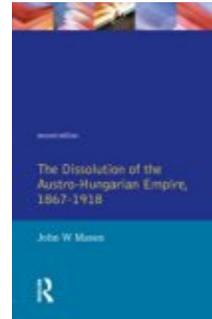


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John W. Mason. *The Dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire 1867-1918*. London and New York: Longman, 1997. xiii + 126 pp. \$11.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-29466-0.

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The Ever-Dissolving Empire

John W. Mason's survey of the final era of Habsburg rule in Central and Eastern Europe is well-suited for the Longman Seminar Studies' effort to create academic handbooks on defined time periods. Although not a noted name in Habsburg history (Mason's name does not appear in the bibliography), the author makes a valiant effort to present some of the intricacies and failings that characterize this period in the limited space available.

The book is organized in five parts: background, domestic affairs, foreign affairs, an assessment, and a series of documents. While some background is necessary to any understanding of the monarchy, the five pages for the eight-hundred years preceding 1867 are almost too brief to warrant inclusion. Yet the strict breakdown of topics assists the reader in understanding one idea at a time without getting caught up in a maelstrom of facts. Also excellent from the point of reference, and a hallmark of the Longman series, is the use of bracketed numbers to tie in textual main ideas to related sources in the bibliography. While these are not notes in a proper sense, their use allows the reader to chase down at least one title on a specific topic. Similarly, there are references to the source documents in the volume.

The second and third parts of the book are the most important and deal, respectively, with domestic and foreign relations. The next several paragraphs of this review will summarize the bulk of the book. After this I will point out what I consider the one main weakness in the material presented.

The second chapter (and the beginning of Part Two) deals with the *Ausgleich* of 1867 and its immediate results. Mason draws on sources that see the Compromise as a product of the Austro-Italo-Prussian War and the need to keep Hungary in the empire. Franz Joseph's willingness, or rather need, to accept a deal with the moderate Magyar compromise party concerning government power created the dualistic structure. No longer absolute in its nature, real domestic control in each half of the realm was assigned to the dominant nationality. The maintenance of a working relationship with the Hungarians is correctly seen as essential in refurbishing the monarchy's power base, but it also harmed relations with the Czech and Slovak populations. This is not to say that the other minorities were placated, but their relative weakness, according to the author, left them with no real means of reaction.

Mason deals with the "Nationality Question" in Chapter Three. To do so he attacks two assumptions. The first is that each nationality could only find freedom outside the monarchy; the second is that the primary struggles were directed at the Habsburgs rather than each other. (p. 9) As opposed to the term nationality, most of the eleven national groups (German, Magyar, Slovene, Czech, Italian, Pole, Croat, Slovak, Romanian, Serb, and Ruthenian) are more correctly labeled by the author "historico-political entities." The conflict in the nineteenth century arose between the traditional rights of the more established groups and the rising notion of nationality based on ethnicity, culture, and language. Following this brief introduction each of the main ethnic

groups is dealt with alone or by geographic pairings (i.e. "The Croats and Serbs"). Aside from the Germans and the Hungarians, who represented the ruling groups, Mason develops the traditional line of thought: the general unhappiness of the minority populations in the monarchy following 1867. The author succeeds in showing why this was the case for each group, even in the brevity of the few paragraphs allowed for each historico-political entity.

In keeping with the general tone, the book deals with economics in a brief but incisive manner. Chapter Four makes clear that the monarchy was well behind industrial Germany and operating from an essentially agricultural base. More important is the fact that development was retarded for reasons not traditionally considered. After the turn of the century the entirety of the monarchy experienced real and favorable growth despite political decline. This fact is often allowed to fall by the wayside. Of importance too is Mason's insight into Czech and Hungarian industrialization, which out-paced growth in the German lands. Finally, the often neglected Prime Minister Ernest von Koerber's attempt to create a Habsburg supra-national unity based on economic development is given its due.

What is perhaps the single most difficult topic in late Habsburg history, the politics of dualism, receives an accurate but brief treatment in Chapter Five. The book deals only with three delineated periods of the time, the "Liberal Dominance" (1867-79), the Iron Ring (1879-93), and the functional end of parliamentary government (1893-1914). Mason assists the reader at this point by clarifying the three main parties that emerged, the Social Democrats, the Christian Socials, and the Pan-Germans. In a few terse sentences the author sweeps away what he considers the myth of direct intellectual association between Karl Lueger, the Mayor of Vienna and founder of the Christian Socials, and Adolf Hitler. Although the names of Prime Ministers fly by, brief introductions are given for each. The chapter concludes by attempting to deal with the Austro-Hungarian troubles between 1903 and 1914, but only succeeds in pointing out, albeit correctly, the detrimental reaction caused by the Slav minority's hatred of Magyarization.

