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Preparing to Save the Habsburg Monarchy: Aehrenthal Before 1906

For more than fifty years Solomon Wank has lived with Count Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal, first as a graduate student, then as professor, and now, at length, as author of the first biography of Aehrenthal based on archival sources.[1] During this long interval Wank whetted the appetite of fellow historians with probing, insightful essays on the count, edited a two-volume collection of his letters, and commented frequently on discussions of Habsburg foreign policy.[2] Now the first volume of the long-awaited biography covering the years to 1906 and Aehrenthal's appointment as foreign minister has appeared, and the question–was it worth the wait?–can be answered with a resounding "Yes."

In the first volume, Wank not only deepens our knowledge of the Bohemian aristocrat with extensive descriptions of his actions before his appointment as foreign minister, but more importantly also explains the why behind his actions. This constitutes a seminal contribution to understanding Habsburg foreign policy and its integral connection to Habsburg domestic policy. Throughout, Wank's clear, almost conversational prose makes for easy reading, pulling the reader forward to see what the ego-driven Aehrenthal proposed next to rescue his beloved monarchy.

In six chapters, Wank describes the future minister's family background, once more disposes of the allegations made at the time that he was Jewish, discusses the formation of his "marmoreal" personality and the ambitions that drove him, and then analyzes his career in the Habsburg diplomatic corps from the late 1870s until his appointment as foreign minister in late 1906. Based on an exhaustive search of archives in Austria and in the Czech Republic, as well as copious family records and secondary works, this book demonstrates a thorough mastery of the relevant sources. That familiarity gives the text an authoritative ring.

Some of Wank's major findings and conclusions deserve special attention early in this review. His account provides a useful reminder of just how small and narrow and parochial the Habsburg ruling elite was. This was an aristocratic circle of perhaps a few hundred persons, most of who knew each other and sometimes very well. In this milieu, Aehrenthal's father, Johann Friedrich, played a key role as a leader of the Constitutionally Loyal Large Landowners party in Bohemia. His father's importance benefited Aehrenthal's early career path, while his own ambitions, his tireless willingness to think creatively (if ultimately unsuccessfully) about the nexus of domestic and international politics, and the assistance of powerful patronage early marked him as a political comer. Indeed, these factors enabled Aehrenthal, while still a relatively young diplomat, to gain access to Emperor Franz Joseph in the 1890s well before he became foreign minister. With this kind of access, the younger Aehrenthal had no hesitation in providing advice to the emperor on domestic politics, a practice at odds with most previous descriptions of the emperor as unwilling to allow officials to comment outside their portfolio.

With an exalted sense of his own views, often inflexible in his opinions and with sharp elbows to push others out of his way, Aehrenthal repeatedly intruded into domestic political issues (chiefly those involving Bohemia) whether he was stationed in Vienna or away on a diplomatic posting. As Wank repeatedly stresses, Aehrenthal recognized no division between domestic and foreign policy–in the case of Austria-Hungary, it was all one seamless canvas. Aided by family status and family wealth (though as second son he was not at first wealthy), Aehrenthal also benefited from the powerful patronage of long-time Foreign Minister Count Gustav Kálnoky (1881-95).[3] Like his patron and mentor, Aehrenthal became convinced that only a vigorous for-

eign policy could rescue the monarchy, but also recognized that the nationality question rendered this difficult. The tension between the desire to use foreign policy to preserve the monarchy and the complicated realities of nationality politics shaped Aehrenthal's approach to all politics, while almost, in Wank's opinion, ensuring long-term failure.

The author draws a warm, careful portrait of the future minister in his opening chapters. Aehrenthal deeply loved his family estates, which totaled more than thirteen thousand acres. His relations with his mother and father remained close, with frequent letters between them until the time of his marriage in 1902 to Countess Paula Széchényi when she took over much of the exchanges with his mother, Maria. A chapter on the development of Aehrenthal's personality, which could have easily descended into psychiatric jargon, proves surprisingly useful as Wank explores the facets of a "dependent/independent" personality that craved reassurances and praise, though his carefully studied appearances gave the impression of imperturbable self-confidence.[4] Wank explores the issue of Aehrenthal's successive filial relationships, including those with his parents, Kálnoky, and ultimately, Franz Joseph on the one hand, and with his devoted retinue of subordinates on the other. With men who were more closely his peers, including the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Count Agenor Goluchowski, and General Conrad von Hötzendorf, he had more troubled relationships.

