

INTRODUCTION



Austria-Hungary ceased to exist almost a hundred years ago. The oldest generation of Central Europeans can remember it from their parents' and grandparents' stories. The majority of them learned about it in high school and associates the monarchy with its few royals, particularly the late Franz Joseph and his eccentric wife Elisabeth. Those figures, already famous during their lifetime, entered the realm of popular culture and remain recognizable in most countries of Europe, providing a stable income for the souvenir industry in what used to be their empire and inspiration for screenwriters on both sides of the Atlantic. Naturally, the situation varies from country to country as far as history textbooks and historical monuments are concerned. Thus, Austrians and Hungarians are generally more familiar with the monarchy than are the Germans or Poles, not to mention the British and French, whereas Serbs, Italians, Czechs, and Romanians tend to be highly suspicious of it. The old monarchy also built quite well, so modern travelers who wish to see what is left of the Habsburg empire do not need to limit their curiosity to imperial residences, nor to the opera houses in cities such as Prague, Lviv, and Zagreb. In most cities of former Austria-Hungary, visitors can get acquainted with Habsburg architecture at the railway station. In this respect Vienna, heavily bombed by the Anglo-American air forces and the Soviet artillery during World War II, is merely a sad exception. Other traces of the

imperial past can still be discovered in many private apartments, antique shops, and retro-style cafés, in cemeteries, and old photographs.

Those who wish to learn more about Austria-Hungary have to look for it in books. The monarchy is quite lucky in this respect, because many excellent authors have chosen it as their subject, or as a background for their narratives. A library dedicated to Austria-Hungary would consist of hundreds of volumes, and the bibliography to this book includes only those that I found most instructive. Before World War II the vast majority of authors dealing with the newly extinct monarchy were its former citizens. In the following decades a number of crucial studies on the subject were written in America, particularly by émigrés from Central Europe and their students. Even before the collapse of communism, studies on Austria-Hungary became popular again in Central Europe, and after 1989 this interest has only increased. Today, various aspects of its past and its legacy are researched at numerous academic centers on both sides of the Atlantic, and a valuable book is published nearly every year.

Still, those who have never plodded through a scholarly study on the monarchy, and know it only from one of the world literary classics—by Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, Franz Kafka, Elias Canetti, or Jaroslav Hašek—need not feel deprived. I also began my acquaintance with Austria-Hungary this way, and I can hardly imagine a better introduction. Indeed, one of the purposes of this book is to inquire why those popularly admired authors decided to write about this apparently bankrupt and almost forgotten country, why they have immortalized it. I argue that at the moment when the monarchy fell it was rather unlikely that future authors would find it fascinating, and that it owes its current reputation to a series of coincidences, one of which was its capacity to inspire the imaginations of some outstanding authors.

When it still existed, the Habsburg monarchy did have a few talented admirers. Most of them were shocked when Austria ceased to be a part of Germany after the Austro-Prussian War and the founding of Bismarck's German empire. They believed that Austria could have created a better version of this empire, more joyful, culture-oriented, and friendly toward its neighbors. The majority of European commentators, however, including Germans, were more than a little skeptical about the Habsburg monarchy. It was usually viewed as a country located at the peripheries of the civilized world, populated by a hodge-

podge of half-anonymous nationalities and clumsily struggling against the fresh, ambitious, and apparently victorious idea of nationalism. It was rather peaceful, relatively civilized, but also irritatingly archaic in appearance, and being neither modern nor exotic before World War I meant being rather uninteresting.

Ironically, World War I was begun by Austro-Hungarian ministers with the approval of their peace-loving monarch, because of their astonishing belief that by crushing Serbia they would prove that their country was more vigorous and formidable than it actually was. Although millions fought bravely for the monarchy during the war, its dissolution in 1918 caused almost no protest, to say nothing of resistance. Most people considered it dead even before the successor states managed to agree—after considerable military and diplomatic clashes—upon their borders, organize their administration, and introduce their currencies, uniforms, and the new national colors. Nevertheless, soon after Austria-Hungary irrevocably disappeared from the map of Europe it started expanding in the realm of imagination. Consequently, the number of more or less talented authors who became obsessed or simply intrigued by it grew remarkably. Numerous public figures, essayists, and journalists commented on its fate; political writers and economists analyzed the causes for its weakness; historians described its decline and fall; poets and visionaries dreamt about an idea that should have arisen from its legacy; novelists resurrected it in the land of fiction. As long as Austria-Hungary actually existed, Austrian patriotism had been generally considered as nothing more than a superficial by-product of imperial pomp and a ridiculous dream of bureaucrats. Once the empire was gone, many found it an attractive, sublime, and profoundly humane idea, a solution to many problems of the present day. Of course, there were others who despised it wholeheartedly and ridiculed its memory. However, those who became nostalgic about Austria-Hungary, although their number was rather small, appeared remarkably—one could say disproportionately—successful. Their achievement was to change the image of the monarchy, and since its image was the only thing it had left, their impact has been immense.

