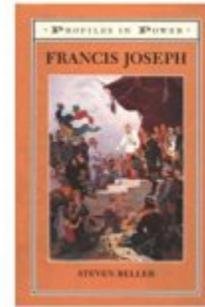


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Steven Beller. *Francis Joseph*. London and New York: Longman, 1996. viii + 272 pp. \$34.20 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-06089-0; \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-06090-6.

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## The Emperor's Errors

One visit to an Austrian bookstore is enough to convince anyone that there is no lack of popular treatments of even the most obscure members of the Habsburg family. Though books on Empress Elisabeth (including such classics as *Sissi: Die geheimen Schoenheitsrezepte der Kaiserin und des Hofes*) far outnumber those on other members of the imperial family, there are plenty to choose from when one is feeling the urge to read more about *Grosse Herrscher des Hauses Habsburg*, *Habsburgs verkaufte Tochter*, *Liebesgeschichten und Heiratssachen im Hause Habsburg*, or *Scandal beim Hof*.

It is more difficult, however, to find scholarly treatments of Habsburg rulers, let alone serious treatments of members of the dynasty that could be assigned to undergraduate lecture classes.[1] And yet, perhaps more than any other European state, the Habsburg Monarchy was a creation of its dynasty. Emperor Franz Joseph, though far from an autocrat after the debacle of 1859, maintained considerable control over foreign policy and the military, and great influence on domestic politics, for sixty-eight years. The same Franz Joseph who rose regularly at 4 a.m. to work for the good of his peoples authorized the brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1849, and put his signature on the declaration of war in 1914, a war that cost millions their lives and erased the centuries-old Habsburg dynastic state from the European map. It is, therefore, almost mysterious that recent scholarship on the last decades of the monarchy has all but ignored the institution of the dynasty and the figure of the emperor.[2]

Steven Beller seeks to redress this oversight in his *Francis Joseph*, returning the emperor to the center of the history of the monarchy. Beller's goal is not to find the "real Franz Joseph." For a scholarly biography of Franz Joseph one is better advised to look elsewhere.[3] Beller delivers instead an extended essay on late Habsburg political history and the role of Franz Joseph in shaping the monarchy, seemingly aimed at the student textbook market. The book includes a concise chronology of Franz Joseph's reign, several useful maps, and a summary of secondary literature, more a list of books and articles in English and German on Habsburg topics than a bibliographical essay.

Beller opens his book with a thoughtful and succinct overview of Habsburg historiography on the "inevitability" debate. This debate, certainly familiar to readers of HABSBURG, focuses on the viability of the monarchy. For Beller, any evaluation of the survivability of the monarchy must begin with the role of the emperor himself:

"All the great decisions of the Monarchy were ostensibly taken or not taken by one man, Francis Joseph, whether it be the attempt at absolutism in 1851, the turn to liberalism in 1867, the refusal to intervene against Magyarisation in Hungary, the occupation and later annexation of Bosnia, and most notoriously the decision to go to war in 1914. He was the "first bureaucrat" to whom the vast Habsburg officialdom reported, he was the man who reigned over a Monarchy which was either doing nicely, or heading to its doom, depending on one's histo-

riographical allegiance” (p.9).

In his book, Beller tries to come to terms with three key questions: what power did the emperor actually have, what did he do with that power, and what were the effects of his use of power on his successors (p. 13). Beller’s answers to these questions reveal him as a missionary, out to remove the last shred of respect and sympathy for the old emperor. Beller powerfully argues that the decisions Franz Joseph made stifled the development of a working political system, increased national tensions, and laid the groundwork for the national-exclusivist, authoritarian, bureaucratic, and eventually pro-fascistic politics that followed the dissolution of the Habsburg State. For Beller, Franz Joseph’s monarchy was no idyllic paradise of multi-national peace before the barbarians destroyed Eden and began their campaigns of ethnic cleansing unencumbered by the power of the benevolent ruler. He claims instead that the disastrous role played by the emperor helped set the stage for the darkness that followed.

Beller’s Franz Joseph, a born absolutist dedicated to the preservation of his great dynasty, never ceased to consider the state a vehicle for the glory of the dynasty, to view the monarchy as a *Hausmacht*. The emperor was not averse to dismantling old forms of legitimacy: quite rightly Beller describes neo-absolutism as a radical break with the past. Beller argues that the emperor was concerned more with preserving dynastic control over the two aspects of governance on which his dynasty’s claims to glory and prestige rested—the army and foreign policy—than in pursuing domestic reforms to ameliorate the growing political and social problems. Moreover, in Beller’s view Franz Joseph’s preoccupation with military and diplomatic affairs leaves him open to criticism regarding the backwardness of the Habsburg military and the Habsburgs’ many failures in the arena of diplomacy. For example, Beller writes that the isolation resulting from incompetent Habsburg diplomacy during the Crimean War left the monarchy without needed allies in 1859. Insufficient modernization of the armed forces and the continuance of foreign policy based on dynastic rather than state interest resulted in the defeat of 1866.

