

Should the Habsburg Empire Have Been Saved? An Exercise in Speculative History¹

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THE OBSERVATIONS WHICH I SHALL PUT BEFORE YOU require the kind of apology that is always necessary when the historian leaves the ground of facts and turns to the hazy realm of what might have been or ought to be. Still there may be extenuating factors for an undertaking of this kind. I refer here, of course, to the frequently voiced assumption of the value of hindsight prophecies for the prevention of errors in the future, the wishful thinking that may generate appropriate action and, in a more general way, the training of the mind that may derive from speculative thinking.

To these common and general considerations I would like to add one that is more specifically tied to the question before us tonight: Should the Habsburg Empire have been saved? I believe there are speculations and speculations, and the categories of some are closer to the facts than others. If we ask the question what would have happened if three decisive events had not occurred in the fifteenth century, namely the invention of printing from movable blocks, the conquest of Constantinople and the Ottoman Turks, and the discovery of America, we have in each case the entire wealth of factual history of the time at our disposal to move into the vacuum of the one eliminated factor. After all, we can gauge the significance of a specific event only if we attempt to eliminate it and ask ourselves the question: How would the course of history have run if that specific event had not happened. If, on the other hand, we ask the question what would have happened if the Roman Empire had withstood the German invasions, if the Nazis had won the battle of Britain, if Stalinism had not been superseded, we have not removed just one factor. Due to the length of time, the indeterminable character of new conditions introduced, or the spread of ideologies involved, we have opened a whole floodgate of conceivable combinations of events.

I would not like to be misunderstood here. Of course, the supposed elimination of one single historical fact may, by the impact of the law of causation, lead to a chain reaction of events. Furthermore, depending on the phraseology which I use, the same question can be put either into a positive or negative frame. It can be asked as a simple factual query or, like in our case, as a should or should not issue, in other words a standard of reason or rightfulness can

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be injected. Here, too, the difference should be obvious. If I ask the question, “Should the Habsburg Empire have been saved?”, the stress is put on the elimination of one major factor, a historical entity of long standing. If, on the other hand, I ask of a series of new factors into history, in the first case what I would call a law of historical inertia, the human factor of resistance to sweeping change, is on my side; in the other it works against me.²

Now both types of questions are entirely legitimate, but the first one, which is focused primarily on specific events of the past, seems to me to stand on firmer ground or, in other words, to be less speculative than the second, which deals with a greater variety of unexplored or unexplorable factors and is therefore even more speculative in character. Still, both of these operations in speculative thinking have to be clearly separated from a third one, which deals with the conceivable impact of events of the future. This I would not call merely speculative but utopian, or in Freud’s terms at least, illusionary thinking.

After I have tried to plead that, I will avail myself only of the relatively least speculative and in no way utopian kind of thinking, noted above. Therefore, I should like to approach the main problem of our discussion itself. Notwithstanding our—I hope commendable—purpose of speculative restraint, we face here quite formidable difficulties. In the first place our question makes sense only if we assume that the monarchy could have been saved, and even before we touch upon this rather complex problem we have to answer a preliminary one. What standards do we apply if we raise the question of the feasibility of salvation of a bygone empire? Is it nostalgia for the image of the realm with an old, white bearded emperor, lovely girls and dashing cavaliers in hussar uniforms dancing to the tunes of the Blue Danube waltz? Is it the notion of an allegedly mighty though actually increasingly brittle empire as bulwark against aggression from the East, and more recently also from the North as well? Is it the preference for the social order of the past? Is it finally and most importantly the belief that the preservation of the empire up to the present would have helped to secure a reasonably just peace? No doubt, judging from the subjective viewpoint of the individual observer, all these reasons and quite a few more could be given and are given to explain the wish for the preservation of the Habsburg Monarchy. Whether they are convincing reasons may be a matter of opinion; that they exist is a fact. In any case, to simplify matters I suggest that in our reflections tonight we forego the pleasure of nostalgic and illusionary reminiscences and apply only the one last mentioned standard: whether the empire could have helped toward the preservation of a reasonably just peace in our time. And this brings us back to our question: could the monarchy have been preserved at all?

