

# **Diplomacy in the Center of Europe: Austria 1814-1914**

## **Part I: From Congress to War**

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The conduct of Austria's foreign policy before the First World War demonstrates, how a bad foreign policy could transform a country from a dominant power into an isolated one. After the Congress of Vienna, 1814-15), Austria was the dominant country in Europe. She dominated Central Europe; was the leading power within the German Confederation, and exercised political dominance over Italy.

Austria was a multinational state that was home to many nationalities: Germans, Magyars, Czechs, Poles, Ruthenians, Croats, Romanians, Slovaks, Serbs, Slovenes, Italians. The Austrian Emperor Frances I, formed the 'Holy Alliance,' together with the Emperor (Czar) of Russia and the King of Prussia. This Alliance was managed by the Austrian Chancellor Metternich - the most preeminent statesman of his day, and one of the most distinguished diplomats in history. The goals of this Alliance were: to assure political dominance in Europe, and to suppress the main ideas of the French Revolution: democracy, equality, and self-determination of nations. The Holy Alliance intervened to suppress revolutions, and prevented 'regime changes' in conservative countries.

For more than a generation, until 1848, the Austrian Chancellor Metternich managed the system well. As far as the internal political structure was concerned, this system of absolutism was a perfect police state: absolute power was held by the Monarch; there was no representative government. The army and bureaucracy were the unifying forces within the Monarchy.

In 1848, revolutions broke first out in Paris and spread to Hungary, Northern Italy, and other places in Europe. People were revolting against oppression, invoking the principles of the French Revolution: Liberty and democracy; national independence, and the right to form a nation state.

In Austria, the revolution was suppressed in blood and defeated. The Hungarian revolution was put down with the help of the Russians at the battlefield of Vilagos. The Italian uprising was smashed by Field Marshal Radetzky; the uprising in Vienna was crushed by the troops of Windisch-Grätz and the Croat Baron Jelacic. The movements for liberty and national self-determination were defeated. It was a triumph of the counter-revolution. But the ideas of liberty and national unity lived on.

On December 2 1848, Franz Joseph was crowned Austrian Emperor at the age of 18. His lesson from the defeat of the 1848 revolution was rather illusory: he assumed that ideas and ideologies could be defeated by military means. New barracks were built in Vienna and in Budapest, and filled with soldiers from Bosnia in order to prevent political protests in the future. Austria showed a repressive attitude against the unification movements in Italy and did not succeed at preserving its predominance in Germany. It was, in fact, through military defeats that Austria lost her dominant position both in Italy and Germany.

In Italy, at that time not yet a nation-state, the movement for unification was irreversible. The driving force of this movement was the Kingdom of Piedmont with its capital Turin. Supported by France, in 1859 the province of Lombardy (Milan) defeated the Austrian troops at the decisive battle of Solferino. In Germany, the driving force for unification was the Kingdom of Prussia, under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck. In 1866, Austria was defeated at the battle of Königgrätz, and had to give up all rights to rule Germany. At the same time, Austria had to give up its last possession in Italy, the province of Venetia (Venice).

In 1871, German unity was achieved after a successful war against France. This unity was established without Austria, which had previously been the predominant power within the 'Holy Roman Empire' for centuries. The old security assumptions were fading and Europe was steadily entering a multipolar era. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Europe was preoccupied with the maintenance of balance of power arrangements among its five great powers: Great Britain, France, Russia, Austro-Hungary, and Prussia.

In 1879, the 'Dual Alliance' between Austria - Hungary and the German Reich was concluded. Germany was bound to come to Austria's assistance only if Russia attacked her first. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was aware of the fact that the new German Reich was too big and too powerful on a continent, and proper balance of power arrangements were essential for peace. For this reason Bismarck presented himself not as an all-powerful leader, but as an 'honest broker.' He bound Germany into a system of treaties in order to make the other powers feel safe.

In this spirit he concluded the 'Reassurance Treaty' with Russia, and asserted time and again that the Balkans were not worth "the bones of one Pomeranian Grenadier" (an interesting parallel to what President John F. Kennedy said almost a century later about the islands Quemoy and Matsu off the Chinese coast not being worth 'the bones of a single American soldier'). Regardless, political tensions were never of the agenda in the Balkans.

In 1881, Serbia was still ruled by an Austrian friendly dynasty, which concluded a treaty with Austro-Hungary. Under the terms of this treaty, Serbia agreed to suppress all anti-Austrian conspiracies. But eventually, in 1903, the Austria-friendly dynasty of Obrenovich was overthrown. Previously, in 1873, the 'League of the three Emperors' (Austria, Germany, and Russia) had been established with the aim of containing the Russian expansion in the Balkans. It was an unstable alliance, as Russia and Austria had conflicting interests in the Balkans. Therefore, the League eventually gave way to the 'Dual Alliance' (Austria and Germany), which in 1882 was turned into a 'Triple Alliance' by including Italy as an independent nation-state (it was important for the new Italian state to assert herself as such). On the other hand, Italy gave the assurance of neutrality in case of war between Austria and Russia. This Triple Alliance was on shaky grounds from the beginning, and it did not work that well with the outbreak of World War I.