According to Beller, the *Ausgleich* was one of Franz Joseph’s gravest errors and had fateful consequences for the future of the monarchy. Facing military and financial collapse in 1859, Franz Joseph acknowledged the need to change the constitutional structure of his state, entered into a series of experiments, and finally opted for a Dualist agreement between the crown and the Hungarian no-

bility, creating Austria-Hungary. Beller does not praise Franz Joseph for his flexibility and willingness to curb his own power, though this seeming flexibility is rather astounding for a dedicated absolutist and scion of a family claiming descent not only from Carolingian and Roman emperors, but from the House of David itself.[4] Rather Beller attributes the emperor’s willingness to accept the introduction of parliamentary rule to the fact that dualism allowed dynastic control over the military and foreign policy to continue. Beller also suggests that for this reason the emperor tolerated the domination of the Hungarian nobility over the non-Hungarian masses in the Hungarian half of the monarchy and sanctioned the very undemocratic election-calculus that provided for a German majority in the Cisleithanian Reichsrat.

Beller shows that Franz Joseph’s decisions repeatedly undermined his goals of enhancing the dynasty’s prestige. The emperor’s refusal to award more real power to elected representatives created an atmosphere in which all privileges were to be gained through negotiations with the crown rather than among various interest groups. Politicians did not have to face the reality of ministerial responsibility, and therefore presented maximum demands. With no long-term solutions reached, nationalist tensions increased until the explosion of the Badeni language crisis. Nationalist politicians used the negotiations necessary every ten years to renew the Compromise to demand concessions in other areas, and refused to provide the army with the funds necessary to support the Great Power pretensions inherent in Franz Joseph’s foreign policy.

Beller’s evaluation of Austria-Hungary’s Balkan adventures follows the same pattern. Locked out of Italy and Germany, largely due to foreign policy mistakes for which the emperor bears the ultimate responsibility, the dynasty could defend its prestige only by extending its influence in the Balkans. The very moves Franz Joseph made to preserve the honor of his dynasty, culminating in the declaration of war in 1914, undermined the effectiveness of the army and led to total dependence on the Germans during the war. Even had Austria-Hungary emerged from the war victorious, the once proud dynastic state would have emerged as a satellite of the German Empire.

In conclusion, for Beller

“..the real tragedy lies with the countless thousands and millions who have been the victims this century of the failure of the Habsburg Monarchy and its monarchical embodiment [Franz Joseph] to use the power at its

disposal not only to ensure by transformation the continuance of itself, but to provide that "homeland" where all could flourish together in peace and security. That the Monarchy never became that homeland, and that Francis Joseph was never the man to bring it about, is one of the harshest truths of modern Central European history, but it is true none the less" (p.230).

The book is relentlessly argued and Beller's thesis is clear and thought-provoking: by insisting on dynastic control over foreign policy and the army, Franz Joseph undermined his own goal of enhancing the prestige of the House of Habsburg and prevented the consolidation of the monarchy based on national justice and democracy. Though this thesis is attractive, the book does have some serious drawbacks.

The book is based almost exclusively on English- and German-language secondary works, and even here Beller makes little use of scholarship on the monarchy's nationality problems. Despite the centrality of national tensions in Beller's essay, he does not attempt to describe the nature of the various nationality conflicts. He does not consider the social tensions that contributed to ethnic strife—the challenge of socialist forces plays no role in his narrative outside the struggle for election reform. Beller too easily dismisses the agreements between national groups in Moravia in 1905, the Bukovina in 1910, and in Galicia in 1914 as "ad hoc solutions to local nationality conflicts following no set pattern" (p. 177). But their local nature reflected the willingness and ability of at least some important groups to negotiate with one another and to lay aside some of the bitterness of national conflict.

As Beller himself writes in his short overview of historiography on the monarchy, Joseph Redlich, Oskar Jaszi, A.J.P Taylor, and Robert Kann made many of the same points in their earlier works.[5] Beller points out that Alan Sked, whose 1989 *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire*[6] is in many ways the antithesis of Beller's essay, asserted that Franz Joseph agreed to go to war against Serbia out of the logic of dynastic honor rather than for real state interests. It seems likely that those who, like Sked, emphasize the forces supporting the stability of the monarchy would agree with much of Beller's indictment of Franz Joseph, and yet few would reach his negative conclusions about the viability of the monarchy.

A "Profile in Power" might also be expected to consider the power of the image of the emperor to contribute to the coherence of the state. Had Beller considered

this aspect of Franz Joseph more seriously, his argument would have been strengthened. Imperial ritual and ceremony enhanced the sacrality of the emperor in the eyes of his subjects. The multiplication of brochures, articles, and books commemorating the emperor's fiftieth and sixtieth jubilees and praising him as the emperor of peace confirms that leading politicians and industrialists understood the value of using and enhancing the popularity of the emperor. However, in an age of democratization and politicization of society, the supporters of the dynastic system did not seek sources of legitimacy in the glorious dynastic past alone. They based their arguments for the state and the dynasty on very real concrete achievements, including the preservation of peace. With continued dynastic legitimacy at least partially dependent on the preservation of peace, a long and devastating war for dynastic prestige was sure to undermine faith in the state system.

