

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

### Part II: From Greatness to Decline and Dissolution

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For Austria, World War I was already lost when it was started. On June 28<sup>th</sup> 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated in Sarajevo in Bosnia. Vienna concluded that the perpetrators were supported by Serbia. The Austrian ultimatum handed over to Serbia was formulated the way Serbia could not accept it. Leading circles in Austria wanted 'to take an action' and to punish Serbia. They were convinced that Serbia's destruction would deflate slave nationalism and strengthen the Empire. Austro-Hungary declared war on Serbia, the Russian Empire declared war on Austria, the German Empire declared war on Russia, the French Republic declared war on Germany, and the British Empire supported its French ally and did likewise. Later Italy, and most crucially the United States joined the so called triple entente of Russia, France, and Britain. The so called Central Powers of Germany and Austro-Hungary were outgunned:

	UK/US/France	Germany / Austro - Hungary
Percentage of World manufactured goods (1913)	51.7 %	19.2 %
Energy consumption (million metric tons)	799	236
Steel production (million tons)	44.1	20.2
Total industrial production (UK (1900) = 100)	473	178

The war expenditures and the forces mobilized by the two opposing camps show the same imbalance:

	Billions, in today's US dollars	Mobilized Forces
<b>Total Allies</b>	<b>116.8</b>	<b>40.7</b>

British Empire	35.3	9.5
France	24.2	8.2
Russia	22.3	13
Italy	12.4	5.6
USA	22.6	3.8
<b>Total Central Powers</b>	<b>60.5</b>	<b>25.1</b>
Germany	37.7	13.2
Austro-Hungary	20.6	09.0
Bulgaria, Turkey	2.2	02.85

As it was indicated in Part I, Austrian foreign policy was primarily guided and influenced by internal developments. External affairs certainly remained the '*Domaine réservé*' for the Monarch; but he had to take into consideration the internal situation of the Monarchy, especially as far as the ethnic minorities were concerned. To a large extent, the failures of Austria's foreign policy were linked to the deadlock of domestic reforms of political institutions.

During the period between 1814 and 1848, Austria was an absolute Monarchy, and people were excluded from government. The main forces of unification within the Monarchy were the person of the Emperor, the army, the bureaucracy, and the Catholic Church. The ideas spread by the French Revolution were suppressed, not only in Austria, but throughout Europe, and Metternich considered himself as the guarantor of the status quo in Europe. Aspirations for more civil liberties, such as expressed by student movements, met strong resistance.

In 1866, the Austrian army suffered a decisive defeat at the battlefield of Königsgrätz against Prussia. After that military defeat the Emperor and the ruling circles of Vienna had to make political concessions. A 'Compromise treaty' (*Ausgleich*) with Hungary was concluded. Hungary was granted home-rule and only defense, foreign policy, and the currency remained within the overall competence of the Monarchy, which from then on, became Austro-Hungarian.

This compromise just normalized the relations with Hungary, but was not able to bring a general solution to other problems within the Monarchy. It was certainly a deficiency that the Hungarians interpreted the text of the 'compromise' in a different way from the Austrian side, but the Hungarians made one crucial mistake: they did not grant those same rights to the minorities on their own territory which they were afforded by Austrians.

Internally the Austro-Hungarian Empire was beset with structural problems. The civil service worked quite well, the judiciary could guarantee fundamental rights, but it was not possible to develop functioning democratic institutions. A national parliament was established, but it was neglected from the beginning. It was symptomatic for the parliamentary process that the Emperor Franz Joseph never really recognized its legislative powers, and never entered the parliamentary

building during his whole life. He remained convinced that his legitimacy derived from the grace of God, and not from the power of the people.

The conflict over the rights of various nationalities within the Empire paralyzed the Parliament; essential state problems could not be resolved. Over the years the political system failed: the Parliament did not convene and the governments changed every few months. New social classes, like the bourgeoisie and the working class became more important, they established new political parties like the Christian Democrats and the Socialists, but they did not develop into a unifying force for the Monarchy.

Overall, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire the dividing force of nationalism prevailed over the potentially unifying forces of class or group interests. The political institutions were usually either inactive or quite often destructive. In the end, the international crisis of summer 1914 had to be faced by political institutions that did not work and by a government that did not represent the people. A general suffrage for males was introduced in 1907, an early date compared to other European countries, but it could not prevent the decline of parliamentarism in the country.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was an age of ideologies. New ideas and ideologies developed all over and influenced political processes. From central European romanticism there emerged nationalism that became a dominant force in European politics. Nationalism brought about militaristic policies, and positive attitudes towards war. Linked to those new movements and new ways of thinking was a traditional concept of honor, a fact that proved especially detrimental when the Great War broke out in August of 1914.

