

HISTORICAL SCIENCE AND POLITICS: THE CASE OF *DIE HABSBURGERMONARCHIE 1848–1918*

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Abstract: *One of the most important research and publication projects of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the series „Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918” was born out of an idea at the end of the Second World War, not only out of the scientific interest in researching one of the great empires in history, but also out of the need to explore possible historical models for the reconstruction of Europe, which was then divided into ideological blocs after the torments of war. One of the prerequisites for this project, which was planned to last several decades, was therefore to involve experts from both the West and the East. This is how the twelve volumes of the series came about, covering aspects ranging from the political establishment, legislation and parliamentarism to everyday life, culture and the First World War. One of the main editors of these volumes, Peter Urbanitsch, describes in this article how the idea of such a broad and internationally sustained publication project was born and depicts the development of the volumes describing the reception of these contributions and the lively interest shown by both politicians and experts. In the context of contemporary challenges facing the European Union, such as federalism and centralism, or the impact of nationalisms, he concludes that the highly complex development of the Habsburg monarchy and many of the scientific discoveries achieved may be relevant for present and future Europe.*

Keywords: Habsburgermonarchie, 1848–1918, Transleithanien, Cisleithanien, First World War.

In December 2021 two volumes entitled *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918 Band X: Das kulturelle Leben. Akteure–Tendenzen–Ausprägungen* [volume X: *Cultural Life: actors–tendencies–manifestations*] were published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences Press. This publication marks the end of a project on the history of Central Europe from the middle of the 19th century to the end of the First World War. Its beginnings can be traced back to the early fifties of the 20th century, the years following the Second World War. Two differing ideas and intentions stood at the beginning of this venture: an international–political and a domestic–scientific one.

The international-political track is connected with the American *Rockefeller Foundation*, which soon after the end of the Second World War began to fund

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historical research projects which would promote „the establishment of a European peace zone by overcoming nationalistic tendencies”. Among others, it was the Habsburg Monarchy during the last seventy years of its existence which was regarded by the members of the *Rockefeller Foundation* as a paradigmatic example for the problems arising in connection with the unification of Europe as a supranational political body. In 1952 the *Rockefeller Foundation* approached the Austrian authorities, suggesting the establishment of a multinational scientific organization which should „work on achievements and failures of the Habsburg multiethnic empire and make this valuable treasure instrumental for plans and activities at present and in the future”¹ – words that were retrospectively formulated on the occasion of the publication of the first volume in 1973. The appreciation of a political, economic and cultural system that would perhaps be able to mediate between western democracies and eastern autocracies gained weight. Although never officially stated, it is obvious that in the years of the Cold War American protagonists were thinking about how to overcome ideological divides and to make the frontiers between the two power blocks at least a little bit more permeable.

On the Austrian side, these ideas met with great interest by politicians as well as academics. Both groups, who generally belonged to the ideologically conservative camp, were striving – just a few years after the end of the „Third Reich” and the pan-German idea related to it – to reinforce a specific Austrian identity, including the Habsburg heritage (an idea that was however utterly opposed on the Left)². For the academics an additional point of view was of decisive importance: immediately after the end of the Habsburg Monarchy the notion had solidified in many circles that the defunct state had been nothing but a „Völkerkerker”, („prison of peoples”) oppressing its population in many ways. After the Second World War the topos of „Völkerkerker”, originally nourished by nationalistic ideas, was still used by some historians (and political journalists) outside of the realm of the no longer existing Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, for example the influential left-wing British historian A.J.P. Taylor, whose book on the Habsburg Monarchy, originally written in the early forties, was widely acclaimed when a revised edition appeared in 1948. Another historiographic trend regarded the history of the Habsburg Monarchy during the 19th century as one of „decline and fall”, thus the title of a book by Alan Sked, published in 1989³.

¹ Adam Wandruszka, *Planung und Verwirklichung*, in vol. *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, Band I: *Die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung*, Adam Wandruszka, Peter Urbanitsch (Hgg.), Wien, 1973.

² The discussion on an „Austrian nation” speeded up only after 1955, the conclusion of the Austrian State Treaty and the concept of „perpetual neutrality” associated with it. See: Arnst Bruckmüller, *Nation Österreich. Kulturelles Bewusstsein und gesellschaftlich-politische Prozesse*, Wien, 1996.

³ Alan P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809–1918. A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary*, London 1948; Alan Sked, *The decline and fall of the Habsburg Empire*, London 1989.

In order to counteract these notions some Austrian historians came up with the idea that a group of internationally linked researchers, basing their work on a rich source stock, should concentrate their efforts on the elaboration of the complex realities of a multinational state. Therefore, the Austrian historians saw in the American initiative a suitable starting point for their endeavour. In the years to come, they established various contacts to their fellow historians abroad (at that moment primarily to the United States – where academic preoccupation with Austrian history had taken ground, the renowned journal „Austrian History Yearbook” bears witness of it up to the present day – and to interested scholars in Western Europe). Meanwhile the Austrian group started with preliminary work.