In this book I will describe and analyze what may be called the discourse on Austria-Hungary in its formative years. I do not intend to compete with modern historians, nor do I question any modern study regarding Austria-Hungary as it actually was. It is my inten-

tion, however, to demonstrate how much modern historiography on Austria-Hungary owes to its interwar predecessors, particularly those who were not professional history writers. My analysis covers some three decades after the dissolution of the monarchy, until the outbreak of World War II in some places and the 1950s in others, particularly Austria. This was roughly the time when those who had witnessed the downfall of the Habsburg monarchy and could remember it from their own past dominated this discourse. It was their memory, their experience, and their passion that shaped it. In other words, this book is about a generation that took an ambiguous and unclear imperial legacy and transformed it into a coherent image of the past.

The situation they faced was unique. In 1914 the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was almost four hundred years old and its ruling dynasty, the Habsburgs, claimed to be the successor of the imperial title of Charlemagne.¹ Its size made it the second largest European state, after Russia, and its population put it third, after Russia and Germany. Its economy was doing well, its culture flourished, and its great power status in Europe had not been questioned for centuries. Technical innovations continued to flood into the country, officials were receiving their salaries and widows their pensions, and trains were generally running on time. To be sure, the dissolution of Austria-Hungary had many prophets—among them Napoleon, Karl Marx, and Adam Mickiewicz—and they had all pointed to the conflict of the monarchy's nationalities.² However, the dissatisfaction of the nationalists was remarkably peaceful; it manifested itself mostly in newspapers and in the speeches of the deputies to the Viennese parliament. Still, four years later Austria-Hungary was no more. Neither Austrians nor Hungarians (the formerly privileged nations) nor any political party wanted it back. History pronounced its verdict and then executed it immediately and irrevocably.

When the former Habsburg subjects sought a comparably spectacular change, they scarcely saw any examples in Europe's modern history. And yet they had to produce explanations, interpretations, and narrative formulas that would allow them to understand and organize their experience. Certainly the majority was too busy with everyday needs, and many were too enthusiastic about their newly established nation-states to care about such things. Thus, in this book I focus on those authors who, for many reasons, were still looking backwards,

and who considered the breakdown of Austria-Hungary a major historical event.

In the first chapter I present an overview of the situation in the interwar successor states of the old monarchy, and attempt to contextualize the perspectives from which it was most frequently seen, giving special consideration to contemporary historical imagery and concepts. I also briefly discuss the main trends in post-World War II writing on Austria-Hungary, dividing them into three categories: history, journalism and essays, and literary fiction. Eventually, I consider this division as merely a useful fiction, and in the concluding chapter I emphasize that my sources are narratives that may be interpreted from a number of common perspectives. I also argue that as far as the transfer of concepts, ideas, and particular intellectual obsessions is concerned, the borders between genres mattered much less for the discourse on Austria-Hungary than ideological and national divisions. If I nonetheless respect those borders in my book, it is because I believe that crossing them consciously is more instructive and amusing than simply ignoring them or torturing readers with some new, artificial classification.

In the chapter on historiography I discuss, among other things, the problems in Austro-Hungarian and Austro-German relations, explanations of the causes of the monarchy's breakdown, and some counterfactual alternatives of its fate, as produced by interwar historians. In the chapter on journalism and essays I mainly concentrate on discussions about Austrian identity and the alleged Habsburg historical mission. In the chapter on literary fiction I analyze various literary images of the imperial past, and some historical interpretations provided by a number of excellent as well as some mediocre writers. Additionally, a short chapter covers the biographies of Franz Joseph and his image in other kinds of writings. His person provoked so much interest, controversy, and speculation among his contemporaries, and came to be so powerfully symbolic of the Empire, that I could not ascribe him to any other genre, but only to one of his own; evidently, he had been there before modern pop stars joined him. Finally, in my conclusion I summarize and evaluate the motifs, tendencies, and obsessions of the interwar authors, which appeared persistent and indisputably influenced postwar discourse on the monarchy.

The Habsburg Heritage between the Wars

Before we arrive at opinions, narratives, and images of Austria-Hungary let us first examine the situation caused by its rapid disappearance in light of some basic facts. It is true that actual changes do not necessarily determine our perception of the past; humans are able to see more than just the bare reality. The facts, however, should not be entirely ignored. Since they are all well known, I will emphasize those that seem to have influenced Central Europeans' attitudes toward the Habsburg monarchy.

Prospects for the monarchy seemed bright in 1914, even though it had many critics and malcontents. However, in order to realize how rapid its fall might appear to contemporaries, one needs to realize that by early 1918 its future, while not as bright after four years of war, still seemed firm. Three of its enemies—Russia, Serbia, and Romania—had been beaten. Italy was desperately fighting, but suffering losses. Although the Habsburg armies had already started fighting against their previously implicit enemies—the British and French, who landed in the Balkans—the Western Allies did not intend to dismember the monarchy at that point. Actually, they still did not care much about Central Europe, for they were too preoccupied by their struggle against Germany. On June 3 in Versailles, the Allies officially spoke in favor of the future independence of Poland. This meant returning Galicia to Poland, but that was supposed to be mainly an anti-German maneuver. As far as the Czechs, Slovaks, and the Southern Slavs were regarded, Western statesmen merely expressed their sympathy for the aspirations of these nations—and this implied no more than autonomy, democracy, and equality within the monarchy, a claim that US President Woodrow Wilson had already announced in his Fourteen Points. However, as early as June 26, Edvard Beneš, from the Czech National Council, obtained an official declaration from the French Minister of Foreign Affairs supporting the idea of a Czecho-Slovak state, and within weeks British and American officials joined him, consistently advocating the formation of Yugoslavia as well. In contrast to the next World War, the Allies kept their promises to Central European politicians.