The secret peace negotiations during World War I were generally conducted between representatives of individual powers, sometimes as spokesmen for the alliance systems, but sometimes quite independently and secretly even in relation to the partners of the alliance. The highly secret character of those negotiations explains in part why new documents are steadily forthcoming. Only within the last two years two comprehensive works by Gerhard Ritter and Wolfgang Steglich have been added to a formidable output of literature. Even greater in volume and likewise increasing is the literature on the reasons for the breakup of the Habsburg Empire.

I will mention only the most recent distinguished studies by Zeman in England, Batowski in Poland, and Valiani in Italy. Merely to touch upon these highly complex matters in this brief

²This sentence is printed here exactly as it appears in Kann’s manuscript. It is possible that it should read: “If, on the other hand, I ask about a question of a series of new factors that enter into history, in the first case what I would call a law of historical inertia, the human factor of resistance to sweeping change is on my side, in the other case it works against me.” (S. Winters)

talk appears to be well nigh impossible. Only that much may serve as a mere skeleton for our discussion.

The year 1917 was undoubtedly the critical one in which a negotiated universal peace stood some chance of success. Previously the Central Powers did not realize the long range hopelessness of their position. Afterwards the Western Powers were too sure of their impending victory. Only in 1917 were the scales in a way in balance. Negotiated peace, that means of course peace by compromise, could have come about roughly speaking in three ways. A general peace between all powers involved in a war or, more likely, a separate peace between the Entente powers and Austria-Hungary might have been conceivable. There is a third possibility which does not quite fit into the picture of either alternative: If the Habsburg Empire had solved its national problems in time, the future peace, either comprehensive or separate, would presumably have preserved the empire's existence.

Peace feelers pursued by the German government on behalf of the Central Powers never proceeded to a point where one can speak of formal negotiations. Yet much evidence points to the fact that an unequivocal German declaration to cede Alsace-Lorraine, to pledge restoration of the sovereignty of Belgium, unconditionally in 1917, and to drop the initiation of unrestricted U-boat warfare would have made general peace quite likely. Failure to do so made it impossible. Yet just this factor increased the chances for a separate peace with Austria. The various secret peace negotiations, known under the terms Sixtus Affair, Revertera, Armand, and Mensdorff-Smuts negotiations, and others, can indeed be considered as semi-formal offers on the part of the French and British governments to conclude a separate peace with Austria-Hungary with at least the tacit consent of the United States. Italian opposition could not have presented an insurmountable impediment due to the military weakness of that partner of the Great Alliance. Far more important is the fact that Austria-Hungary had well grounded fears of becoming a battleground if she tried to extricate herself from the German alliance. Yet even that formidable obstacle might conceivably have been overcome with Allied assistance. The chief concern of the Austrian Foreign Minister, Count Czernin, whose so far missing own record of some of the secret peace negotiations I was able to locate in the Austrian archives and to publish, looked beyond the end of the war. Separate peace with the Entente powers, and of course, a reasonable compromise with Russia might have satisfied the Slavs in the Habsburg Empire for a time. Yet their long range support of this empire was extremely doubtful under the most optimistic conditions, while alienation of the Austro-Germans and Magyars, the safest pillars of the Habsburg throne, seemed certain. But these were concerns chiefly for the after war period, though admittedly very serious ones. Up to the divulgement of the secret peace negotiations between the French President and the Austrian Emperor through the latter's brother-in-law Prince Sixtus of Bourbon-Parma by the most incredible gaffe on the part of the Austrian Foreign Minister, the peace channels were still open. The revelations of April 1918 which showed the Habsburg regime as equally unreliable in the face of enemies and friends, sealed the chance for the continuation of secret negotiations and led, at least indirectly, to the recognition of the Czech National Committee abroad as provisional government and more important to the revision of President Wilson's Fourteen Points urged by Secretary of State Lansing. Thus the chance of a separate peace existed, always against very great odds to be sure, until spring 1918. Yet it was not the only chance. We know from the war times memoirs of Edward Benes, T.G. Masaryk, and other sources that the political emigration abroad was seriously disturbed by such measures as the convocation of the Austrian parliament in the spring of 1917, the however feeble attempts of federal reform, and above all by the amnesty for political prisoners in July 1917. This course of action was in substance not pursued beyond the summer of 1917, but the possibilities to resume it certainly existed in January 1918,

when Prime Minister Lloyd George of Great Britain expressed himself in favor of the preservation of a reformed Habsburg Empire and was congratulated upon his speech by the French Prime Minister Clemenceau.

