright once described the United States as in world affairs. The Habsburgs began as a rather minor ruling family in southern Swabia, what is now part of Switzerland. The family got its big break when Rudolf Habsburg was elected German king in the late thirteenth century and proceeded to defeat Otakar of Bohemia. As a consequence, the lands of the extinct Babenberg dynasty, centred on the duchy of Austria, came under the rule of the Habsburgs. Over the course of the fourteenth century, the Habsburgs shifted their power base (or it was shifted for them) from what is now Alsace and northern Switzerland to their Austrian lands, and they adopted the title of the House of Austria. Up until the early fifteenth century they were junior partners to the Luxemburg dynasty, but through dynastic accident and canny exploitation thereof, the Habsburgs (re-)gained the imperial office in 1452 with Friedrich III and then acquired a massive and wealthy territorial empire through a series of famous dynastic marriage alliances centred on Maximilian I.

By the early sixteenth century Maximilian's grandson, Charles V, was Holy Roman Emperor, and ruler of the wealthy Burgundian lands, including the Netherlands, and the Kingdom of Spain, including Spain's new conquests in the New World, as well as much of Italy. It was an immense empire, so immense (and unwieldy) that he soon gave the less significant part, the Austrian lands, to his younger brother

³ The following section goes over ground already covered well, and in more detail, by the book of which this one is the sequel, Charles W. Ingrao, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1618–1815*, and readers are urged to read that for a fuller understanding of what preceded the nineteenth-century developments outlined in this book.

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Ferdinand. So powerful did the Habsburg position appear, that Charles was urged to become a ‘universal monarch’ of Christendom, but this proved to be hubris, largely because of the adverse effect on Habsburg authority of the Reformation (as well as resistance from France and the challenge of the Ottomans), and the sheer, unmanageable extent of his lands.

After Charles, the House of Austria (Habsburg) was split into two, the *senior* Spanish line, and the *junior* Austrian one. The Spanish branch, with gold and silver flowing in from South America, was the leading power of Europe, casting the Austrian cousins in the shade for many decades. Nonetheless, the Austrian line – partly because it was not as powerful, and hence less of a threat to the prince electors of the Holy Roman Empire, retained the imperial title. In addition, yet another dynastic marriage alliance meant that the death of the Jagellon king, Louis II, at the Battle of Mohacs in 1526, resulted in the Austrian branch acquiring a sizeable Central European domain. The trio of Austria, Bohemia and Hungary was to prove the core of the future Central European Habsburg Monarchy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet there were several chapters of hubris and disaster still to go before then.

The later sixteenth century saw the Spanish Habsburgs as the leading power of the Catholic Counter Reformation, most famous in English history for the Armada of 1588. Their Austrian cousins, beset by the threat of the Ottoman Turks, struggling to maintain a hold of ‘royal Hungary’ – the part of its newly acquired kingdom not in either Turkish hands or in autonomous Transylvania – and having to deal with the religious divisions in the Empire, and in its Austrian and Bohemian lands, initially took a more conciliatory course. Yet with the succession of Ferdinand II, who had grown up under Spanish tutelage, the Austrian branch also pursued a hard line in returning its subjects to the Catholic faith. The resultant Thirty Years War (1618–1648) was a catastrophic turning point for both Central Europe and the Habsburgs. Initial political and military success led Ferdinand II to overreach, with drastic consequences. A limited conflict became a European-wide war, with the Spanish attempting to regain their Dutch territories, Sweden intervening as the champion of the Protestant cause, and the French, guided by Cardinal Richelieu, choosing *raison d'état* over religious loyalties to help the anti-Habsburg, Protestant party, and supplant Spain as Europe’s leading power. Meanwhile large tranches of German Central Europe, including parts of the Habsburg lands, were ransacked, pillaged and laid waste by the roaming, largely mercenary armies, of both sides. The Peace of Westphalia that ended the war was an acceptance by the (Austrian) Habsburg imperial house of a severe diminution and

contraction of the powers of the imperial office, and the beginnings of a new international system based not on imperial suzerainty but rather state sovereignty, which was soon to be presided over by Louis XIV's France.

