PART I

Precarious elites

How did contemporaries experience and explain imperial decline in continental Europe? Perhaps the most famous image of imperial decline in the twentieth century is the photograph of Franz Ferdinand shot on the last day of his life in Sarajevo. The Habsburg family did not just represent its empire but embodied it. This explains the particular shock caused by the death of Franz Ferdinand not only to Europeans but to a global readership of world news. A photograph shot just minutes before the assassination – such an utterance poignantly expresses the tint of celebrity surrounding this particular death.

The first chapter places the effect of his death in the context of a longer affective genealogy of dynastic decline. In the last decades of Habsburg rule, members of the Habsburg family, like those of other dynasties such as the Romanoffs, were plagued by fears of assassination. We can grasp imperial decline both from a first-person perspective of its rulers, and indirectly, by observing the changing function of dynastic families in the period of declining empires. From the intellectual formation of the last ruling Habsburgs in the climate of cultural globalization, we get to the odd wartime ethnography of aristocratic officers serving Germany and Austria in the First World War. In the same generation, they went from a sentimental education in the grand tours of the Belle Epoque to a very different kind of mobility. Their deployment as officers in the First World War gave them techniques and technologies of detachment from the theatre of war. Looking at imperial transformation through the eyes of the dynastic and military elites exposes the connections between imperial societies both during and after imperial decline. Whether empires ended gradually or abruptly, by way of partial devolution and decolonization, like Britain, or revolution, like Russia, they did not collapse independently from each other. The old imperial elites were mutually connected and remained so after the demise of their former rulers.