For reasons which are still unclear, the *Rockefeller Foundation* withdrew from the project in 1959. Notwithstanding the loss of financial security the Austrian side decided to continue the undertaking, explicitly retaining its international component. The understandable wish to integrate research workers from the former „successor states” still under communist dominance met at first with some resistance inside and outside of Austria (although in Austria some other attempts to achieve cultural cooperation with the former „successor states” had already been made⁴). But in the years to come some historians in Eastern Europe saw their work on the history of the Habsburg Monarchy and Central Europe – a term willingly used by dissidents behind the Iron Curtain – as a means to overcome their intellectual isolation in soviet-dominated Eastern Europe (although finally the idea of „Central Europe” turned out to be an intellectual „Glass Bead Game”⁵), and they accepted invitations to join the common project.

Based on their experience to that point the Austrian group of researchers – in the meantime organized as a committee at the Austrian Academy of Sciences – elaborated in the 1960ies a work program, finally modified in 1969, which in its essentials (the publication should be structured according to thematic subjects, e.g. nationalities, political institutions, economy, foreign policy etc.) has remained in place until the very end of the project. However, there has been a great deal of progress in terms of establishing research priorities and in details of content. At the beginning the main emphasis was put on the „nationality question” understood in its broadest sense (as the nationality question became politically virulent for the first time in 1848 the whole project started with this year). But over the years new scientific paradigms and historiographic questions arose and were duly taken into account, whereas other items were regarded as obsolete and were therefore eliminated.

⁴ Notably by the establishment of the „Österreichisches Ost- und Südosteuropa-Institut” [Austrian Institute of East and South-East European Studies] under the longtime leadership of Richard G. Plaschka.

⁵ Helmuth Rumpler, *The Habsburg Monarchy as a Portent for the New Europe of the Future*; in vol. *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918 XII: Bewältigte Vergangenheit? Die nationale und internationale Historiographie zum Untergang der Habsburgermonarchie als ideelle Grundlage für die Neuordnung Europas*, Helmut Rumpler, Ulrike Harmat (Hgg.), Wien, 2018, p. 14.

In 1973 the first volume of the series was published, a series comprised of 12 volumes, each dealing with a specific theme (some appeared as two-part works), so that the whole series, the publication of which has now come to an end, consists of 18 voluminous books plus two special publications. Across roughly 19.000 pages almost 300 authors (a little fewer than half of them non-Austrians) from, all total, 20 other countries, from North America across Europe up to the Near East, have tried to describe and analyse the political, social, economic and cultural problems the Habsburg Monarchy was confronted with. They pointed out the ways in which the decision-makers succeeded in finding reasonably viable solutions for these problems or why such efforts failed or why they were not even launched.

Even if the volumes can be regarded as handbooks covering a broad thematic spectrum some lacunae could not be prevented, partly because in some cases there is still a lack of detailed research, partly because some authors invited to cover certain specific aspects called off their engagement and could not be properly replaced. It goes without saying, in an undertaking of this scope there can be no consistent line of argument and uniform assessment of facts and interpretations. The national research traditions, as well as individual research approaches and interests, are simply too divergent. It was the explicit aim of the editors not to smooth out these differences.

The attempt to describe in detail the contents of the various volumes would by far exceed the space allotted to this article. Therefore I will only mention the titles of the 12 volumes, adding some more detailed information on specific articles⁶.

Contrary to the original program – but resulting from mere practical considerations as to the availability of texts ready for a speedy publication of the first volume – the first volume deals with economic matters. Published more than 50 years ago and therefore a bit outdated in some details, the main line of argumentation as to the general development of economic affairs is still valid and has been confirmed by numerous more recent research efforts. Volume 2 is concerned with the administrative and judicial system of the Habsburg Monarchy, opened up by an article on one of the key questions of the history of the Habsburg Monarchy, titled *The Habsburg Monarchy and the problem of a supranational state*. Volume 3 is dedicated to the