Time forces me to take a short cut here and to stop even the mere citation let alone interpretation of further evidence. The simple question of what the foregoing adds up to is now in order. I believe it is reasonable to assume that the Habsburg Empire could have been saved in 1917. The further contention that it might still exist in our time is, of course, not merely speculative but highly so. It must suffice to say that any gain of time in delaying the threatening dissolution would also have been a gain in substance since it offered the chance for essential reforms.

Let us proceed from here to the further question of what might have happened if the Habsburg Monarchy had been maintained for some time to come. The contingency can be ruled out, of course, that a preservation of the Habsburg Empire decided upon in 1917 would have been the consequence of a victorious peace on the part of the Central Powers rather than of a negotiated one. The entry of the United States into the war, and the fact that the impact of the Russian revolution turned eventually to the detriment and not to the advantage of the Central Powers, sealed any illusions on this point. Yet if we stress this consideration, we do not merely belabor the obvious. If the monarchy could have been preserved at all, it could have been preserved only by a negotiated peace. Then and only then chances for the essential national reforms in the empire might have existed. Defeat naturally would have led, and indeed did lead, to its destruction, but a *Siegfrieden* dictated by Ludendorff and his Austrian Pan German henchmen and Magyar nationalists would have made a break-up of Austria-Hungary by way of a revolt of the underprivileged national groups against the German-Magyar center, probably with outside support, in the not too distant future more than likely. Some other deductions are not only based on probabilities but practically on certainties. According to an approximation of the law of physics that two bodies cannot exist in the same place at the same time, we can of course say with assurance that the Succession States would not have existed the way they evolved according to the inter-Allied agreements and to the treaty system of Versailles in 1919.

This is not to say the frontier rectification such as the cession of the Trentino to Italy would not have been conceivable or that the access of Serbia to the sea would not have been fully compatible with the further existence of the monarchy. We may perhaps even allow for the existence of an independent Poland in line with the preservation of the Habsburg Monarchy, though hardly—and according to some this is the crux of the matter—any longer as a Great Power. We may, of course, deny this assumption, that the main justification for the preservation of the empire would have rested in its Great Power position. Yet it is very likely that the establishment of an independent Czechoslovakia cut out entirely, and of a multinational Rumania and Yugoslavia cut out substantially from the body of the monarchy would have been incompatible with its further existence. If on the other hand the monarchy would have been preserved within the viable limits stated above, that is with moderate frontier rectification, for some time to come, the whole course of history would naturally have been different. Please, observe that I don't say it would have been better from the point of preservation of the peace; though sometimes, in looking over the history of the Second World War and what happened since, it is difficult to think that the chain of events could have been worse. Yet obviously neither the Munich crisis, the rape of Czechoslovakia, the German and the subsequent Russian aggression against Poland could have taken place the way it did, though other patterns of aggression or combinations of aggressors would have been entirely feasible in different manners.

What would have happened instead? According to the champions of the idea of a Habsburg Great Power as a consolidating factor and therewith a peaceful element in European politics these major points, among quite a few others, would have to be taken for granted:

1. The minority problems so painfully obvious in the interwar period in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Rumania, and Yugoslavia would not have existed since all the national groups would have been peacefully united in a great multinational empire.
2. A great geographic-economic union, not divided by the customs barriers established after the breakup of the empire, would have existed to the benefit of all nations living in the area.
3. Most important, a Great Power in Central Europe, the famous fifth great power, would have maintained the balance of power and would have prevented German and Russian aggression from West, North, and East. Therewith peace could have been and still could be maintained.