Still, the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 left many Central Europeans bitterly disillusioned about the intentions of the peacemakers.

Actually, those expectations were mostly shaped by the idea of self-determination of nations, brilliantly advocated by President Wilson, who inspired much hope throughout Europe, varying from the enthusiasm of former enemies of the Central Powers to the naïve optimism of their supporters.³ They all believed that Wilson could mitigate the mutual hatred and anger of the belligerent nations and their leaders, and that he would bring about a “just” peace settlement. This settlement, however, appeared to please the victorious powers—and their allies—exclusively. It was French diplomats who stubbornly advocated for Polish, Czech, Romanian, and Yugoslav claims at the peace conference, whereas the British and the Americans occasionally opposed them, although they often did not know where these disputed territories were located, not to mention the ethnic composition of their populations. In fact, some of the Allies’ decisions were simply an acknowledgment of *faits accomplis*, such as the results of the Polish-Soviet War, the Czech occupation of Teschen (Cieszyn), or the Romanian invasion of the Hungarian Soviet Republic.⁴

The results of the conference were shocking for both Austrians and Hungarians; what was left within their new national frontiers was much less than they would ever imagine as acceptable. Hungarian delegates to Paris who had to sign the humiliating Treaty of Trianon resigned from their public functions because they considered their names to be too shameful for their compatriots. Indeed, it was scarcely possible to maintain that Trianon was based on the principle of self-determination, for it left some one-third of Hungarians, including vast Hungarian-populated territories, outside the country’s borders. The basis for such a settlement was the “strategic” demands of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia, as well as the fact that after the short-lived communist revolution, Hungary was bankrupt, occupied by its enemies, and totally defenseless.⁵ As a consequence, as soon as Hungary recovered, it became a threat to all of its neighbors except Austria, for all the Hungarian parties and governments dreamt about revenge—indeed, some Hungarians still dream about it in the twenty-first century. Therefore, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania soon formed an alliance, called the Little Entente, to oppose the Hungarian territorial claims; in other respects, however, these countries had little common interest, and the alliance soon proved unreliable.

The Austrians did not constitute a comparable threat to their

neighbors. They did not even dare plan to regain the German-speaking territories they were forced to cede to Italy and Czechoslovakia. Instead, they dreamt of getting rid of Austria itself and incorporating it into Germany, and that was denied to them mainly because of French fears of an increase in the population of their “eternal” and still-mighty enemy. Deprived of their Slavic provinces, Austrians considered their country to be a part of Germany because of the common language and culture, and in light of the fact that Austria was bankrupt and cut off from its markets and its food supplies. Before the Allies forbade the Anschluss, plebiscites had been held in two provinces, Voralberg and Tirol, with the result of more than 90 percent positive votes. Forced to accept the decisions of the Treaty of Saint-Germain, Austrians formed the German Republic of Austria (Republik Deutschösterreich), which immediately faced a flood of veterans of the imperial army and bureaucracy, and a long economic crisis.⁶

In other words, the peace settlement did not solve most of the problems that had troubled Central Europe before the war and which were supposed to have contributed to the fall of the Habsburg monarchy. To be sure, Czechs, Poles, Romanians, and Serbs welcomed the changes on the political map with great joy and enthusiasm. However, the dissatisfied national minorities still numbered in the millions. Only the newly formed Austria and Hungary did not have any of them, except for the well-assimilated Jews. And it was exactly the former master-nations Germans and Hungarians, now forced to live under their neighbors’ rule, who were the most frustrated. Their dissatisfaction was of a different kind than the sense of underrepresentation of the non-German and non-Magyar nationalities under the Habsburgs. They considered the new political status quo a fresh and inexplicable injustice, and they had their fatherlands to look up to for support and the League of Nations to appeal to. The Ukrainians of Galicia first lost the war against the Poles, and then were denied the autonomy promised to them by the Allies; in Czechoslovakia they had their own region, but its autonomy was an administrative illusion supervised by Czech officials. The Slovaks, Slovenians, and Croatians soon felt underprivileged in their new states of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, which were supposed to satisfy the dreams of the oppressed Slavs of Austria-Hungary, but which actually resembled the monarchy in their multiethnic composition and ethnic policies. And there were the Cen-

tral European Jews, who had special reasons to be afraid of the new settlement after the pogroms in Galicia during the Polish-Ukrainian conflict of 1919, and the anti-Semitic character of the “white terror” in Hungary after the collapse of the short-lived communist regime. Although anti-Semitism was omnipresent in Austria-Hungary, its revered emperor Franz Joseph was well known for his disgust for it, and Jews from the shtetls throughout the monarchy, as well as the rich and educated, simply adored Franz Joseph as their legendary protector. In comparison, the new rulers were considered either an enigma or the opposite. The so-called Little Treaty of Versailles regarding the protection of minorities, which the new states were forced to sign, was indeed proof of the persuasive power of Jewish public opinion in the West.⁷ But Central European Jews had reasonable doubts about whether this treaty, imposed by foreign diplomats, could really protect them from their new governments and their Christian neighbors.