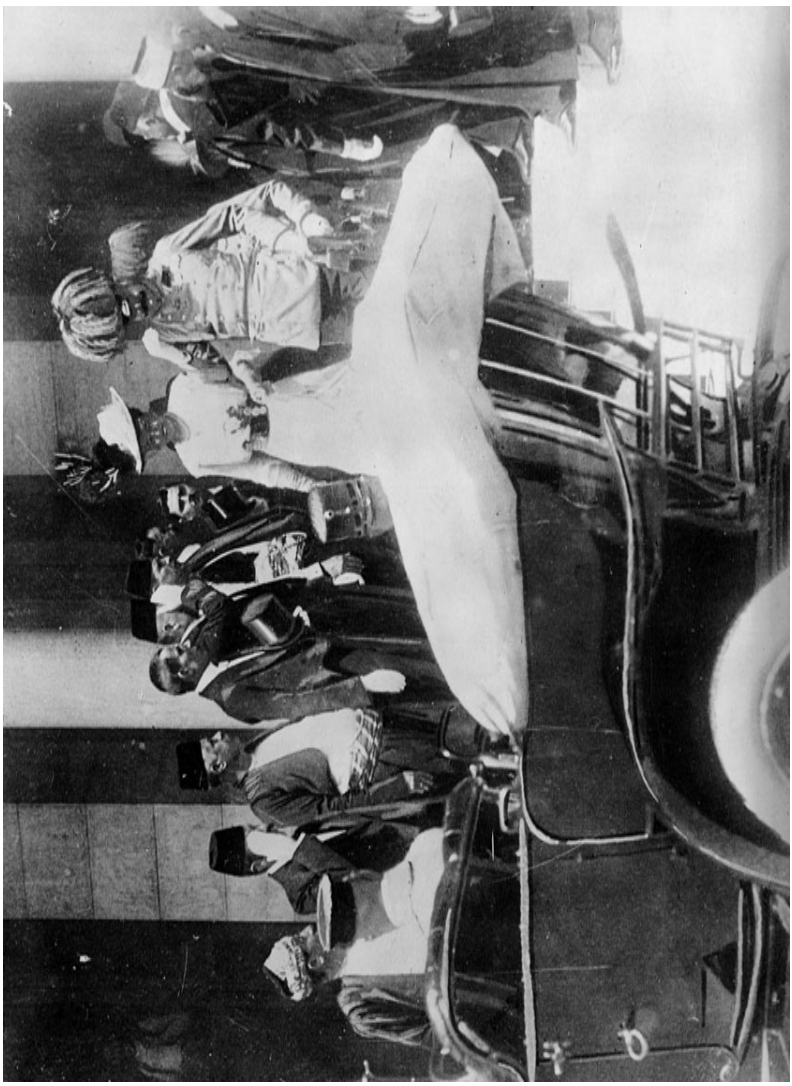

Figure 3 'Anniversary of the War's Origin', *New York Times*, 27 June 1915

CHAPTER 1

Famous deaths
Subjects of imperial decline

On a December day in 1892, in Trieste, a young Habsburg Archduke boarded the steamer *Empress Elizabeth* to embark on a Grand Tour around the world. The Archduke originally planned to travel incognito, but throughout his journey, he was received and entertained by members of the highest nobility.[1] He was accompanied by three servants, two cooks, a gamekeeper, the adjunct custodian of the Austro-Hungarian imperial Hofmuseum for Natural History, and a taxidermist, who was also a photographer. The group included two consuls of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and four military officers of the imperial Ulan Guards. One of the officers was the descendant of an old dynasty of Crusaders, and others belonged to the innermost circle of the Habsburg emperor.[2] It was impossible for the Archduke to hide his high standing with such an entourage.

Yet in some sense, in 1892, he was indeed unknown to the world. Few outside of Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the higher European aristocracy would have actually recognized him by first name. His trip around the world, for all its excesses in luxury, was typical of someone of his standing, as were many of his other activities. Before assuming the title of Archduke, the prince had been mostly interested in hunting exotic animals. He had purchased a hunting estate from a financially troubled Bohemian nobleman, Prince Lobkowicz. Here, at Konopischt, he displayed the spoils of his exploits shooting Bohemian deer to a select number of guests.[3]

[1] Franz Ferdinand, *Tagebuch meiner Reise um die Erde*, 2 vols., vol. 1, 1892–93 (Vienna: Hölder, 1895), 20.
[2] Regina Höfer (ed.), *Imperial Sightseeing. Die Indienreise von Erzherzog von Franz Ferdinand von Österreich-Este* (Vienna: Museum für Völkerkunde, 2010), 82–84.
[3] Wladimir Aichelburg, *Der Thronfolger und die Architektur* (Vienna: Neuer Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2003), 23.

His Grand Tour was organized using the same boat that had already taken one of his predecessors, Maximilian, on trips to Brazil.[4] By the middle of the nineteenth century, the educational tour around the globe had become one of the core experiences that prepared aspiring rulers for political power on an increasingly global scale. Between 1880 and 1912, several incumbents to the throne of the Romanoff, Wittelsbach, Hohenzollern, Saxe-Coburg Gotha, and Habsburg families all went on trips around the world. Even the route that Franz Ferdinand's group had taken was mainstream: they passed from the Mediterranean to Port Said in Egypt to India, from there to Singapore and Australia, then to Japan, North America, and finally, having crossed the United States, back to Vienna.

Global personal renown only reached the Archduke on the day of his death by assassination on 28 June 1914. As Emil Ludwig, one of his generation's most celebrated political biographers, put it, the assassin, 'under the doubly symbolic name of Gabriel Princip' had let loose a 'world-cataclysm' for all of Europe's remaining emperors.[5] The assassination signalled a famous chain of events that eventually put an end to four European empires. The shots resonated in European cultural memory decades after they were no longer heard in the streets of Sarajevo. The symbolic construction of this event was a major collective accomplishment of Europe's journalists and historians. Photographs of Franz Ferdinand, originally intended for celebratory purposes, marking the Archduke's state visit to one of his future domains, obtained documentary value because they were billed as having been taken 'just minutes before he was assassinated'.

There is hardly a political leader in European history whose assassination was as constitutive of his fame, in proportion to his lifetime identity and achievements, as Franz Ferdinand. This culturally constructed echo reached as far back in time as the French Revolution, when Empress Marie Antoinette had been executed, and as far away geographically as the remote Mexican city of Querétaro, the place where another Habsburg Archduke, Mexican emperor Maximilian, had been executed in 1867.[6]

[4] Georg Schreiber, *Habsburger auf Reisen* (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 1994).
[5] Emil Ludwig, *Wilhelm Hohenzollern, The Last of the Kaisers* (New York and London: G.B. Putnam's, 1927), 433–434.
[6] 'If one man's pistol shots had brought about the French Revolution and he had left the world for a prison to re-enter it after Waterloo, his eyes would not have looked at such a change as will Gavrilo Prinzip's in 1934 – or earlier, if the Allies win. True, Prinzip's shots were not really the cause of the war; the cause lay deeper. [. . .] But the assassination at Sarajevo was the signal gun': 'Anniversary of the War's Origin', *New York Times*, 27 June 1915.