Certainly, Beller succeeds in clearly presenting the position of the emperor under Dualism, and brings the figure of the monarch to the center of Habsburg political developments. Instead of focusing on Franz Joseph's relations with Katharina Schratt, Beller reminds us that any evaluation of his role must be based on what Franz Joseph actually did (or failed to do) rather than on the aspects of his character and his personal family tragedies that continue to provide writers of scandal or nostalgia-laced treatments of the Habsburg dynasty with ample material.

Yet, although Beller's narrative is witty and gripping, no small achievement for writers of history, the book may not be suitable for most undergraduate reading lists. Too many facts are ignored and Beller introduces the Polish Club, the Old and Young Czechs, Lueger's Christian Socials, Pan Slavism, and many other key terms without offering satisfactory definitions. It is simply not enough to write that the Young Czechs were more radical than the Old, or that the Christian Socials were composed of a "ragbag of clerical, radical, and anti-Semitic elements" without offering at least a few sentences about the social-political forces behind these and other movements. Furthermore, by presenting a book-length overview of Habsburg political history through the prism of his criticism of the emperor, Beller reduces the entire political history (and all the political failures) of the monarchy to the person of Franz Joseph. By doing so, Beller's largely justified criticism of the emperor seems at times exaggerated and repetitive.

In the end, Beller's *Francis Joseph* could serve as a tool to stimulate discussion in Habsburg and Central Euro-

pean History courses, perhaps in conjunction with Alan Sked's book, but might not be an effective central text to assign to undergraduate students in place of other available materials.

## NOTES

[1]. A welcome exception is T.C.W. Blanning's *Joseph II* (London: Longman Publishing Group, 1994), also in the Profiles in Power series.

[2]. For discussions of the image of the emperor, see among others: Martin Hecher, *Hans Makart und der Wiener Festzug von 1879* (unpublished dissertation, University of Vienna, 1986); James Shedel, "Emperor, Church, and People: Religion and Dynastic Loyalty during the Golden Jubilee of Franz Joseph," *Catholic Historical Review*, (January 1990); Elisabeth Grossegger, *Der Kaiser-Huldigungs-Festzug Wien 1908* (Wien: Verlag der Oesterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992); Peter Hanak, "Die Parallelaktion von 1898. Fuenfzig Jahre ungarische Revolution und fuenfzig Jahre Regierungsjubilaem Franz Josephs," in *Der Garten und die Werkstatt. Ein kulturgeschichtlicher Vergleich Wien und Budapest um 1900* (Wien: Boehlau Verlag, 1992); Laurence Cole, "Vom Glanz der Montur: Zum dynastischen Kult der Habsburger und seiner Vermittlung durch militaerische Vorbilder im 19. Jahrhundert. Ein Bericht ueber "work in progress," in *Oesterreichische Zeitschrift fuer Geschichtswissenschaften*, Heft 4, (Wien, 1996); Andrea Bloechl, "Die Kaisergedenktaege. Die Feste und Feiern zu den Regierungsjubilaen und runden Geburtstagen Kaiser Franz Josephs, in Emil Brix and Hannes Stekl, eds., *Der Kampf um das Gedaechtnis. Oeffentliche Gedenktaege in Mitteleuropa 1848-1885* (Boehlau: Wien, 1997) For interesting discussions of the image of the emperor in Galicia, see Zbigniew Fras, "Mit dobrego Cesarza," *Polskie mity polityczne XIX i XX Wieku* (Wroclaw,

1988), Fras, "Podroze cesarza Franciszka Jozefa I do Galicji," in Marek Czaplinski, ed., *Z dziejow Galicji, Slaska, Polski i Niemiec* (Wroclaw, 1994), and Krzysztof Karol Daszyk, "Miedzypolska racja stanu a habsburskim mitem," in Wlodzimierz Bonusiak and Jozef Buszko, eds. *Galicja i jej dziedzictwo, Tom 1: Historia i polityka* (Rzeszow: Wydawnictwo wyzszej szkoly pedagogicznej, 1994). For a sweeping overview of Habsburg self-representation, see Andrew Wheatcroft's *The Habsburgs: Embodying Empire* (London: Viking, 1995).

[3]. Jean-Paul Bled, *Franz Joseph*, trans. T. Bridgeman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); Alan Palmer, *Twilight of the Habsburgs: The Life and Times of Emperor Francis Joseph* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994). See also E. Conte Corti's 1950s three-volume biography of Franz Joseph and Joseph Redlich, *Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

[4]. See Marie Tanner, *The Last Descendant of Aeneas. The Hapsburgs and the Mythic Image of the Emperor* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1993).

[5]. Joseph Redlich, *Emperor Francis Joseph*; O. Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Chicago, 1929); A.J.P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918* (London: Penguin, 1948); Robert A. Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire, 1526-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

[6]. Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire* (London: Longman Publishing Group, 1989).

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