1 The Distinctiveness of Austrian History

On June 9, 1815, the representatives of the great European powers gathered in the Hofburg, the medieval city palace of the Habsburgs, to sign the peace settlement that ended the Napoleonic Wars. The final act of the Congress of Vienna was accompanied by no fanfare or celebration. Yet, as the last of the European princes and the other 100,000 visitors who had crowded into the city now departed for home, there was no mistaking the import of a treaty that would help define the European state system and preserve it from another great war for the next hundred years.

Although representatives of Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia – and even defeated France – had played a major role in the peace negotiations, none had helped shape the course of the negotiations more that their Austrian hosts. And with good reason. Although it has always been fashionable to give the British Duke of Wellington the credit for defeating Napoleon at Waterloo, his fate had been sealed two years earlier when Austria entered the war. It was the Austrian empire that had contributed the allied army's largest contingent and its commander-in-chief to the first conquest of France since the Franks. And it was the war aims of the emperor's foreign minister, Clemens von Metternich, that had served as the basis for the final peace settlement. Indeed, the so-called Metternich System that he directed from Vienna was destined to dominate the domestic and foreign policies of the continent until 1848.

It is with the Congress of Vienna and the subsequent Age of Metternich that many students' and historians' knowledge of Austrian history begins. As a rule, they associate Austria's success with its great prime minister, while viewing the empire itself as a declining power that was destined for dissolution in World War I. Yet historians who credit (or criticize) Metternich for the system he helped to create forget his own characterization of himself as a mere helmsman who only followed the dictates of his Habsburg sovereign. In truth, Metternich adhered to many of the same principles that had inspired Austrian statecraft for most of the past three centuries. Moreover, our awareness of the Austrian empire's decline in the nineteenth century comes at the expense of ignoring its

emergence during the seventeenth century as a powerful, at times innovative, force that often played a leading role in international affairs and coalition diplomacy.

But the Habsburg monarchy was also different from the other great states and societies of Europe. And it was because of its distinctiveness that it conducted its domestic and foreign affairs in ways that have encouraged western historians to visualize it as something of a European backwater, a political anomaly whose structural immaturity condemned it to a constant state of crisis and decay from the very beginning of its history. It is only by understanding the monarchy's inherent individuality that we can comprehend how it successfully dealt with problems that were present from the very beginning of its history and how it not only survived, but steadily grew in size, wealth, and strength to the point where it had the military power and domestic stability necessary to resist and, ultimately, triumph over revolutionary France.

It is possible to identify at least five interdependent factors that were influential in determining the distinctive course of Austrian history after 1815, but that were already evident at least two centuries before: the impact of geopolitics and balance of power diplomacy; the diversity and individuality of the Habsburg dominions; the dynasty's close identification with Germany; its dependence on achieving a consensus among both domestic elites and foreign allies; the key role of the monarchs themselves in providing continuity and security for their state.

Diplomacy and the Formation of the Monarchy

In considering the monarchy's early history and emergence as a great power it is appropriate to recall the famous observation by the nineteenth-century publicist, František Palacký, that if the Habsburg monarchy did not exist it would have to be created. The monarchy was, in fact, created at the beginning of the early modern period, and continued to grow largely because its development was consistent with the needs of the international community. Indeed, it is difficult to underestimate the central role that dynastic diplomacy played in the monarchy's unique evolution. Most countries like England, France, or Spain can trace their eventual emergence as nation-states to a geographical continuity that promoted a substantial degree of economic, political, cultural, and linguistic homogeneity. To a great extent their rulers and ruling elites merely acted out roles that had been largely predetermined by this underlying structural reality. By contrast, the Habsburgs used dynastic politics to assemble a conglomeration of otherwise disparate dominions, over which they might later superimpose domestic policies aimed at

providing the continuity that their territories lacked. Yet the Habsburgs were also driven by geopolitical forces that greatly facilitated their success on the international stage. From beginning to end their monarchy's fate was shaped by the European practice of balance of power diplomacy, especially by the assistance of neighboring rulers and states that perceived it to be sufficiently strong to help resist more powerful enemies, yet weak enough not to pose a serious threat to their own security.