Furthermore, political arrangements regarding Central Europe seemed rather shaky from the beginning. New states emerged after a series of diplomatic and military clashes, which not only resulted in the Hungarian dream of revenge against almost all its neighbors but also in Polish-Czech, Romanian-Yugoslav, and Italian-Yugoslav animosities. Initially, France planned to make these new states its protégés and join their forces into what the French diplomats imagined as a bulwark against Germany, but they soon turned their eyes toward the Soviet heir of their reliable ally Russia. The promised peace did not seem to have a solid foundation.

Hopes for democracy quickly proved unrealistic. For Hungary the postwar era began first with the red terror of Béla Kun and then continued with the white equivalent of Admiral Miklós Horthy. The limited franchise and Horthy as the regent of the superficial kingdom remained until the next war, accompanied by anti-Semitic legislation copied from the Nazis in the late 1930s. In other countries democracy was crushed by popular dictators: Mussolini in Italy, Piłsudski in Poland, King Alexander in Yugoslavia, and Dollfuss in Austria. In Romania, the government managed to win all the elections without any constitutional changes, until Ion Antonescu installed his dictatorship in 1938. The Yugoslav king, the Austrian chancellor, the first Polish president, and a Romanian prime minister were all murdered by fanatical political opponents. The rise of authoritarianism in the region

was in part a response to signals from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, which seemed fascinating and terrifying simultaneously. Finally, when Hitler felt strong enough to dictate his will to the region, only Poland and Yugoslavia dared to oppose him, although their determination was based on the false calculations that the Western Allies would keep their promises and help them to resist Germany militarily.

Czechoslovakia alone remained a stable, liberal democracy until it was first peacefully dismembered and then militarily occupied by Hitler. The Czechoslovak political consensus was, however, based on the personal reputation of the patriarchal President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and the fear all Czech parties had of the largest, richest, and best-organized minority in the Central Europe: the Sudeten Germans. The other reason for Czechoslovak stability was that Bohemia was the most industrialized and economically prosperous country in the region that, cut into barely sustainable units by the new frontiers, suffered from an almost continuous economic crisis. The post-World War I and post-1929 depressions lasted longer and had more devastating results here than they did in the West. As in most of Europe, the interwar era brought unemployment, inflation, and impoverishment on a previously unknown scale. Some governments in the region introduced new legislation in favor of workers and peasants, but they were unable to provide them with jobs or a demand for their products. Social conflict was no longer limited to the anger of the poor against the rich, workers against capitalists, or peasants against landowners. After the Great War, which ruined many but brought fortunes to a few war speculators, the middle classes also felt frustrated. They could no longer expect that hard work, education, and tenacity would make them prosperous and secure. Moreover, most of the new governments of Central Europe and their bureaucracies were notorious for corruption, which was quite unlike the Habsburg epoch, when men of power had almost exclusively been aristocrats wealthy enough to not be suspected of abusing their positions. In Poland, for example, most of the anti-parliamentary campaign of Piłsudski in the 1920s was constructed upon accusations of corruption against the political class as a whole. Exaggerated as they were, they successfully undermined the nation's belief in democracy.

In other words, the interwar years brought enough poverty, disillusionment, and insecurity for the Central Europeans to make them look back at the “good old days of peace” with some deserved nos-

talgia. Of course, nostalgia did not necessarily mean dreams about the Habsburgs regaining their power. Outside of Austria and Hungary this idea simply seemed outrageous, since political independence was considered the most precious national achievement. The Austrians and Hungarians themselves did not consider it too seriously, although Hungary was officially a kingdom, and in Austria Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg apparently attempted to recall some Habsburg patriotism to aid his desperate resistance to Hitler's pressure. Nostalgia, however, is not an active attitude toward the present; it does not need to seek a link between the past and present. It may all the more easily be fueled by the belief that what is gone is gone forever.⁸

Of course, the postwar era brought much more than social, political, and economic insecurity. Cinema, radio, jazz, phones, cars, and airplanes reached almost all corners of Central Europe, although they were available to a smaller number of people than in the West. Women could shorten their hair and dresses, and enter politics and professions requiring higher education, enjoying popular enfranchisement. Most young men shaved their beards and moustaches, and many made brilliant careers in the new national capitals, even though their social origins may have been very humble. In short, the realities of Austria-Hungary soon became anachronistic, not only because the Habsburg dynasty appeared to be politically bankrupt but because now progress and dynamism were enthusiastically expected to dominate all aspects of life. Because of enormous changes in everyday life during the Great War and its aftermath, time appeared accelerated. Hence, the last years of Austria-Hungary seemed to represent a past much more remote a decade after the monarchy's breakdown than, say, the turn of the century had represented in the spring of 1914.