Within the Austrian and Bohemian lands, however, the conflict had the reverse effect, leading to a huge gain in the power of the Habsburg dynasty and their political, military and religious allies. The large part of the nobility that had been Protestant was either executed, expelled, dispossessed or forced to convert, and there developed a distinctly Habsburg system of rule by the Baroque trinity of dynasty, aristocracy and (Counter-Reformation) Church. The Habsburgs also regained their footing as a major European power by the late seventeenth century. While the Spanish branch faded, the Austrian Habsburgs eventually found a new role in allying with the other European powers to their west, even Protestant ones such as the Dutch United Provinces and England, to counter a now dominant France. To their east, the military threat from the Ottoman Empire reached a critical level in 1683, with the siege of Vienna, but this perceived threat to Western Christendom resulted in a rallying of Christendom's forces against the infidel, and a major victory for the Habsburg dynasty, with their eventually reclaiming the entire Hungarian kingdom and more from the Ottomans.

When the Spanish line ended in 1700, the Austrian Habsburgs attempted to bring their cousins' entire heritage back under their, Habsburg control in the War of the Spanish Succession (1700–1714), but they were unsuccessful. Spain and the Spanish overseas empire went to a junior branch of the French Bourbon dynasty. Nonetheless, the Austrian Habsburgs gained potentially valuable territories in the Netherlands and Italy, and by the early eighteenth century, with their imperial title and their now greatly expanded territories in Central and Southeastern Europe, were again one of the great powers in Europe – a vital player in the balance of power and an arbiter of relations within the Empire. It is at this point that the Habsburgs were first and foremost a Central European power, based preeminently on the resources of the territories within the Central European bloc that came to be known as the Habsburg Monarchy.

A House that had so often been favoured by dynastic accident now struck very bad dynastic luck, in the form of not producing any direct male heirs. The Pragmatic Sanction of 1713, a modest document declaring the 'inseparable and indivisible' nature of the Habsburgs' territorial possessions, had been published by Charles (Karl) VI before it was clear that he would have no male heir, simply to establish the legal basis of Habsburg rule, but that legal document needed to be recognised and

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accepted by all the relevant interests and powers, foreign and domestic, to gain legitimacy and validity. Once it did become clear, after the death of Charles's son in 1716, it became much harder to gain this recognition for Charles's preferred heir, his daughter Maria Theresa. Charles was able to gain such recognition and assent from most powers, at considerable cost to Habsburg power and finances, but when he died unexpectedly in 1740, many of the promises and agreements made proved of little or no value. Maria Theresa's claim was challenged, and in a particularly cynical manoeuvre Friedrich II of Prussia seized the crownland of Silesia while claiming to be protecting Maria Theresa's right of inheritance. There followed two major conflicts, the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748) and the Seven Years War (1756–1763), which saw Maria Theresa survive as Habsburg ruler, and become empress in 1745 with the election of her husband, Francis Stephen of Lorraine, as Holy Roman Emperor. She never regained Silesia, however, and had to suffer the severe loss of prestige (humiliation) of accepting upstart Prussia as a serious counterpart within the German, and European, states system.

The onset of the 'struggle for supremacy in Germany' was to have immense consequences in European history, but the immediate effects on Habsburg foreign and domestic policy were significant enough. Maria Theresa began a transformation of the Monarchy from an agglomeration of provinces and lands, where the monarch ruled largely indirectly through the landed aristocracy and the Church, towards a centralised state. Initially this amounted to little more than closer supervision of the provincial estates, to gain greater revenue for the military force needed to maintain the Monarchy's status as a great power. This did involve the creation of a much larger bureaucracy centred on Vienna, however, and it was accompanied by the beginning of a complete overhaul of the education system and the status of religious institutions within the Monarchy. Maria Theresa's reforms were relatively circumspect, and did not extend, for instance, to Hungary or the Austrian Netherlands, but they did transform the government of the core Austrian and Bohemian lands. Moreover, the logic of 'Enlightened Absolutism' that was behind this reform campaign was fully implemented when Maria Theresa's son, Joseph II became Habsburg ruler in 1780.

An idealist (or ideologue) without his mother's sense of political practicalities, Joseph II set out to expand and perfect her reforms. Much as Ferdinand II had tried to impose the true faith in the seventeenth century, now Joseph II attempted to bring about the rule of Reason. As in the first case of hubris, the second also led to crisis for the Monarchy. Acting as a 'philosopher-king', in imitation of his role model, ironically Friedrich II of Prussia, Joseph took what was still a fairly ramshackle set of territories