Franz Ferdinand's significance as a symbol of the start of the First World War is so pervasive that it is still heard in the twenty-first century. A hundred years on, no historical analysis of the Great War can really do without some account of Franz Ferdinand's assassination.

The contrast between the rather local significance of Franz Ferdinand before his death, and the global fame of his decline, raises the question as to the reasons for this celebrity. On the surface, aside from the legendary Franz Josef I, who died in 1916, none of the Habsburgs who lived in the twentieth century had any significant political role. Even Franz Josef himself ended up witnessing the gradual devolution of his powers: first, in 1867, to Hungary, then, in the defeat at Solferino, to the rising Italian nation, and finally, around the time of his death, to the other components of his empire. The last Habsburg emperor, Karl, tried to preserve his own power by promoting the creation of puppet kingdoms in Poland and Ukraine, with Karl Stefan and Wilhelm von Habsburg as regents, but this plan never succeeded. Karl Stefan died in his Galician castle, while Wilhelm von Habsburg was killed in a Soviet military camp in 1948.[7] Increasingly, the Habsburgs had come to excel at another sort of renown: the celebrity of imperial decline. As I want to suggest, the deeper reasons for this celebrity lay not in their real achievements, not in the actual promises that their persons held for their empires, but in the symbolic significance that their figures had both internally and abroad. As Europe's oldest elites, they were also figures of public identification in the age before democratic representation. Their existence gave persons of different social, ethnic, and religious status to sense some commonality. This sense of a common background became even more important when the empires that these Habsburgs had ruled declined.

Commodifying Habsburg deaths

The property of being *célèbre*, a secularized form of sanctity, precedes the emergence of the 'celebrity' as a noun describing a type of person. This status is achieved when the name of the person itself gives the public the illusion of knowing the person behind the name, even if they know very little about the person, and independently of the person's actual deeds and

[7] Timothy Snyder, *The Red Prince. The Fall of a Dynasty and the Rise of Modern Europe* (London: Vintage, 2009).

actions.[8] Modern theorists of celebrity tend to explain this phenomenon as the result of the separation of particular individuals from the rest of society through a mass-mediated worship of some of their attributes.[9] According to this view, celebrities are a quintessentially modern phenomenon, born with the age of the modern revolutions; they come about as a result of the confluence between democratization, rationalization, and commodification.[10]

However, the quality of being known in virtue of being known applies particularly directly to Europe's princely dynasties and other noble families.[11] We have an illusion of being familiar with people bearing noble names, as Georg Simmel pointed out, because we recognize the names from history, not because we recognize them as persons. They have practised a careful art of self-fashioning, and other factions in their environment were historically interested in contributing to the fashioning of aristocratic identity in their own interests as well.[12] Their *devises* and coats of arms are not unlike modern brands. Moreover, the greatest majority of family members with illustrious names spent their life doing very little in the spheres of politics, science, or art, being engaged in purely representational activities, or just living their lives. Most societies know them primarily through the image they associate with their name, supplemented with personal attributes.

Celebrity is the last remnant of charismatic forms of grace; the 'King's touch' is still visible to us through the gaze of the celebrity. The origin of the term 'celebrity' is not accidentally connected to the sphere of the sacred, such as the celebration of mass. Weber had taken the theological concept of charisma to describe a particularly premodern and 'pre-rational' form of granting someone authority. Modernity is the period in which celebrity is not only a mass spectacle but the spectacle also has multiple, and seemingly impersonal, organizers. The increased intensity of economic

[8] Antoine Lilti, 'Reconnaissance et célébrité: Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la politique du nom propre', in *Orages, Littérature et culture*, n 9, mars 2010, 77–94; Lilti, *Figures publiques. L'invention de la célébrité 1750–1850* (Paris: Fayard, 2014).

[9] Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001), 105.

[10] Rojek, *Celebrity*, 13; P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

[11] This capacious definition belongs to Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1961).