There is a fourth point frequently advanced by champions of the other three, voiced in general by a smaller but all the more passionate group. I refer to those adherents of the Habsburg Empire idea who put the accent not on the word empire but on Habsburg. According to them, the power of tradition of a dynasty which had ruled the major parts of Central Europe for six and a half centuries would be the primary bond of cohesion. According to them, allegiance to the empire by the people under its rule had been so in the past. It may be suggestive to assume that this affirmation of loyalty to the dynasty represented also a built-in affirmation of the social structure of the empire under its rule. Let it be said in fairness that the present pretender to the Habsburg throne denies this last contention. Just the same, the last point is largely based on nostalgic, emotional grounds advanced primarily by an older generation which is in the process of dying out. Anyway, the point is undoubtedly the weakest of the four put before us for discussion. Only a fraction of those supporting the other issues would support this one, and it is a well meaning fraction to be sure, but rather frail by now. The idea of any kind of restoration after half a century and, more important, after the structure of the social forces supporting it has been completely changed, appears to be of little consequence today.

Let us now turn to the other more weighty points in the order outlined. Let us first agree with the obvious, that the peace treaties after the First World War have not solved the East Central European nationality problems in full. No doubt, some frontier settlements could have been improved upon such as that between Czechoslovakia and Germany, though hardly in the extreme sense of the surrender of Munich. No doubt also that the association of the Carpatho-Ukraine with Czechoslovakia represented only an emergency solution arrived at for the main reason to prevent the extension of the Soviet Union beyond the southern ranges of the Carpathians. Unquestionably the settlement of the Ukrainian question on both sides of these mountains after the Second World War—irrespective of the political question involved—is more in line with ethnic realities. As to the handling of the Sudeten problem and its uncontested shortcomings, it may be seriously doubted that the existence of even a nationally homogeneous Czech state would have restrained Hitler's aggression. Secondly, altogether it seems to me fair to say that one major error of the treaties of 1919 from the ethnic point of view was corrected after the Second World War, and that another one was of not nearly as decisive a nature as alleged by German nationalist propaganda. Thirdly, the federal structure at least of present day Yugoslavia is better fitted to deal with the Southern Slav national problems than those of the interwar period.

Beyond and apart from all this, there is the most remarkable and most remarkably overlooked fact that the settlement of the frontiers of 1919 between the Succession States of the Habsburg Monarchy has stood the test of time and the test of recognition by the conflicting ideologies of the peace makers of 1919 and that of the Soviet power after 1945 fairly well. The frontiers between Czechoslovakia and Poland, Hungary, Rumania, and Yugoslavia are—with the above noted exception—in substance the same today as they were half a century ago. According to the bulk of available evidence they are accepted—though not exactly hailed—today if we exempt the age old Magyar-Rumanian conflict. I would go so far as to suggest that the same kind of acceptance may gradually become true for the Polish-German Oder-Neisse frontier, though this particular issue transcends the topic of our discussion. To be sure, none of these frontier settlements is perfect, but accommodation to them seems possible in an area where, short of world government, a perfect solution is well nigh impossible.

Obviously, I could not expect you in fairness to follow me for comparison's sake into the intricacies and complexities of the unsolved nationality problems in the Habsburg Monarchy. Only that much may be said here. The assumption that nationality problems, and at that the nationality problems which led Europe into the First World War could be more easily solved if they were rolled all into one—into one big empire, that is—seems utterly preposterous. Not the size of the states involved in these problems but their ethnic composition and efforts made toward their fair settlement are decisive in this respect. Here the record speaks for itself.

But the question of the size of sovereign state is brought up also and even more frequently in another context, namely the economic one. The notion of the ideal geographic-economic entity of the Habsburg Monarchy, in which an industrialized western and an agricultural eastern part supplemented each other to perfection, was a gross oversimplification. The coast of the Littoral was largely separated from the interior of the empire by the Dalmatian mountain ranges, as was Galicia from Hungary by the Carpathians.³ The traffic of the main rivers Danube and Elbe flows in one case to the Black Sea, for all practical purposes a landlocked sea, and in the other to the North Sea, barely passing Austrian territory. The West was only partly industrialized, and the industrial needs of Hungary had to draw to some extent on the resources of Germany. And yet it is true that the substantial free tariff area, though maintained only by cumbersome compromises precariously arrived at every ten years, had some economic advantages as compared to the situation after 1918. It had not only advantages though. The evolution of the Succession States served as a mighty incentive to regional industrial developments, concomitant prosperity, and a better balanced occupational structure. As far as the notion of the wide customs area is concerned, the age of EEC and EFTA should not provide insurmountable obstacles for the establishment of free or low tariff areas in Central Europe. As the situation looks now, at least, trends in that direction are operative, political divergences notwithstanding.