I have emphasized conditions of the postwar status quo in Central Europe because the crucial fact for the attitudes toward Austria-Hungary at that time is that scarcely anyone claimed its legacy. For obvious reasons, nationally disposed public opinion in the successor states considered the Habsburgs foreign oppressors and their rule illegitimate. Indeed, such was the prevailing opinion not only among the Czechs, Poles, Romanians, and Yugoslavs but also among many Hungarians, although Hungary had been so much bigger and more powerful and prosperous within the dual monarchy. However, most patriotic, or indeed nationalist, Hungarians never forgot their defeat

in 1849 and the uprisings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and regarded dualism as yet another form of oppression, insisting that a true patriot could approve of nothing but full and official independence. Furthermore, German nationalists also saw the Habsburgs as a major disaster in their country's history, for they had constituted the main obstacle against the unification of all Germans in one state throughout the nineteenth century. In Austria alone did the imperial legacy inspire popular sentiment. As far as the present and future were concerned, however, Austrians opted for unification with Germany. Some timid and desperate attempts by Schuschnigg, the last chancellor, to oppose German nationalism with the Habsburg one may best be illustrated with an anecdote. The chancellor, it says, asks an old Austrian about his opinion of his government. The old man responds that he is afraid of speaking, for the chancellor might report his words to the police—so the chancellor promises not to do that. The old man, however, is still afraid that the chancellor might report his words to the city mayor. When the chancellor promises not to do that, and not to report them to the local doctor, the teacher, the postmaster, the priest, and many others, the old man says, “Personally, I’m very happy with your government’s policies.”⁹

The fact that Austria-Hungary already appeared remote just a relatively short time after its dissolution, and that it seemed perfectly dead as a political idea, shaped discourse on the monarchy in a special way. In short, the monarchy immediately became a historical subject par excellence. Moreover, people who had personal interests in interpreting the late history of Austria-Hungary were still there, and they influenced its image significantly. Many of them were actively involved in political life before 1914; some of them had even shaped the policies of the monarchy, and after it fell they wanted to prove that they had always been right and that others were to blame. Some of them sympathized with the monarchy and believed it deserved a better fate. In other words, emotions were certainly involved and the debates drew in a much wider audience than the purely academic disputes of specialists, and yet they were abstract and did not serve any practical purposes—except for, perhaps, saving some individuals’ reputation and self-esteem, because their object had ceased to exist. The combination of these two features made interwar discourse on Austria-Hungary quite exceptional. It referred to the epoch that had recently ended and

was still fresh in contemporaries' memories, and, on the other hand, it allowed for an intellectual detachment that normally requires a generation or more to pass away. One may argue that it matured faster than most modern historical discourses, full of national pride and complexes, militant ideologies and party lines, and yet it preserved much of their vigor and, last but not least, their ability to attract the public's attention.

Austria-Hungary and the Idea of History

Before moving to analyze particular interwar texts on Austria-Hungary, let us first consider some aspects of the monarchy that seemed obvious to contemporary authors, but which may not seem so today. They all profoundly influenced interwar discourse on the monarchy; however, contemporary authors did not necessarily comment on them explicitly. In short, they may be regarded as constituting the paradigm of knowledge on Austria-Hungary by the time it collapsed.

As I claimed, with World War I time relatively accelerated, and Austria-Hungary seemed to belong to a distinctively anachronistic past just a few years after its dissolution. Still, there were even more reasons to view it as such. First, Austria-Hungary had proudly appeared to be an old-fashioned country for a long time before it actually fell. The main pillars of the Habsburg political ideology were historical claims and historical splendor. The dynasty had claims to primacy among the European ruling families, it maintained special relations with the papacy, and obeyed a family code which drastically limited the number of potential marital partners. The emperor's titles included all territories that Habsburgs ruled from time immemorial; the most fantastic gem in this diadem was apparently Jerusalem, proudly reminding people about the time when the Holy Roman Emperors had led the crusaders. The final touch to this historical marinade was that the Viennese court and governments were dominated for sixty-eight years by the personality of Franz Joseph, a most traditional monarch who disapproved of any innovations and viewed himself as a grand enforcer of the past from the very establishment of his rule.

Before 1914 almost all European countries were monarchies, and certainly all had their royal pomp and rituals. Nevertheless, they also had other claims for political legitimacy and the most obvious of them was the national idea. In this respect Austria-Hungary was an excep-

tion—it had to emphasize feudal loyalty because of the lack of a comparably attractive national idea. Many modern historians emphasize analogies among the multiethnic empires of the Habsburgs, the Romans, Ottoman Turkey, and occasionally also Hohenzollern Germany, but in fact contemporaries rarely acknowledged them. Russia and Germany eagerly and noisily claimed to represent their respective national ideologies as sources of their political legitimacy. Austria-Hungary was the only large European country that could not follow this highly prized ideal, not because so many ethnic groups inhabited it—in-*deed*, Russia had more of them—but because it was supranational by definition.