[12] Georg Simmel, 'Exkurs über den Adel', in Simmel, *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1908), 732–746; Ronald G. Asch, 'Aristocracy and Gentry', entry in *Europe 1450–1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World*, ed. Jonathan Dewald, 6 vols. (New York: Scribner, 2004), 96–102; Eckart Conze, *Kleines Lexikon des Adels. Titel, Throne, Traditionen* (Munich: Beck, 2005).

and cultural exchange means that the persons holding celebrity status have less control over their image than before. The difference between premodern and modern forms of celebrity, or rather between celebrity in early capitalist and advanced capitalist society, is not in the quality of the celebrity's authority over a public, which remains magical; rather, the change affects the forms in which the celebrity's image is socially mediated.

The key question for the historian is at which moment the mechanism of celebrity construction kicks in. In the case of Franz Ferdinand and the Habsburgs generally, these moments are the points in time at which their particular achievements and position come to be perceived as being representative of something far larger than they are. For Franz Ferdinand, this 'larger than his life' effect had to do with his activities as a patron of culture.

Upon his return, Franz Ferdinand began to take his duties as a curator of imperial culture as seriously as his uncle. Travelling to remote parts of the Habsburg Empire, he promoted the development of regional folk arts; he also continued collecting and expanding the family's ethnographic collection for the now-established museum. Seen through the eyes of the Habsburg Archdukes, Europeanness can be grasped through two concepts of detachment: the social detachment of the nobility, particularly of the ruling houses, from their 'ethnically other' subjects; and the ethnic distinction between Europeans (as white Christians) and non-Europeans. Members of dynastic families played the role of identity builders, not only as politicians, but also in the sphere of symbolic power, as collectors, as patrons of allegorical self-representation, and as the first dilettante ethnographers.

Celebrities did not emerge at the same time as the circulation of print and the mass market; rather, what changed in the modern period was that their image became much more widely commodified, and that as commodities, they were in competition with others. As commodities, they could not 'go to market and make exchanges of their own account', as Marx had put it in *Capital*, the first volume of which was published in 1867.[13]

In order to understand the symbolic significance of dynastic death – a peculiar kind of celebrity – in modern Europe, we need to place it in

[13] Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*, vol. I, ch. 2 (Hamburg: Otto Meissner, 1867), cited after the translation by David McClelland, in Karl Marx, *An Abridged Edition*, ed. David McClelland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 52.

comparative perspective. Between 1881 and 1914, there were more assassination attempts against members of European ruling families than had ever before occurred in a comparable time span of recorded European history. Even non-ruling or minor members of a ruling family, as well as vice-regents coming from non-dynastic aristocratic families, became victims of political assaults. This is surprising not least because dynastic legitimacy was an old and carefully constructed system of beliefs; the ruling families, which had controlled much of the cultural production in their realms, sustained it by encouraging displays of their special genealogy, which secured a selective memory of their ancestors. Many groups and factions of European society maintained or at least passively accepted the image of ruling dynasties as symbolic sources of their common identity.[14] Thus even though rituals like the King's touch, which had previously affirmed the widespread belief in royalty's special powers of healing, had disappeared by the modern period, in many other respects, dynastic charisma remained intact.[15] The fact that more Europeans were ready to assassinate members of their royal families was not necessarily a sign of their decline in authority; on the contrary, it could equally be interpreted as an act of affirmation that these old rulers continued to embody a political order, albeit one whose decline many considered overdue.

Publicly mediated news of assassinated royals and their voluntary or involuntary abdication allowed contemporaries to conceptualize imperial decline through the notion of death, which was both metaphorical and literal. But this picture of imperial decline, captured in the figure of the deposed or assassinated monarch, would remain incomplete if we did not consider other ways in which imperial decline was represented allegorically.

The celebrated late-Victorian anthropologist James Frazer had remarked that assassinating a monarch used to be one of the fundamental taboos of primitive societies, more significant than the taboo of murder.[16] Yet the increased frequency of royal assassinations, together with the abolition of the nobility, might suggest that in modern times the taboo had been broken too often and in too many places at once to still merit the

[14] Marie Tanner, *The Last Descendant of Aeneas: The Hapsburgs and the Mythic Image of the Emperor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 146ff.

[15] Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); for more recent treatments of the theme, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence*, transl. Alphonso Lengis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005).

