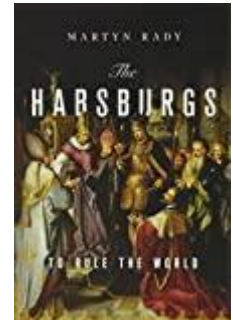


Martyn C. Rady. *The Habsburgs: To Rule the World*. New York: Basic Books, Hachette Book Group, 2020. xvii + 397 pp. Ill. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5416-4450-2.



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A New History of the Habsburgs

In twenty-nine short (around ten pages each), focused, and readable chapters plus a brief introduction and conclusion, Martin Rady offers a new history of the Habsburg dynasty. This volume is not intended to be a general overview of Habsburg history.[1] Nor does the book seek to illuminate the lives and experiences of those who inhabited the varying collections of provinces, territories, principalities, and kingdoms that constituted the Habsburgs' inheritance from the dynasty's origins in today's Switzerland to its demise as a ruling family in 1918. Instead, Rady, Masaryk Professor of Central European History at the University College of London, writes that "it is the purpose of this book to explain their empire, their imagination as well as the ways in which they were imagined, and their purposes, projects, and failures" (p. 9).

There are many things to like about this book. In contrast to so many works on the Habsburgs,

the text is not skewed heavily toward the last decades of Habsburg rule. Before reaching the last era of Habsburg rule, from the Enlightenment to World War I, Rady devotes numerous chapters to the tenth-to-thirteenth-century Swiss Habsburgs, to Maximilian's successful marriage policies leading to astounding dynastic territorial gains (fortuitous in large part due to the relative longevity of the Habsburg partners), to Charles V and the Habsburg World Empire, to Rudolf II and alchemy in Prague, and to Habsburg confrontations with the Protestant Reformation and the Ottoman Empire.

Most welcome are the chapters and passages that put the Habsburgs and their interests into a truly global context. Rady considers the acquisition of and cultural, political, and economic engagement with its world-spanning Spanish inheritance as well as Habsburg participation in eastern Mediterranean shipping, including the slave

trade, various Habsburg scientific expeditions (and the collections resulting from them), and the very short-lived Habsburg colonial outpost at Tianjin. Rady's discussion of the Thirty Years' War (1618-48) does not overlook the defenestration of Prague or military conflict in Europe, but also views the war as a global struggle fought out in Congo, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the Caribbean.

Along the way, readers will learn about Rudolf II's beliefs in the occult and his depression. Franciscan clergyman Peter Ghent, Maximilian's out-of-wedlock offspring and the first member of the family to visit the Spanish lands in the Western Hemisphere, makes a brief appearance. The volume highlights more than a century of inbreeding between the Spanish and Austrian branches that resulted in the demise of the dynasty's Spanish Habsburgs. The chapters also include passages on the sex lives of several Habsburgs, vampires, a turban-wearing and chess-playing automaton performing at Maria Theresa's court (turned out to be a hoax), as well as Sissi's exercise regimen. Rady devotes welcome attention to the political influence of three Habsburg women who governed the Low Countries in the sixteenth century. Rady also writes about Maria Theresa as ruler and Elizabeth's contributions to Franz Joseph's relations with Hungary.

Despite the many positive aspects of the book, some readers will likely set down this volume with a feeling that opportunities had been missed. The promising introduction sets out an ambitious agenda. In these first pages, Rady analyzes the Prunksaal, the magnificent Baroque library hall in the Hofburg Palace in Vienna. As Rady masterfully describes, the hall's globes, frescoes, statues, and Emperor Frederick II's mysterious "AEIOU" proclaim the Habsburg dynasty the world's greatest ruling family.[2] They are the heirs to the imperial dream of Rome, champions of the Catholic Church, and Promethean disseminators of knowledge and art in central Europe and beyond. The complex

Habsburg sense of mission evolved, as Rady shows, especially in the first half of the book, over the course of centuries. Yet, Rady offers little analysis of Maria Theresa and Joseph II's visions of their roles as monarchs and administrators and how radically these departed from their predecessors' Spanish and Catholic-inspired vision of world empire and global religious mission. The detailed political and military overview of revolution in 1848-49 and some sections on culture and art, while insightful, are not clearly linked to the themes laid out in the introduction.

The book does not offer a sustained examination of Habsburg dynastic ruling practice and self-understanding. Still, Rady has produced a witty and fascinating volume that treats the dynasty from its obscure tenth-century origins to the 2011 death of Otto, the son and uncrowned heir of the last Habsburg emperor-king. In fast-paced, never boring, bite-sized chapters Rady distills vast and ever-growing intersecting historiographies authored in numerous languages. This is in and of itself an impressive achievement.

As Rady demonstrates, "the Habsburg idea embraced universality" and continued to stand "above nationalism" unlike their dynastic rivals. Considering the traumatic histories of the central and eastern European "nation-states" that arose from the ruins of the Habsburg Monarchy, it is hard to argue against the author's conclusion that "a Habsburg would have done no worse" (p. 329).

Notes

[1]. Among recent overviews of Habsburg history: Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); and Steven Beller, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1815-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[2]. One among many interpretations of AEIOU is *Alles Erdreich ist Österreich untertan*—all the world is subject to Austria.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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