⁶ *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, Hrsg. von Adam Wandruszka und Peter Urbanitsch (Bde. 1–6), Helmut Rumpler und Peter Urbanitsch (Bde. 7–9), Helmut Rumpler, Peter Urbanitsch und Martin Seger (Bd. 9/2), Andreas Gottsmann (Bd. 10), Helmut Rumpler und Anatol Schmied-Kowarzik (Bd. 11), Helmut Rumpler und Ulrike Harmat (Bd. 12); Bd. 1: *Die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung*, Wien, 1973, 2nd edition in 2005); Bd. 2: *Verwaltung und Rechtswesen* (Wien 1975, 2nd edition in 2003); Bd. 3: *Die Völker des Reiches* (2 Teilbände, Wien, 1980, 2nd edition in 2003)); Bd. 4: *Die Konfessionen* (Wien, 1985, 2nd edition in 1995); Bd. 5: *Die bewaffnete Macht*, Wien, 1987); Bd. 6: *Internationale Beziehungen* (2 Teilbände, Wien, 1989, 1993); Bd. 7: *Verfassung und Parlamentarismus* (2 Teilbände, Wien, 2000); Bd. 8: *Politische Öffentlichkeit* (2 Teilbände, Wien, 2006); Bd. 9: *Soziale Strukturen* (2 Teilbände, Wien, 2010); Bd. 10: *Das kulturelle Leben* (2 Teilbände, Wien, 2021); Bd. 11: *Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg* (2 Teilbände, Wien, 2016); Bd. 12: *Bewältigte Vergangenheit* (Wien, 2018).

11 officially recognized nationalities („Volksstämme“) plus Jews (not recognized as a „Volksstamm“) and various ethnic and religious splinter groups, according to a reviewer „until today unsurpassed in the richness of information and its sophistication”⁷. Special mention should be made of a lengthy article on the equality of nations as a legal principle and its practical application (later this article was also published as a separate publication⁸). In addition to the texts this volume contains a map showing the territorial distribution of the population according to the predominant spoken language (in Cisleithania⁹ „language of daily use“, in Hungary „mother tongue“) according to the census of 1910 – in common parlance used as an indicator of the strength of nationalities as defined by language. Unlike other maps on this topic this one shows the proportion of languages in every single district, thus shedding light on the mixture of nationalities which in certain areas was more complex than the simplified presentation of solid blocs of nations suggests (this map is also to be had separately). Yet the Habsburg Monarchy was not only a multi-ethnic state, it was also a multiconfessional one, and that is the theme of volume 4, dealing with all the denominations and religious groups to which the inhabitants of the Monarchy belonged (people without confession were a vanishingly small minority even at the end of the Habsburg Monarchy’s existence). Volume 5 is devoted to the armed forces, indispensable for the foreign policy of the state, to which volume 6 is dedicated. It offers insights into the organizational structure of the foreign service, treats the changing position of the Habsburg Monarchy within the great-power-system and elucidates the views of other states on the Monarchy, thus illuminating the divergent perception of various problems the Habsburg Monarchy had to deal with. With Volume 7 on constitutional questions and the rise of parliamentarism the focus returns again to domestic political affairs. This volume stands out for by far the best treatment of Hungarian constitutional matters in any western language. In the course of time parliamentary life came to differ fundamentally in the two parts of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The Cisleithanian general election of 1897 was the first one to combine (almost) universal suffrage for men with elements of the traditional curial suffrage. Several maps and charts elucidate this complex arrangement. The second part of this volume deals with representative bodies in all the crownlands and self-governing corporations, laying out in detail their legal constitution and day-to-day responsibilities. This is the first time that all these bodies have been studied together, thus enabling the reader to set aside any notion of the western part of the Habsburg Monarchy (but also to a lesser degree of the eastern part) as a unitary state and instead to view the Monarchy as

⁷ Mathias Stickler, „*Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*“ – *Ein Jahrhundertwerk auf der Zielgeraden*, „Historische Zeitschrift“, 295 (2012) p. 712.

⁸ Gerald Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in der Verfassung und Verwaltung Österreichs 1848–1918*, Wien, 1985.

⁹ „Cisleithania“ was after 1867 the unofficial, yet commonly used term for the „western“ (non-Hungarian) part of the Habsburg Monarchy which was officially designated „Austria“ only in 1915.

the „composite state” it actually was¹⁰. The next volume broadens the view to the establishment of a civil society dealing with a multitude of associations of all kinds and with a plethora of newspapers and journals which were essential for the politicization of the population, offering a wide variety of new insights into the actual working of democratic, political processes within a society that was rapidly being transformed in the second half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century. This process of transformation is thoroughly dealt with in Volume 9, covering living and working environments of all kinds of social stands and classes as well as various efforts to solve the „social question”. A separate volume of maps and statistics explains the social situation of the population according to the census of 1910. Volume 10 on cultural manifestations – dealing not only with examples of high culture (literature, music, visual arts etc.) but also with elements of everyday culture (like fashion, eating habits, housing, leisure activities ...) – again bears witness to the great variety of possibilities the people could take advantage of under the umbrella of the Habsburg Monarchy. Volume 11 deals with a number of aspects – military and civil ones – brought about by the First World War, whereas a special volume contains all kinds of statistics concerning the war and its implications. Finally, volume 12 bears the title *Dealt with the Past?* and examines how the successor states handled the heritage of the Habsburg Monarchy after its demise and in which ways they made use of it or break away from it.