It was this double equation that had led to the election of the first Habsburg to the German imperial crown. The German princes who chose Rudolph I (1273–91) did so partly, because, as the relatively obscure lord of several modest-sized southwestern territories, he was deemed insufficiently prominent to challenge their preeminent position within the empire. But they also valued his assistance in helping them to repel the threat posed by Germany's southeastern neighbors, Bohemia and Hungary. When Rudolph's forces killed the Bohemian king at the battle of Marchfeld (1278), he acquired his enemy's southeast German lands, including the duchy of Austria. By the middle of the following century his descendants had elevated themselves to the rank of "archduke" (with the help of a forged document) and had established their identity as the House of Austria.

But the dynasty acquired more than its Austrian identity at Marchfeld. It now assumed the possession of the empire's southeastern flank, which was exposed not only to Hungary and Bohemia, but ultimately to the growing menace of the Ottoman Turks. The Austrian lands' strategic position enhanced the Habsburgs' importance as defenders of Germany's frontiers and helped secure the election of a series of Habsburg emperors, beginning with the succession of Emperor Albert II (1438–40). Although the competing power of the other German princes greatly weakened the imperial office, the dynasty used it effectively to enhance its prestige and European profile. In a memorable flight of grandeur, Emperor Frederick III (1440–93) even adopted the all-vowel acronym AEIOU to represent his presumptuous, if prophetic, motto *Austria Est Imperare Orbi Universo* (Austria is destined to rule over the entire globe). Together with the acquisition of the Austrian lands, the Habsburgs' hold on the imperial crown also brought into play a second geopolitical factor that would help determine the course of Austrian history until the end of the monarchy: a strategic, central European location that exposed it to potential enemies and attracted an even greater number of solicitous allies.

Both of these factors – the Habsburgs' strategic position and their utility in achieving a balance of power among warring neighbors – played a decisive role in the dynasty's sudden emergence on the European stage

at the end of the fifteenth century. Much of the individual credit belongs to Frederick III's remarkable son, Emperor Maximilian I (1493–1519), who was responsible for the conclusion and fruition of three key marriage alliances during the half-century 1477–1526. It was the first of these unions in 1477, between the then young Habsburg prince and Mary, the daughter and heiress of the duke of Burgundy, that inspired the famous refrain:

> Let the strong fight wars.
> Thou happy Austria marry.
> What Mars bestows on others,
> Venus gives to thee!

Its author, King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary (1458–90), could appreciate his Habsburg rival's good fortune. He had conquered most of the Habsburgs' Austrian lands from Maximilian's father and had even made Vienna his capital in 1485. The gap between the Habsburgs' dynastic pretensions and martial impotence even prompted the Viennese to mock Frederick III with their own version of AEIOU: *Aller Erst Ist Österreich Verloren* (Austria has already lost everything). But, five years later, Matthias's empire fell apart when he died childless. By contrast the progeny of Maximilian and Mary ultimately inherited both the Habsburg lands in southern Germany and Burgundy's holdings in the commercially rich Low Countries. This dual inheritance converted the Habsburgs from German territorial princes into a European dynasty of the first rank.

The second great match transformed them into a world power. When Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile agreed to wed their daughter Juana to Maximilian's son Philip ("the Handsome") in 1496, they had no expectation that the Habsburgs would soon inherit the new Spanish empire that they themselves had done so much to create. Two elder siblings and, eventually, three nephews stood ahead of Juana in the succession. But the untimely death of all five of those heirs established her claim. Thus, it came to pass that four monarchies would be concentrated in the hands of Charles of Ghent, the Dutch-born, eldest son of Juana and her Habsburg husband Philip: Castile and Aragon through Charles's mother; Burgundy (including the Netherlands) and the dynasty's German lands through his father. His election in 1519 to succeed his grandfather Maximilian as German Emperor Charles V (1519–56) completed a stupendous dynastic coup far beyond the bitter expectations of Matthias Corvinus.

The Burgundian and Spanish marriages established a primarily western European conglomeration that included not only Spain and the Low Countries but also Aragon's extensive Italian possessions and Castile's

emerging New World empire. It was not long before Charles V recognized his monarchy's Atlantic orientation and established Castile as its center. Given the relative remoteness of his Austrian lands, Charles ceded them to his younger brother Ferdinand in 1521. It was at this point that the consequences of a third, truly bizarre marriage compact involving Ferdinand led directly to the creation of a second major Habsburg state rooted in east-central Europe. In 1506 the two boys' grandfather, Maximilian, and the Jagellon King Ladislas of Hungary and Bohemia concluded a highly speculative accord that foreshadowed a double marriage of Ferdinand to Ladislas's daughter Anna, and of Ferdinand's infant sister Mary to the as yet unborn (but, hopefully, male) child of Ladislas's pregnant wife. The subsequent birth of Ladislas's son and successor, Louis, enabled both weddings to take place, following the conclusion of a more definitive marriage compact in 1515. When the childless King Louis II died fighting the Turks at Mohács in 1526, his Habsburg widow Mary and brother-in-law Ferdinand were able to secure the latter's election as king of Hungary and Bohemia.