[16] James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), see esp. Preface from 1922; and Frazer, 'The Killing of the Khazar Kings', in *Folk-lore*, xviii (1917), 382–407.

name. But even if this is the case, the widespread tendencies to break with the old imperial order must still be explained in terms of their impact and their social function. The legal and cultural forms taken by these abolitions contributed significantly to the shaping of post-imperial societies in Europe, from national democracies to authoritarian dictatorships.

As violence against the ruling dynasties took on cultural as well as political forms, these families themselves responded to the acts of terror by enacting policies of commemoration. Monuments were built in a historicist style, recalling a bygone era of greatness, whether neo-Gothic neo-classical, or neo-Mughal. Throughout Europe, an unprecedented number of monuments to living and recently deceased members of ruling families were erected in the decades between the Franco-Prussian War and the First World War. This also coincided with historicist painting coming into fashion, presenting newly made nations with the illustrated history of their rulers.

When they prepared to succeed in power, the representatives of the old empires in Europe were aware of the precariousness of imperial rule. Monuments were erected both in the centres and at the fringes of the empires. The Habsburgs built the neo-Gothic *Votivkirche* at the heart of their empire in Vienna; completed in 1879, it commemorated both Franz Josef's survival of a failed knife attack by a Hungarian nationalist in 1853 and the death by firing squad of Emperor Maximilian of Mexico. Similarly, in 1907, the Romanoffs commemorated the death of Alexander II both at the centre and the periphery; the Cathedral of *Spas na krovi* (literally: 'Savior on the Blood'), built on the spot in St. Petersburg where Emperor Alexander II had been assassinated in 1881, looks like a smaller copy of the St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow. Like the Habsburgs, the Romanoffs also made sure to build monuments to the assassinated emperor at the more contested fringes of their empire, such as the city of Kazan itself, where a monument was erected in 1895. Beyond Europe, Lord Curzon's calls to build monuments in India to the deceased Queen Victoria resulted in construction not only in the former colonial centre of Calcutta but also at the periphery, in Lucknow, where the famous Sepoy rebellion had strongly shaken her rule in 1857.[17] At the same time, Lucknow became a tourist sight attracting global interest in imperial decline.

The symbolic commemoration of violence gave dynastic rulers a special kind of charisma. Control over the representation of this threat

[17] Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Veena T. Oldenburg, *Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

did not remain under the control of the ruling families for long, however. Throughout the territories of former imperial control, the very places where monuments had been erected became loci of resistance. The most famous images of toppling hegemony came from revolutionary Russia.

Another example of self-promotion projects with unintended consequences was the historical archive initiated by the Habsburgs. In 1868, the Habsburg family agreed to open its archives to the public, starting a long process of collecting documents and building a representative edifice for their presentation. The Hohenzollerns, too, opened a museum for the public at this time. But just as in the case of the Hohenzollern museum, the completion of the Habsburgs' Court and state archive in 1918 would eventually coincide with the demise of the dynasty and its empire.[18] Throughout Europe, aristocratic archives, which the dynasties and minor nobility presented as documents of shared imperial history, had become instruments of their disintegration.

The increased circulation of images of destruction in the international press, books, and films meant that the power of these images transcended the borders of the former empires that the dynasties had represented. Destruction in one location was visible in several locations at once. Images of the decline of dynasties acquired a double meaning as symbols of decline. The dynastic families who had been the makers of identity became objects of an almost ethnographic interest in the past, a European self-ethnography.

The Archdukes as collectors: civilizing Europe with barbarian art

The noble courts and the imperial families that controlled them, in a variety of ways, gave Europeans their first idea of themselves.[19] For ruling families like the Habsburgs and their chief political rivals, the Protestant Hohenzollerns, the history and culture of their families were inseparable

[18] Eva Giloi, *Monarchy, Myth, and Material Culture in Germany, 1750–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[19] Norbert Elias, *Court Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Tim Blanning, *The Power of Culture and the Culture of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Edward Berenson and Eva Giloi (eds.), *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame, and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010); Dominic Lieven, *The Aristocracy in Europe, 1815–1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). *Erzherzog Franz Ferdinand. Unser Thronfolger. Zum 50. Geburtstag*, eds. Leopold Freiherr von Chlumetzky, Theodor v. Sosnosky et al., *Illustriertes Sonderheft der Oesterreichischen Rundschau* (Vienna and Leipzig: K.u.K. Hofdruckerei, 1913), 9–11, 9.