Impressive as these volumes might be, to a broader public their overall relevance for understanding the past is somewhat restricted by the fact that they are written in German, a language whose knowledge – especially among the younger generation – is nowadays not so common as it used to be some decades ago. Therefore it is all the more praiseworthy that Prof. Rudolf Gräf and his team have taken upon themselves the tremendous job of translating parts of the earlier volumes (vols. I–VI) into the Romanian language, thus enabling the public interested in wider historical questions to get acquainted with the results of internationally based research on the Habsburg Monarchy, an achievement I as responsible editor of the entire work and we all as beneficiaries cannot be grateful enough to Prof. Gräf and his team.

Returning to the question of today’s relevance of the history of the Habsburg Monarchy, let me repeat, that after the Second World War the idea of the functioning of the unification of Europe as a supranational political body stood at the very beginning of the renewed preoccupation with the history of the Habsburg Monarchy. Ever since the European Union came into existence, historians and political commentators alike tried to find out, in which way the „achievements and failures” of the defunct Habsburg multiethnic empire with all its diversity – aptly described as a „conflict community”¹¹ – could serve as an

¹⁰ *Kooperatives Imperium. Politische Zusammenarbeit in der späten Habsburgermonarchie*, Jana Osterkamp (Hg.), (= Bad Wiesseer Tagungen des Collegium Carolinum 39, Göttingen, 2018).

¹¹ The term is borrowed from Jan Křen, *Die Konfliktgemeinschaft. Tschechen und Deutsche 1780–1918* (= Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum 71, München, 2000; the original in Czech language was published in 1990 under the title: *Konfliktní společenství: Češi a Němci 1780–1918*), but can be used for the situation in the Habsburg Monarchy as a whole.

example for the present European Union¹². This is a question not easy to be answered. Some of the founding fathers of the process of European unification (Jean Monnet, Robert Schumann, Paul Henri Spaak) hoped for a true European Community by letting nationalism fade into the background. These hopes were never truly realized, while the – more realistic – ideas of others (De Gaulle's „Europe de Patries") more or less prevailed. It is understandable that in a big unit composed of various smaller parts of extremely varying size and importance there will always exist divergent and sometimes conflicting interests – be they more or less justified or just imagined by a certain group of people. This was also the case in the Habsburg Monarchy, which on the administrative level found some ingenious methods to solve these problems. Disregarding nationalistic rethoric it can be said that – at least in the western part of the Monarchy – the principle of devolving power from the centre to lower levels, to regional and local institutions, had some success when it came to everyday affairs. Concomitant to the sharing of power in internal matters there was however a concentration of foreign policy and military affairs in the hands of the central government (to be precise, in the hands of the monarch and his advisers) – a state of affairs which legally seems a long way off in the present European Union (though perhaps not that far off in practical terms). Yet the kind of federalism operating in the Habsburg Monarchy (allowing individual solutions to be found on different levels) was not sufficient to satisfy the excessive demands of nationalists, who lacked one decisive element of statecraft: the will to compromise. Shortly before the demise of the Habsburg Monarchy political commentators and farsighted politicians regarded the „absence of a political culture of compromise" as the main reason for the problems the state was confronted with¹³, along with an inability to tone down „the struggle of the nations for the state"¹⁴.

This assessment might also apply to the European Union, given the – smaller or greater – rise of nationalism in many of the member states. Yet in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural political entity (the kind of entity the Habsburg Monarchy was in the past and the European Union is at present) a federal system can only function if there is a basic willingness to compromise between „regional autonomy" (in the case of the European Union implying the partial renunciation of sovereignty on the part of the member states) and the agendas of the central political unit. It is easier for a culture of consensus and solidarity to prevail if all the members of the greater unit feel committed to a common aim, a „goal"

¹² One of the latest products of this metier is a book by a Dutch journalist recently published in German: Caroline de Gruyter, *Das Habsburgerreich – Inspiration für Europa? Eine Spurensuche*, Wien, 2022.

¹³ Helmut Rumpler, *The Habsburg Monarchy as a Portret for the New Europe 2*, quoting a statement by Friedrich Wilhelm Foerster.

¹⁴ [Rudolf Springer, Karl Renner], *Der Kampf der österreichischen Nationen um den Staat*, Wien 1902.

beyond mere material wellbeing. Forming a common legal, economic and cultural region is not enough (as has clearly been demonstrated by the fate of the Habsburg Monarchy), it needs an overriding idea of state, a „soul”, a spiritual foundation. If the severe crisis we are bound to experience at the moment should lead to a growing awareness of such a need, this crisis may have at least some positive effect, but it is far from certain that those in charge of the people’s fate will pay heed to the lessons of history.