It is easy to attribute these three incredibly fortuitous unions to the frenetic matchmaking of Maximilian I, who actually planned and concluded numerous other, less fruitful marriage alliances during his lifetime. They came about, however, because Maximilian's dynastic partners shared a mutual concern over the growing threat posed by rival powers to the regional balance of power. In selecting Maximilian for his daughter, the duke of Burgundy was seeking assistance against his bitter enemy, the king of France, whose Swiss allies actually killed him in battle three months before the wedding. The union with Spain stemmed from Ferdinand of Aragon's desire to protect his own dynasty's possessions in Italy following France's sensational conquest of the peninsula in 1494. Although they produced no male heirs, two subsequent Anglo-Spanish marriage alliances were likewise motivated by England's historic rivalry with France. If Burgundy, Spain, and England envisioned the French as a menace to the balance of power in western Europe, the Jagellon kings of Hungary and Bohemia – and the noble diets that subsequently elected Ferdinand to succeed them as king – were driven by the need to enlist Habsburg assistance against the Ottoman Turks' relentless march through the Balkans. Indeed, their sense of urgency was not lost on the entourage of the ill-fated Louis II, which literally had to fish the Hungarian crown out of the swamp in which their king had drowned while fleeing the Turks at Mohács.

The question arises why all these countries found the Habsburgs to be such desirable partners with whom to face these various foreign threats. Once again, the central location of the Austrian lands and the Holy

Roman empire made Maximilian and his successors equally sensitive to the emergence of aggressive states all along the fringes of Germany, whether to the west in France, to the south in Italy, or to the east in the Balkans. Moreover, as each marriage bore fruit and added to the Habsburg patrimony, it steadily expanded the reach of their geopolitical interests and security needs, drawing them deeper in each direction until they embraced most of the continent. Moreover, although they were now the preeminent German dynasty and were invariably elected to hold the imperial crown, the Austrian Habsburgs were never regarded by Maximilian's contemporaries as great a threat to the regional balance of power as the French or the Turks. Therefore, they made ideal allies, in keeping with Machiavelli's famous dictum that one should always ally with weaker powers against stronger ones. Never again would the Austrian Habsburgs reap significant territorial gains from dynastic marriages. But the reasons that had made Maximilian such a ready and desirable partner – the Austrian lands' strategic, central location, and the Austrian Habsburgs' usefulness as a benign counterweight in balance of power politics – remained more or less a constant in European politics to the end of the monarchy in 1918.

The Problem of Diversity

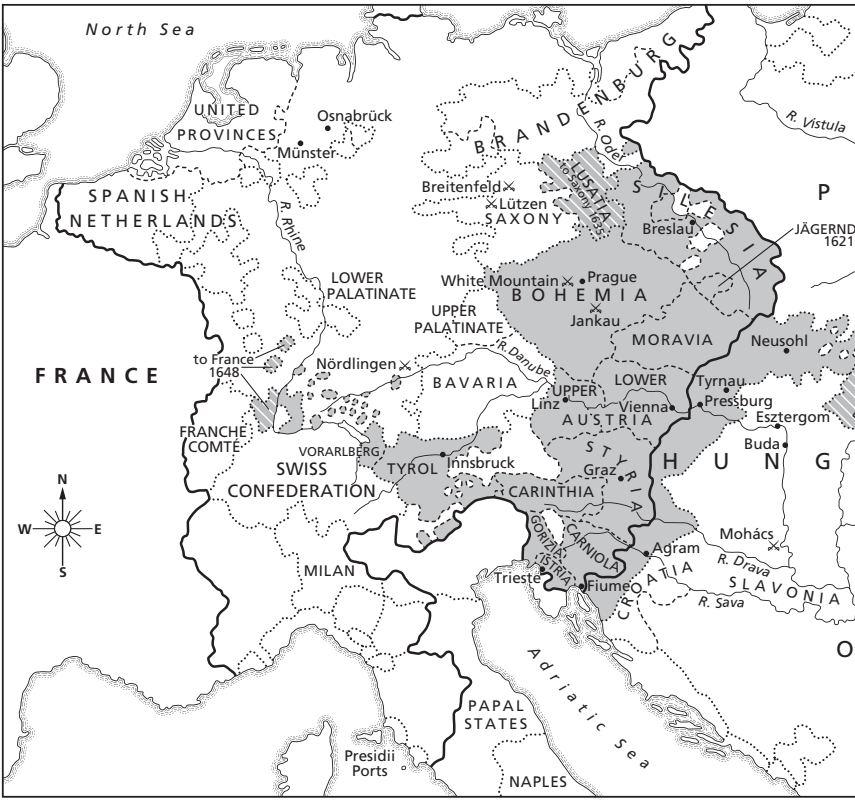
Acquiring an empire by inheritance was not, however, without its pitfalls. One of the unfortunate legacies of Maximilian's dynastic alliances was the diversity and individuality of the dominions that he brought together. As can happen in any arranged marriage, the subjects of these unions were sometimes incompatible, or at least unwilling to surrender their individual rights and independence to the dominant partner. Indeed, before they could receive the homage of their new subjects, the Habsburgs invariably had to swear to respect their privileges and autonomy – a constitutional nicety that would have been unnecessary had they acquired them by conquest. Thus, both the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs assembled a patchwork pattern of dominions in which the estates of their component territories retained a separate identity, as well as substantial control over the making and local enforcement of the law. Conditions such as these helped perpetuate each crownland's sense of independence at the expense of a common identity and loyalty to the monarchy as a whole. In the end these were fatal flaws that helped doom the Spanish Habsburgs to destruction in the seventeenth century, just as they ultimately contributed to Austria-Hungary's dissolution in the twentieth.