The most important consideration for those who want the Habsburg Empire restored is, of course and understandably so, concerned with the overriding problem of our age, security from aggression. To reiterate the argument: The elimination of the fifth European Great Power has upset a precarious balance in international relations and has opened the way for totalitarian aggression from Germany and Russia. This view can refer and indeed very frequently does refer among others to the illustrious name of Winston Churchill. Surely his opinion was at least not consciously influenced by nostalgic reminiscences of an imperial past. Yet when

³The Littoral was part of the Austrian Empire on the Adriatic that included Trieste, Gorizia, Istria, and Gradiska.

Churchill said in one of his famous speeches in the House of Commons before the outbreak of the Second World War, "I may be wrong but I was not always wrong." It seems to me that they can be contested on a number of grounds. The large but increasingly feeble Habsburg Empire, torn by internal conflict, was in spite of brave efforts, naturally not a match for the Russian steamroller in the First World War. Presumably its onslaught would have been put into operation beforehand, had Austria not been backed by the German alliance of 1879. Furthermore, the assumption that the so called "Balkanization" of Europe following the First World War and contemptuously referred to by Churchill and far lesser lights as a consequence of the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy, seems to me to put the cart before the horse. The interwar European crisis did not result from the fact that the Habsburg Empire broke asunder. It was, though only in part, due to the preliminary conditions, namely that this empire was not any longer a viable political entity. The opinions frequently voiced in Western countries that the Western Allies destroyed the Habsburg Empire, is actually nothing but a reverse stab-in-the back legend brought about by a strange guilt complex not, as it seems natural, of the defeated party but of the victors. The Habsburg Empire dissolved actually due to its internal conflicts. Possibly they could have been accommodated for some time to come by placebos in peacetime, but they certainly could not withstand the strain of a major war. The formation of the Succession States was in this sense the mere symptoms of a disease reaching much farther into the past than Churchill and others assumed. As to the "Balkanization" it may be remarked in passing that within the last years the Balkan has become one of the more stable areas in the world and that the ugly word may convey a quite different connotation in the course of time.⁴

Yet even if we would accept all of Churchill's premises it seems to me that the advent of the nuclear age has reduced the argument concerning the potential significance of the Habsburg military power to practically nil. It does not diminish our respect for the great Englishman nor for the proficiency of the army of the bygone empire if we say that this argument belongs to the world of yesterday. In this sense we have to reject in substance the contentions of the main arguments in favor of the preservation of the Habsburg Great Power put before us.

What then is the conclusion of these brief reflections? It is most certainly not the intent to debunk the tradition of a great empire with a proud history of many centuries and many major contributions to Western civilization. It is not the assumption either that we, or at least the peoples in Eastern Central Europe, are better off today because this great empire collapsed. The events of the last half century were too tragic indeed to warrant such bold assertions. All we can say with conviction is that in all likelihood preservation of the Habsburg Empire would not have assured a better and more peaceful way of life for the people who live on its former territory. Yet we have to balance this statement immediately by saying that we have not and naturally cannot have any proof that the present state of affairs is superior to the one that would exist today if There just are neither safe predictions nor safe alternatives in history.

What then—you may justly ask—has been the purpose of the talk? You have me there and yet you do not entirely have me . . . I believe we can draw at least one lesson from the kind of iffy question—as Franklin D. Roosevelt used to call them—which I have put before you tonight. The way to understand history in any practically purposeful sense is not to attempt its restoration or

⁴Marshal Tito was president of Yugoslavia when this was written.

revision, but its acceptance. Only then can we move from the sterile efforts of patching up the past in words and deeds to the brighter one of building the future.

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