Austria attempted to impose German language and culture on its non-German subjects in the epoch of the enlightened absolutism of Joseph II and in the early nineteenth century. However, these attempts were undertaken in the name of civilization, not of the German nation. The enlightened emperors viewed much of their realm as backward territory inhabited by barbarians, and their mission as a *mission civilisatrice*. This semicolonial idea constituted the second most important pillar of Habsburg political ideology at the beginning of the twentieth century. Central Europe, it assumed, needed Austria as its protector against aggressive foreign powers and the contradicting claims of its own nationalities, and as its cultural and economic supervisor and leader. It was still appealing to such mid-nineteenth-century politicians as František Palačky, a Czech historian and national ideologist who claimed that if Austria did not exist it should have been invented. Half a century later, however, the conception of Austria as a *protectrice* of the “small,” and relatively underdeveloped nationalities provoked little enthusiasm. All of them were trying to gain as much as possible from Vienna, but their expectations already went further, toward the ideal of independence, and they were frustrated with the price they were paying for being Habsburg subjects.

Another idea that accompanied the Habsburg monarchy until its breakdown was its status as a great power. The assumption that countries should be naturally and reasonably divided into the great powers and the rest, and that Austria-Hungary belonged to the former group, was omnipresent in contemporary literature. Since interwar authors commented on this issue extensively, I devote a separate section to it in the chapter on historiography. Here I would just like to stress that

the great power concept was typical of the interwar perception of the monarchy, and of the contemporary historical imagination in general. Although the national idea, as well as the problem, of class struggle and social emancipation had already entered the sphere of interest of numerous professional historians, the vast majority of them still focused on questions of high politics: treaties, alliances, campaigns, and personalities of powerful statesmen. The Habsburgs, with their almost seven-hundred-years-long history as a major political factor in Europe, perfectly fit this model.

Nevertheless, seen from the post-1918 perspective, the history of Austria was also remarkably atypical. The main reason for this was quite simple; namely, this history had a clear-cut end: the death of the main protagonist. This profoundly influenced the narrative strategies of the monarchy's historians and the conceptual framework of their writings: all histories of the monarchy had to lead to its breakdown and provide an explanation for it. Consequently, the breakdown became the final stage of the process, whose causes and previous stages had to be described and explained. None of the authors giving a detailed account of Austrian history could avoid discussing them and taking a position in the debate.

In other words, histories of Austria-Hungary had to be written in the “decline and fall” paradigm. The alternative, the Romantic paradigm of rise and successful struggle, did not work. Historians who viewed Austria mainly as an obstacle on their nationalities' way toward independence paid little attention to its nature; the histories they were writing were those of their respective nations, and the monarchy appeared in them as a monolith, an unsympathetic and obscure background.¹⁰ The decline and fall paradigm, however, offered a remarkable variety of arguments, explanations, and rhetorical figures from the repertoire of the most distinguished history writers of antiquity and modernity such as Thucydides, St. Augustine, Montesquieu, Gibbon, Niebuhr, and Mommsen. It embraced moral and political theory, as well as sentimentalism and nostalgia, bitter criticism, cynicism, and mockery. Thus, it should not be surprising that while seeking analogies for the decline and fall of Austria-Hungary, many interwar authors found the Roman Empire to be the best example. Evidently, their education in the classical *gymnasia* made this choice even more tempting.

Another classical analogy was less evident but also essential: the

Greek tragedy. Seen from the post-1918 perspective, the history of Austria-Hungary was a story of its doomed struggle for survival. Hence, its authors could only choose between presenting it as a farce or as a tragedy—a tragedy of vain attempts to avoid a fatal destiny. In both variants the narrated events and acts of characters are essentially equivocal. Successes are only partial, failures are never decisive, and decisions may seem smart but cannot really change the course of history. Actually, most historical debates about the monarchy focused on the interpretation of a relatively small number of events and developments. In interwar historical discourse about Austria-Hungary, controversies concerning factual events were quite limited. They mainly arose around the interpretation of facts and developments popularly known and acknowledged by all sides in the debate—and these very interpretations were typically used to make moral judgments.

Roughly speaking, the choice between farce and tragedy depended on whether the author sympathized with the monarchy. By “sympathizing” I do not mean being uncritical toward the Habsburgs. On the contrary, sympathy for the monarchy usually implied some serious criticism of its rulers, for it was they who actually failed, and who were to blame for the final result. In other words, the sympathetic account of the monarchy’s history was a demanding intellectual and narrative challenge, since Austro-Hungarian statesmen did not know the future results of their actions, and their actual intention was to strengthen the monarchy, not to weaken it. Even if they recognized the gravity of the threats and properly diagnosed where they were coming from, they could not know that the final catastrophe was unavoidable. The challenge was yet more complicated for those who acknowledged that the monarchy’s most fatal weakness was the multiethnic composition of its population, and that its mortal disease was its inability to satisfy these nationalities’ expectations. Indeed, this assumption seemed quite obvious after 1918, and many authors adopted it even if they disapproved of what had happened—that is, if they found these expectations unreasonable or unfortunate. This, however, indicated that the monarchy had been struggling against history itself, against some invincible power, against the very nature of the modern age. Consequently, some authors concluded that it was not surprising that the monarchy fell, but that it had managed to last so long. Others, of course, sought some “mistake,” a moment when the breakdown had still been avoidable, a

moment when the monarchy became infected with the disease that killed it. In consequence, they produced numerous more or less amusing counterfactual scenarios of “what certainly would have happened if . . .” Astonishingly, none of these authors considered the simplest, and indeed the most optimistic, of such scenarios; namely, assuming that the monarchy might have proudly buried the unfortunate archduke Franz Ferdinand and given up the idea of declaring war on Serbia in the summer of 1914. Actually, some of them argued that it might have entered the war better prepared militarily, or having secured the allegiance of its multinational subjects by some internal reforms; others claimed that if only a particular battle in 1917 had been won, the monarchy could have survived. The Great War, however, seemed to be a curse, a fate of modern times, and no one dared to imagine history without it.