Whereas Spain's empire was scattered all over Europe and much of the globe, the Austrian Habsburg dominions at least had the advantage

of being geographically contiguous. Nevertheless, as they entered the seventeenth century they were also, in the words of R. J. W. Evans, "not a 'state' but a mildly centripetal agglutination of bewilderingly heterogeneous elements." Ferdinand's union of Hungary and Bohemia with his Austrian lands had created an essentially tripartite territorial configuration that enjoyed limited economic ties and was linguistically, culturally, and constitutionally diverse. Much of this discontinuity stemmed from the lie of the land: with the singular exception of the Danube, which provided a solid link between parts of Hungary and Austria, the monarchy's unfortunate natural configuration of mountains and peripheral river systems had largely predetermined the separate development of its three components. Yet a century of Habsburg rule had done little to break down these barriers.

This lack of homogeneity was evident even within the monarchy's Austrian, Bohemian, and Hungarian dominions (see Map 1). The Austrian and other German territories that the dynasty had held since the Middle Ages were themselves little more than a disjointed cluster of over a dozen largely autonomous principalities that stretched over much of southern Germany. Over time the Habsburgs had done little to foster a common identity within these so-called hereditary lands, or *Erblande*. At his death in 1564 Ferdinand had renewed a common practice of his Habsburg predecessors by subdividing the Austrian lands among his three sons. This partition still obtained at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In addition to Bohemia and Hungary, the senior Habsburg line held only the two Danubian archduchies of Upper and Lower Austria or, more precisely, Austria above the Enns and Austria below the Enns (so named because of the small Danube tributary that separated them). Directly to the south, a second Habsburg court at Graz ruled a half dozen principalities that were nestled along the eastern fringes of the Alps: the three duchies of Styria, Carinthia, and Carniola, known collectively as Inner Austria, together with the much smaller Adriatic principalities of Gorizia, Istria, and Trieste. Finally, to the west a third Habsburg archduke at Innsbruck governed the most scattered and isolated lands of the Austrian lands: situated high in the Alps and almost totally detached from the other *Erblande* was the Tyrol; beyond it lay the *Vorlande*, or Outer Austria, the contiguous and equally mountainous county of Vorarlberg and roughly one hundred, widely scattered enclaves in southwestern Germany that included the oldest of the Habsburgs' ancestral lands. As geographically disjointed as these lands were, both the Tyrol and Inner Austria were further cut up by the presence of numerous enclaves belonging to a half dozen imperial prince-bishops.