In need of constant reassurance, Aehrenthal came to see his task to rescue the faltering empire as a "holy mission." He went about it, so the author insists, with an almost religious passion. "The ego-fusing function of the idea of preserving the Habsburg Monarchy rooted in his intense dependency explains the near-obsessive commitment to it that distinguishes Aehrenthal from all of the other Habsburg foreign ministers in the era of dualism" (p. 69). For instance, his predecessor, Goluchowski, and his successor, Count Leopold Berchtold, as foreign ministers often avoided direct involvement in domestic nationality issues, though Berchtold did in early 1914 seek to ease tensions between the monarchy and Romania over the question of Magyar policies in Transylvania. By contrast, Aehrenthal, more confident, not to say arrogant, never shied from the tumult of nationality politics, at least not before the consequences of his 1908 actions in annexing Bosnia and Herzegovina played out.

From his teenage years the future minister immersed himself in the details of the domestic issues surrounding the status of Bohemia in the monarchy. Like his father, Aehrenthal preferred a strong, centralized government in which the German-Austrians and the Magyars played the dominant roles, with the socioeconomic status of the aristocracy both recognized and preserved, and with a touch of absolutism if at all possible. Deeply committed to the monarchical principle as an Imperial Habsburg Patriot, he remained optimistic that the nationality issue could be resolved. Yet, as Wank correctly notes, his "view of the nationalities conflict prevented him from appreciating the force and impact of nationalism as the ideological dimension of the processes of social change associated with the growth of modern capitalism. At best, nationalism was, for Aehrenthal, primarily a cultural idea; at worst, which is the way he often thought of it, nationalism was a form of mass hysteria, 'a serious symptom of degeneration that attracts ever widening circles among the lower social orders"' (p. 89).

The subtext of Aehrenthal's entire career was nationalism but the main text of much of his career centered on Russia. First assigned as an unpaid attaché in St. Petersburg in 1878, he returned again in 1888 as the first secretary of the embassy, and then in 1899 as ambassador. He also served as minister to Romania for three years, from 1895 to 1898. While he spent extensive time in Vienna working for Foreign Minister Kálnoky, the years in Russia prepared him for what Kálnoky had decreed were the two central issues of Habsburg diplomacy: relations with Russia and Habsburg influence in the Balkans. Fluent in Russian and willing to travel in western Russia, Aehrenthal developed plan after plan to bring relations between the two powers into a measure of permanent stability. He pressed for actions leading to détente and reconciliation, for a frank division of the Balkans between the two powers, for efforts to exploit Russian involvement in the Far East, and even for the revival of the Three Emperors' League. Aehrenthal repeatedly pressed Goluchowski, Kálnoky's successor as foreign minister, with his conceptions about how to structure Habsburg relations with Russia at a time when the minister much preferred a passive approach to St. Petersburg, an approach that above all would not perturb the Germans whose good will he considered the sine qua non of Habsburg policy.

Wank chronicles the continual jousting between Goluchowski and Aehrenthal over Russia. That the foreign minister could and did tolerate his subordinate's importuning, often bordering on the insubordinate, says much about the esteem with which Aehrenthal was held, not least by the emperor himself. For his part, the future minister did not mind showing a degree of independence from Berlin, so much so that some German Foreign Of-

fice officials were less than happy at the prospect of his possible elevation to the ministry.