Finally, one should also remember that the dreadful but also ambiguous legacy of the Great War was fertile soil for theories of history. The catastrophist visions of the decline of Western civilization mesmerized the exhausted Europeans, whereas utopian visions of the imminent victory of communism were fueled by the triumph of the revolution in Russia. The war and revolution seemed to be a turning point in European history, indicating that some sort of Hegelian-like synthesis was taking place in the real world. Lenin, Spengler, and Toynbee were all foretelling that the West—labeled as the world of capitalism, Latin civilization, or democracy—was soon to expect the next stage of the crisis, or perhaps a mortal catastrophe. The quick and final breakdown of Austria-Hungary, the weakest of the old great powers, appeared a logical and consistent element of this puzzle: the rottenest link in the chain had to break first. For various reasons, the fall of the Habsburg monarchy pleased many. For the Western democrats it was too aristocratic and conservative; for Hitler and Mussolini it was too liberal and tolerant; for Lenin and Stalin it was both, which they found a sign of corruption. However, they were all too eager to forget it, so I will focus on those who remembered it well.

Postwar Discourse on Austria-Hungary

The writings on Austria-Hungary under discussion here were produced by those who could actually remember it. In order to explain why I concentrate on those authors, and to emphasize why I consider

their role in shaping discourse on the monarchy as crucial, some remarks on the later developments of this discourse are necessary.

World War II had a decisive, though not immediate, impact on the image of the monarchy. First, it silenced, if not nullified, most of the moral and political claims of the European nationalists. Second, the new status quo in Europe became fully determined by the rivalry between capitalist democracy and Soviet-style communism. The entire hodgepodge of Central European political ideologies, national rivalries, and animosities became frozen in the zone dominated by the Soviets, and melted off among those who wished to oppose the communists. In other words, the ideological and political implications of interwar writings about the Habsburg monarchy lost most of their significance. Before the war, dreams about the monarchy's resurrection were rather abstract, but at least the Habsburg legacy—or, more frequently, challenges to this legacy—played an important role in legitimizing the status quo in Central Europe. After the war the only contest that mattered involved just two participants, communists and anti-communists.

The moral bankruptcy of nationalism had a different impact on the image of the monarchy. Right-wing movements were stigmatized in all countries where they had cooperated with the Nazis and the Fascists, and the most radical change, obviously, took place in Germany itself. Its importance for discourse on Austria-Hungary was tremendous for three reasons. First, the nationalist German (or pan-German, *grossdeutsch*) ideology played a crucial role in this discourse between the wars. A number of pan-German authors, whose writings will be discussed in the next chapters—such as Viktor Bibl, Heinrich von Srbik, and Edmund von Glaise-Horstenau—easily adapted their views to the ideology of national socialism when the Nazis took power in 1933. After 1945 they all remained professionally active, but the tone of their writings was, of course, different. Second, quite paradoxically, the idea of Austria's Anschluss to Germany, which united all major political parties and enjoyed undeniable popularity among the majority of Austrians between 1918 and 1938, now had to be abandoned, for it was Adolf Hitler who had accomplished it. As a sort of political sabotage, Britain had acknowledged Austria as Hitler's first victim during the war, and this disputable definition became the basis for the foundation

of the Austrian Republic in 1955.¹¹ Consequently, a separate Austrian national identity emerged, and this meant that for the first time the country was popularly considered to be neither a part of Germany nor the “hereditary land” of the Habsburgs. Austrians could finally look back at their history swerving from political discussions considering their larger neighbor and their dynasty.

Furthermore, the decline of aggressive nationalism shed some new light on Austria-Hungary’s most characteristic feature: its multinational composition. Supranational political unity as a remedy against national conflicts, even in its imperfect Austro-Hungarian version, did not seem so ridiculous and anachronistic anymore.¹² Embodied by the European Union and its predecessors, this idea has been growing more and more popular, to the point that the Union now embraces almost all of the ex-Habsburg lands except for Bosnia, the Serbian Banat, and Ukrainian Galicia. Of course the ideologists of the unification of Europe never openly pointed at the Austro-Hungarian example. The Habsburgs as ancestors of this very democratic and “modern” idea would not seem a promising or persuasive political argument. As a matter of fact, even the interwar Austrian aristocrat Count Richard Nikolaus von Coudenhove-Kalergi, whose *PanEuropa* is popularly acknowledged as one of the fundamental writings on the idea of unification of the continent, did not dare to promote the monarchy as a pattern to follow. Nevertheless, simultaneously with the federalization of Europe, a sympathetic interest in the monarchy has been growing in the postwar decades, resulting in a gradual and profound change of its popular reputation.