Although most of the hereditary lands' roughly 2 million inhabitants (1618) were engaged in agriculture, their commercial economies were



Map 1 The Thirty Years' War

distinctive and largely independent of one another. The two archduchies were closely bound to the Danube river commerce that connected them with Hungary and Germany. The Upper Austrian capital of Linz was one of the monarchy's major commercial and manufacturing centers, specializing in the production and export of textiles, as well as the transshipment of wine and minerals from Hungary. The Lower Austrian capital of Vienna was also somewhat involved in the Danube trade, but was slowly assuming its role as the monarchy's administrative center. By contrast Inner Austria's largely agricultural economy also relied heavily on the mining of key minerals. Styria was one of the continent's foremost centers for the mining and crafting of iron, while Carinthia and Carniola were important producers of lead and mercury respectively. Although it also utilized the Danube as a conduit for its mineral exports, much of Inner Austria's commerce ran south to the Adriatic principalities, which were, in turn, primarily influenced economically by their proximity to the sea and to northern Italy. The Tyrol and Outer Austria enjoyed virtually no commercial links with the rest of the *Erblande*. Instead, the Tyrol served as an important route between Italy and southern Germany, to which it exported glass, silk, and the extracts of its own metal and salt mining industries in exchange for food products. Meanwhile, the remoteness of the Outer Austrian lands rendered them an integral part of the economies of the Swabian and Alsatian German lands that surrounded them.

Ultimately the *Erblande* would be permanently reunited in 1665, following the extinction of all but one branch of the family. Nevertheless, these political, physical, and economic divisions encouraged each of the hereditary lands to develop a separate sense of regional loyalty and to focus more on its own selfish interests than on those of the other Austrian lands, or the monarchy as a whole. Moreover, their individuality was reinforced by the retention of their own governmental institutions, even after reunification. Every land was headed by a governor (*Landeshauptmann* or *Landesmarschall*) who was nominated by the estates and appointed by the crown. But real power resided with the estates themselves. Each diet, or *Landtag*, enjoyed a genuine right to negotiate with the governor over the crown's requests. More often they simply set their own legislative agenda. They alone were responsible for such things as the building and maintenance of roads, health care, and sanitation, all levels of public education, and even regional defenses and militia. Except for the archduchies, the individual estates also levied their own tolls and tariffs, thereby accentuating the long-standing divisions between the hereditary lands. Even when raising money for the crown the estates did so by composing their own tax laws and then collecting them through

their own army of officials. With the singular exception of Lower Austria, the estates' own bureaucracy invariably equaled or outnumbered the crown's until well into the eighteenth century. Indeed, the center of each land's power was not so much its diet but the officials whom it designated and paid, and who functioned continuously, even when the diet was not in session. As a nominee of the estates even the governor tended to be at least as deferential to the estates as he was to the crown.

Finally, one step beyond the estates' officials stood the local, landholding nobility, whose task – or privilege – it was to enforce all governmental decrees in their own jurisdiction, or *Herrschaft*. At this level parochial interests always held sway over the priorities of the government in Vienna. This was also the case with the numerous imperial bishops whose Tyrolean and Inner Austrian enclaves enjoyed considerable administrative autonomy. Nor were those interests necessarily expressed in German. The southernmost hereditary lands may have belonged to the German empire, but they generally spoke a different language. The Carniolan, and much of the Styrian, Carinthian, and Gorizian countryside was Slovene. Most of Istria spoke Croatian, while Italian was the dominant tongue in both Trieste and the southern Tyrol. More eccentric Romance languages could also be found along the western fringes of the Tyrol (Romansch) and Vorarlberg (Ladin). It would be misleading to suggest that this linguistic diversity somehow exacerbated the political, economic, or cultural divisions within the hereditary lands. The ruling elites and towns invariably spoke German, except in those areas where Italian dominated. Even then, language was of incidental significance unless it somehow reinforced a greater historical or political identity within the country's ruling class. This was not the case in the hereditary lands. It was, however, in Bohemia and Hungary.

Both Bohemia and Hungary had been established kingdoms for over five hundred years when the Habsburgs acquired them in 1526–7. Each was the creation of a conquering tribe: the Slavic Czechs, who may have arrived in Bohemia as early as the sixth century, and the Magyars, a Finno-Ugric people who subjugated the Slavic and other peoples of the Hungarian plain at the end of the tenth century. Though both nations' native dynasties had died out at the beginning of the fourteenth century, they had continued to prosper under a series of elected foreign rulers, culminating with the personal union of the two kingdoms under the Jagellon Kings Ladislas (1491–1516) and the ill-fated Louis II (1516–26). Indeed, as one of Germany's most prominent states and its only sovereign kingdom, Bohemia had played a major role in imperial affairs. Hungary had likewise been in the vanguard of the Christian defense against the Ottoman threat right up to the catastrophe at Mohács. Thus, the two