But if Goluchowski tolerated Aehrenthal's remonstrances in foreign policy, he also did not block his active efforts to intrude into the domestic arena. Disdainful of Austrian Minister President Count Eduard Taaffe and hostile to his successor, Count Kasimir Badeni, Aehrenthal in the late 1890s became entangled in the language issue in Bohemia. At one point he worked so hard to oust Count Franz Thun und Hohenstein as Austrian minister president that there was talk of Aehrenthal himself as a future Austrian leader. Wank, who tracks these political maneuverings with great deftness, puts it all into context: "From the beginning, however, his efforts to resolve the Czech-German conflict were beset with the basic contradiction found in all of his thinking about the nationalities problem in Austria-Hungary. On the one hand, he argued that satisfying Slavic national aspirations within the Habsburg Monarchy was crucial to its survival. On the other hand, the preservation of the Habsburg Monarchy as a great power, which was equally crucial to the monarchy's survival, required the predominance of the Germans and Magyars in Austria and Hungary respectively, along with the continuation of the existing centralized political structures of the two states, which bolstered their predominance" (pp. 231-232). From this conundrum there would be no escape.

As his diplomatic career progressed, Aehrenthal worked hard to study the full context of Habsburg foreign policy. Not especially fond of Berlin, he recognized Germany's key place nonetheless. And while he disliked all parliamentary systems and always preferred a measure of absolutism, he had some sympathy for France though less for Britain and Italy. Curiously, in his analysis Wank makes no mention of what the future minister thought about Serbia. Nor does he mention the 1903 coup in Belgrade that substantially changed the dynamics of Austro-Serbian and Russo-Serbian relations; perhaps these will be covered in the second volume but some notice in this volume would have been useful. Within the monarchy itself, Aehrenthal fully appreciated the key role of the Hungarians; after all he was married to the daughter of a prominent Magyar. Still, he deplored the behavior of the Magyar politicians in 1903 and later as they sought to extort, in his opinion, concessions from Franz Joseph about the army.

While this volume ends abruptly, as if the next chapter were there to be read, Wank does put his assessment of Aehrenthal's conception of his "holy mission" in blunt sentences: "The solution to Austria-Hungary's problems ultimately lay, according to Aehrenthal, not in concessions to the nationalities, but, as we have seen, in a resolute foreign policy aimed at attaining Austria-Hungary's supremacy in the western half of the Balkan peninsula" (p. 247). In an age of overseas imperialism, Aehrenthal was determined that the monarchy would not lose its imperial gains resulting from the progressive collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In that sense, a successful defense of Habsburg imperialism in the Balkans, perhaps with a few additional gains, would restore the monarchy's fortunes in European politics and ease the nationality problem. His actions in the annexation crisis of 1908-1909 were a part of that policy; those of Berchtold in 1914 were its ultimate, fatal culmination.

This volume sets the stage for the Aehrenthal years as foreign minister. Already one can see his relentless intelligence, his careful but persistent ambition, his political skills and his political connections, and his abiding sense of his own rectitude. It is clear that he wanted to rescue the monarchy from itself with a dramatic foreign policy, that he was willing to confront Berlin in the process as he made a deal with Russia, and that he was supremely confident that he could resolve the nationality issue. As we shall see in the next volume, these hopes would be frustrated and he would be left with even greater tensions in the relationship with Russia and with the festering problem of Serbia in the Balkans, while having annoyed Berlin in the process. The prelude and first and second acts have been set; we can now look forward to Wank's completion of his life's work with the third act and finale of the Aehrenthal saga.

Notes

[1]. The only other biography of Aehrenthal appeared in 1917, written by Berthold Molden, *Alois Graf Aehrenthal: Sechs Jahre äussere Politik Oesterreich-Ungarns* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1917).

[2]. Soloman Wank, Christine M. Grafinger, and Franz Adlgasser, eds., *Aus dem Nachlass Aehrenthal: Briefe und Dokumente zur österreichischen-ungarischen Innen- und Aussenpolitik 1885-1912*, 2 pts. (Graz: Böhlau, 1994).

[3]. For one account of Kálnoky's tenure as foreign minister, see F. R. Bridge, *The Habsburg Monarchy among the Great Powers, 1815-1918* (New York: Berg, 1990), chap. 5.

[4]. As part of his research, Wank had Dr. Theodor Barry, a psychiatrist, review the Aehrenthal letters, an approach that appears to have been very useful.

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