Most importantly, in the postwar decades Austrian studies emerged as a popular subject in the English-speaking (or indeed English-writing) world. As mentioned, many authors writing about the monarchy after World War II in America were in fact émigrés from Central Europe, and this was perhaps why their attitude toward Austria-Hungary was from the beginning a bit more sympathetic than that of British authors. The first major synthesis of Austrian history in English was *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809–1918*, first published in 1948, by A. J. P. Taylor, who viewed the monarchy mostly as the Habsburgs’ *Hausmacht*. A number of more elaborated, thicker, and also more Austria-friendly studies followed: *The Habsburg Monarchy 1867–1914* by A. J. May (1951),

The Habsburg Empire 1790–1918 by C. A. Macartney (1969), and *The Multinational Empire* (1950) and *A History of the Habsburg Empire 1526–1918* (1974) by Robert A. Kann.

Parallel to this impressive progress in historiography was the “discovery” of Austro-Hungarian literature by the international public. Such authors as Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, and Franz Kafka all became world-famous after the war—and posthumously. Only Elias Canetti, perhaps the most international of the Austro-Hungarian writers, lived long enough to be rewarded with a Nobel Prize. Simultaneously, a number of ex-Habsburg subjects emerged as world celebrities in the arts and sciences. The generation of the 1950s and 1960s was obsessed with the writings of Sigmund Freud, dominated by the economic theories of Frederic Hayek, impressed by the argumentation of Karl Popper, and amused by the movies of Billy Wilder—to name just the few of the most famous. Turn-of-the-century Vienna, which had been viewed as a provincial and conservative cousin of Berlin by contemporaries, now appeared as the crucial intellectual and artistic milieu of twentieth-century Europe. In other words, half a century after its collapse Austria-Hungary became very popular.

Obviously, this popularity attracted scholars. The first major foreign achievements in the field of Austro-Hungarian cultural and intellectual history, basically unchallenged until today, were two studies, *The Austrian Mind: The Intellectual and Social History, 1848–1938* (first published 1972) by William Johnston, and *Il mito Absburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* (1963; a German edition followed in 1966) by Claudio Magris. Johnston’s book enthusiastically listed all the major Austrian achievements in the arts and sciences, providing their social and political contextualization. Magris created the concept of the “Habsburg myth” as a key to understanding Austrian prose and poetry concerning the issues of the ambiguous Austrian identity. Both approaches appeared extremely fruitful.

Another major turn in the studies on the Habsburg legacy was *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* by Carl E. Schorske (first published 1979). This extremely influential book proposed to view the declining Habsburg monarchy as “the laboratory of modernity” in arts, architecture, poetry, and mass politics. In other words, it presented the allegedly anachronistic empire as a major trendsetter, which it has indeed become, at least if we consider its posthumous popularity.

At least two of Schorske's numerous followers need to be mentioned: Péter Hanák and John Lukacs, whose *The Garden and the Workshop: Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest* (1998) and *Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City and Its Culture* (1988) broadened and balanced Schorske's view by including the Hungarian part of the monarchy in the picture.

In Central Europe, interest in Austria-Hungary has been growing at least since the 1970s. Obviously, it has always been most vivid in Austria, because of popular sentiment there as well as the freedom to research and publish. The most impressive, perhaps, of all postwar Austrian studies on the monarchy was the multivolume *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, tirelessly edited by Adam Wandruszka, which aimed at covering all the available knowledge on all the Habsburg provinces. Under communism both academic and non-academic writers choosing Habsburg-related topics had to struggle with censorship, varying from country to country, protecting Marxist and also national orthodoxy. In Poland, for example, where censorship was perhaps less harsh than anywhere in communist Europe except for Hungary, a number of valuable and original studies concerning the nation-building processes in the Habsburg empire were published in the early 1980s,¹³ and in 1978 an open debate took place in the popular press concerning recent novels dealing with the Habsburg Galicia. Their authors were accused of evoking nostalgia for the Austro-Hungarian epoch and idealizing anachronistic values, which were considered to be inappropriate for a society struggling to build socialism. Socialism fell, however, just eleven years later, while nostalgia continued to grow, left the realm of belles lettres, and entered the popular culture. Eventually, after the breakdown of communism, all Habsburg provinces and major cities earned a monograph, and the stream of studies regarding politics, everyday life, cultural and social history, and national and economic questions continued to spring from all major academic centers of the region, echoed by the flow of works by Western European and American authors.

During the interwar period Austria-Hungary was still not a popular subject, and if some people wrote about it, it was because they considered it rather more important than fashionable. And yet, the seeds of the future spectacular career of the politically dead monarchy were already there; the major processes, paradoxes, personalities, events,

and conflicts had been identified and described. In other words, this book attempts to take a closer look at the origins of what appeared to be one of the most vibrant, internationalized, and profoundly studied problems in modern European history, because origins always matter. Austria-Hungary has its clear-cut end, and the discourse on the monarchy has a beginning, but it is actually one and the same moment: the late fall of 1918. The scenery is being changed, and people are impatiently looking toward an uncertain future—and one of the things that need to be constructed anew is their history.