Vienna, labeled the cultural center of the empire, is pictured as a place of reaction. The sixth chapter provides some insight into the dynamic flow of intellect that the imperial city experienced in spite of, or according to Mason, because of, the relative decline that seemed evident. Perusing this brief chapter, the reader is unfortunately left without any clear picture of what, if any,

overall school of thought existed. The result is a picture of great activity in Vienna, but potential influence on domestic or foreign affairs remains nebulous. Such a connection would have assisted the reader in establishing currents throughout the pre-war period.

The seventh chapter (and the beginning of Part Three: "Foreign Affairs") runs from the defeat at Sadowa in 1866 to the formal establishment of Austria's alliance with Germany in 1879. This chapter, perhaps the best of the summaries, runs through the main events according to the tenure of each foreign minister. A very complicated period of squabbles and intense political maneuvering is made as clear as is possible. For the monarchy the period has two great and shaping events. The first is the forced about-face from German affairs in the 1870s to a policy directed toward the Balkans. The result was an unavoidable future conflict with Russia. Second was the need for an ever increasing dependency on the strength and protection of Germany. By 1906 it was clear that a militarily weak empire, concerned about events in the Balkans, needed German support.

Chapter Eight starts the process of explaining the myriad of potential reasons for the failure of the monarchy to avoid the calamity of the First World War. Mason gives as the all encompassing problem the growth of an independent South Slav movement, and especially the antagonism of Serbia and Russia. This period, titled "the drift to war," reflected the Monarchy's inability or unwillingness to correct those problems, which were generated by nationalism, with any strength. Both foreign ministers of the period between 1906 and 1914, Aehrenthal and Berchtold, failed to find any real solution to defuse the growing dilemma. In the end the collapse of Turkish control, the rise of an aggressive Serbia, and the monarchy's acceptance of war (although her last victory had been against Napoleon in 1814) created a flow of events beyond the manipulation of ministers or emperors.

The most singular issue dealt with is the idea of "war guilt" in relation to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its handling of the South Slavs. Mason dedicates all of Chapter Nine to an attempt to solve this question. The two key factors, and in his opinion failures, were the relations with Serbia and the administration of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Both gained the monarchy nothing except Serbian hatred and Russian distrust, crucial catalysts for the war. Mason also clearly shows that Franz Ferdinand's intention to create a "trialistic state" of Germans, Hungarians, and Slavs would have ended in failure.

The end comes with the final phase of Habsburg his-

tory, the First World War. Chapter Ten correctly asserts that an understanding of the war and the Monarchy's part in it can only be grasped by dispersing any "notions of historical inevitability." Mason's summary of the actual war is brief, and correct in asserting that the defeat of Austro-Hungarian and German forces in 1918 ensured the dismemberment of the empire. The weakness of the military analysis in this chapter, and the book, will be discussed later. Important, however, was the fact that throughout the war there were no large-scale mutinies or desertion by the nationalities and no call for the dissolution of the empire until late in 1917. This was itself partly the result of the monarchy's unwillingness to abandon Germany and seek a separate peace. By late 1918 the centrifugal forces released by the war's unprecedented destruction made the collapse unstoppable.

Mason's conclusion is an assessment of the reasons, beginning in 1866 (or, he asserts, 1871), for the process that ended in dissolution. His mention of Joseph Roth's *Radetzky March* and Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* sets the tone for the following historiographical material. Most interesting is Mason's identification of six political events as being "crucial" in marking "the path to destruction." Although these points are plausible, the author appears to be accepting the theory of inevitability that he struck down in the preceding chapters.

Part Five of the book presents a series of twenty-three documents concerning economics, distribution by nationality, culture, diplomacy, and individual impressions of the monarchy. This is perhaps the single best part of the book and adds real life to the narrative. All of the short documents are relevant and serve the reader well if used as endnotes viewed at the same time as the text.

Because the book is a summary, and therefore short, it must necessarily leave out a great many details. This means that many will find something they consider cru-

cial to be missing. I fall into this category. In spite of this the book is an excellent introduction to the topic of Habsburg decline after 1866, and can easily be read in a few hours. It is ideal for someone not familiar with the topic, and would serve any student of history well before entering what can be an otherwise tortuous area.

This said, there is an important point to make. One of the key institutions in the life of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is almost completely ignored. This is the army (and after the 1870s the navy). It was the single "school of the nation" that existed in the monarchy and tended to create a sense of "Habsburg supra-nationalism" in those who served it. Furthermore, its abysmal failure in 1914 was symptomatic of the endemic paralysis and decay the imperial machine had experienced. Mason fails to make use of (or mention) the seminal study on the topic, Gunther E. Rothenberg's *The Army of Francis Joseph*.^[1] Also missed is Istvan Deak's social history of the army, *Beyond Nationalism*.^[2] One of the reasons the monarchy accepted a series of ineffective policies after 1866 was the fact that the army never recovered from the war. This in itself was a reason for the ever increasing dependency on the military might of Germany. A page or two on this topic would have enhanced the study's overall quality.

I might add in closing that the book's very reasonable price, its length, and the clarity of writing style all go into making it a worthwhile addition as a quick reference or introductory study.

Notes:

[1]. Purdue: Purdue University Press, 1976.

[2]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

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