In 1883, Austria concluded a treaty with Romania, which should, as an Alliance against Russia, provide more security 'on the Eastern front.' In addition, Romania agreed to give up the irredentist propaganda in Austria's Transylvania, were many

Romanians lived. This treaty failed as well - Romania entered World War I against Austria.

Several other balance of power arrangements were also made, all in an effort to preserve peace in Europe: a 'Mediterranean Agreement' between Austria, Great Britain, Italy, and Spain was supposed to preserve the status quo in the Eastern Mediterranean. In 1897, an agreement between Austria and Russia was concluded in order to 'put the Balkans on ice,' and to preserve the status quo in this region. In 1903, the 'Agreement of Mürzsteg' between the Austrian and the Russian Monarchs was designed to assure the peaceful coexistence in the Balkans. However, these treaties failed to take into account one main factor: the nationalistic aspirations of Austrian (and Russian) minorities. These national aspirations proved to be stronger than all the international treaties or agreements concluded for the preservation of peace.

Very detrimental for Austria proved to be the growing isolation of Germany, on which Austria relied as only real ally. Germany got more and more isolated within Europe. After the successful War against France in 1871, Germany annexed Alsace and Lorraine, an act that led to permanent hostile relations with her Western neighbor. As the 'Treaty of Reassurance' was not renewed in 1891, Russia was alienated as well, and Japan was concerned with the drive of German expansion in the Pacific.

German behavior was puzzling and incomprehensible: an offer of alliance made by Great Britain was declined. Even worse, the Imperial Reich started a costly naval competition with Britain that could never be won. Whereas Bismarck presented himself as an 'honest broker,' the German Kaiser Wilhelm II talked of 'Weltherrschaft' (ruling the world). The buildup of the German navy could in no way threaten the English sea dominance, but it had a terrible effect of mobilizing the British establishment against Germany. During the World War I, the German navy played no significant role, and ironically in 1918, the German Revolution against the German Kaiser was started by German sailors.

As Germany alienated the other European powers, Alliances and 'understandings' (*Entente*) among other European powers developed. In 1891, a military alliance between France and Russia was concluded - French financial institutions were heavily involved in Russia. In 1898, France and England settled their colonial disputes after the Fashoda conflict was successfully avoided. In 1904, the '*Entente cordiale*' was concluded between France and Great Britain, and it became the basis for a future alliance. In 1907, an agreement between Great Britain and Russia over Persia led to an 'Entente' between those two countries.

What did Austria do? It followed Germany into isolation. The 'Dual Alliance' concluded with Germany in 1879 was inflated by official propaganda to mythical dimensions: it was dubbed an 'Alliance of Nibelungentreue' evoking sentiments of a German-Austrian unity. Meanwhile, national minorities in Austria were looking for solutions of their own: Italy wanted to incorporate the Italian speaking territories of Austria. The Romanians of Transylvania were looking towards Romania. The Slavs in Bohemia and the southern parts of the Monarchy were fascinated by the pan-

Slavism, which was inspired by Russia. Parts of the German speaking population were looking to the German Reich and developed pan-Germanic tendencies.

One final fatal act by Austro-Hungary was the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908. Bosnia-Herzegovina had been occupied since 1878; now the leadership in Vienna wanted to demonstrate strength in order to annex that Province. But this act led to enormous tensions with Russia and alienated France and Great Britain. The Austrian Foreign Minister Ährenthal was especially keen to demonstrate strength and determination, but achieved exactly the opposite. Serbia was not intimidated, and the other European powers adopted hostile attitudes.

*To be continued.*

*About the author:* Dr. Wendelin Ettmayer is a retired Austrian diplomat, and a former member of the Austrian Parliament. He wrote this essay at the request of MDY students.

## Comments

Ambassador Ettmayer is currently on a speaking tour around North America, but he will be coming to Norwich University this June to participate in the annual residency conference of this year's MDY graduates. I may be able to suggest further readings on this fascinating period in world history:

Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* – chapters 4 to 7 are about the period from the Congress of Vienna to the First World War.

Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored* – this book is about Austria's Metternich and the early period of the Concert of Europe, 1812-1822.

Section III "The Relevance of History" in *Power, Action, and Interaction*, ed. By George H. Quester, 1971.

Lauren, Craig, and George, *Force and Statecraft*, chapters 1 and 2 in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition (2007) (could be 1 and 3 in previous editions)

Gulick Vose Edward, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*

Erich Eyck, *Bismarck and the German Empire*, 1964 (generally, any authoritative study of Bismarck and his policies, as he was at the center of the European balance of power system in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century).

The Congress of Vienna and its aftermath, Austrian and subsequently German efforts to preserve status quo and general peace in Europe had truly historical proportions. Consider this: the major power who themselves so identified at the Congress of Vienna in 1814 also fought World War I 100 years later.