Instead of becoming a unifying national force like in most other European states, nationalism became a dividing force within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: the Monarchy was a supra-national state, which was a home to many nationalities: Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians, Bosnians, Slovenians, Ruthenians, Italians, Poles and others. One of the essential goals of nationalism from the very beginning has been the principle of self-determination with the ultimate goal of creating own states for every national minority.

The roots of nationalism lay in the French Revolution which proclaimed the rights of the people. In the fights against Napoleonic domination, especially in Germany, feelings of national identity and romanticism arose. Another root came from the discovery and development of one's own language: some groups within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, like Czechs, Slovaks or Croats started to read and write in their own language only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Romanticism, the discovery of ancient mystic poems and the development of a national art, literature and music inspired national feelings. An example: Giuseppe Verdi's operas such as *Nabucco* or *Macbeth* not only dealt with historic subjects, but were clearly directed against Austrian occupation of parts of Italy.

Nationalistic ideas found a special expression in the pan-Germanic and pan-Slavic movements aimed at unifying all Germans and all Slavic nations respectively. This later movement was very influential in the Balkans and was supported by Russians. In addition, extremists and radical groups became active, which further contributed to the paralysis of the Austrian political system.

After the Napoleonic wars until the outbreak of the Great War, Europe was relatively peaceful and for a century did not witness a general war. However, all over Europe, not only Generals but also politicians, bureaucrats and intellectuals thought in militaristic terms - war was generally associated with a short military conflict, such as the Austro-Prussian war mentioned above or the Franco-Prussian war of 1871 - these did not last more than few months and the boys were always home for Christmas. The logic of war was dominant in European societies, and by 1914 most people were convinced that an European war was inevitable, and that it would be a short conflict that would solve most of the problems

In central European states, the army was considered as the foundation for the state; all other state institutions had to be subordinated to it. As Serbia kept the idea of a south Slav national unity alive, the military circles in Austria were convinced that Serbia had to be dealt with sooner or later. Especially the Austrian Chief of staff, Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, was pushing towards a preventive war with Serbia. He believed that a victorious war would slow down the centrifugal forces of nationalism within the Empire. The honor of the Monarchy and the honor of the individual citizen were linked with the army and war. The status of a country as a great power was directly linked to its military power. It was widely considered an honor to die on the battlefield.

At the same time, the Austrian army was weak. It lost its war of 1859 against Italy and France at Solferino, lost the decisive battle of Königsgrätz in 1866, and as the events of the Great War showed it did not even succeed against Serbia. Although splendidly uniformed, the Austro-Hungarian armed forces were badly equipped, and under-financed. Technologically backward they had to be bailed out by German forces on all fronts during the Great War.

When War came in 1914, the mobilization order to the Austro-Hungarian army was issued in 15 different languages. Allocations to the Austrian army were between  $\frac{1}{3}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the financial resources of the Russian and Prussian armed forces. In 1914, one-third of the 900,000 soldiers deployed died or were wounded during the first four weeks of combat (out of a population of 50 million). Due to a lack of financial resources only  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the available manpower was conscripted.

The concept of honor embraced by the elites at the beginning of the World War I was rooted in ancient times, and paralleled the honor code of Medieval knights. The great Austrian economist Schumpeter subsequently attributed the outbreak of

World War I to irrational and pre-capitalist desires for self-glorification and violent self-assertion, prevalent among the aristocracy.

The imperialism practiced also by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was also certainly linked with feudal values –the military honor code still drew a parallel between a personal insult and a national humiliation. The Emperor Franz Joseph was definitely a typical example for this attitude. After the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, he demanded satisfaction and said: “If we must go under, we better go under decently.” Prestige and honor were important contributing causes of the war against Serbia, which triggered the Great War – after all, the world in 1914 was based on honor. Many industrialists and business people, like Walter Rathenau (CEO of the powerful AEG enterprise) preferred trade to war. Others warned that war was a response, grounded in fear. But those voices could not overcome the attitudes of vanity and megalomania. In the Austro-Hungarian society, the rank in the military or in the bureaucracy was definitely more important than money. The thinking of the Austrian Chief of staff, Conrad von Hötzendorf, about war had as much to do with honor as with security. And the Emperor Franz Joseph certainly felt humiliated by the defeats of ‘his’ army at Solfarino and Königsgrätz. He resented the declining prestige of his army.

The decline of Austria from the dominant power in Europe in 1814 to its dissolution 100 years later could be attributed to few specific developments. The forces of history prevailed over ancient modes of thinking and once great power was swept away.

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