

**Robin Okey.** *The Habsburg Monarchy from Enlightenment to Eclipse.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. x + 456 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-23375-4.



**Reviewed by** Solomon Wank

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The Habsburg Monarchy: "Failure With Extenuating Circumstances"

Until the early 1980s, narrative accounts of the last century of the Habsburg monarchy's existence emphasized its dynastic character, intensifying nationalities conflicts, political paralysis, decline and disintegration. To be sure, many of these works took note of developments in the social, economic and cultural spheres, but these were eclipsed by the overarching theme of explaining the monarchy's dissolution. In the ensuing twenty-years, a number of "revisionist" monographic studies have questioned the interpretive framework of the older works. The newer works present a more positive picture of the monarchy, especially the last decades before 1914. Rather than emphasizing factors leading to the monarchy's dissolution, the newer literature "seek[s] to right the record" by showing "the ability of the governmental system in the late nineteenth century to change and accommodate popular forces."<sup>[1]</sup> The historiographical situation seemed to Robin Okey, a Senior Lecturer in history at the University of Warwick and author of a previously

published survey of Eastern European history, [2] to call for "a survey of the Monarchy from the late eighteenth century that takes account of advances in Habsburg studies" (p. vi). Okey's book is his response to that call.

The book's thirteen chapters are divided into two parts: "Dynastic Empire, 1765 [really 1740]-1867," and "Constitutional Monarchy, 1867-1918." The latter is given more space than the former to leave room for an extensive analysis of the monarchy's complex denouement. The first part of the book is narrative and chronological, the second half is more thematic with separate chapters on liberalism, economics, society and social movements, and nationalism. The emphasis throughout is on social, economic and domestic political developments, which befits a book "premised on the primacy of domestic rather than foreign policy" (p. 378). Military and diplomatic affairs are treated summarily on the assumption that they already figure prominently in many existing surveys. Okey apologizes in the Foreword for the limited attention paid to cultural and intel-

lectual topics, a sacrifice to the extended treatment of domestic themes.

Magyars and Czechs are more fully treated than are the other non-German peoples, but the author attempts to keep the other nationalities in view as much as possible. Hungary merits a separate chapter, but not Bohemia which Okey nevertheless treats as part of a "trinity" along with Austria and Hungary. The book is based not only on many English and German monographs, but also on wide reading in Magyar and all of the Slavic languages spoken in the monarchy. Footnotes are sparingly used throughout for quotations, many of the latter from non-Western language sources such as the diary of Croatian Count Adam Orsics, or unusual details such as peasant soldiers on the Croatian-Slavonian Military Frontier in the eighteenth century "had a diet of coagulated milk, barley cakes and 'succulent herbs'" (p. 22). Okey's analysis also offers many illuminating comparisons and parallels, e.g. the Czech-German conflict in Bohemia with the Anglophone-Quebecois one in Canada. He concludes many chapters with historiographical reflections and arguments with other historians that offer material for scholarly discussions.

The outline of Okey's story is not new. The nationality problem which "retained throughout its determining place in the empire's evolution" (378) is also central to his interpretation. Indeed, he asserts that the Habsburg monarchy resorted to war in 1859, 1866 and 1914 in the context of mobilizing national aspirations which it was unable to turn to its advantage. Okey's contribution is telling the story of the mounting nationality crisis, from its beginning in the pre-March period to the monarchy's collapse, with a level of complexity and detail not usually found in surveys. One of the major themes of the book is that the Habsburg monarchy was "no exotic anomaly"; it experienced "the same [modernizing] processes as most other European lands in the same period" (p. vi). Okey considers Ernest Gellner's theories on the

rise of nationalism useful but criticizes Gellner's "functionalist" thesis for essentially reducing nationalism to an epiphenomenon of industrialization in the second half of the nineteenth century. [3] Okey maintains that Slav linguistic ideologies "were formulated in the Enlightenment and romantic periods before significant industrialization had taken place" (284). He charts the gradual but steady rise of linguistic and national identities throughout the nineteenth century, with the Czechs as a prime example of a *Volkskultur* which developed into an independent "high culture" (p. 284). He maintains that "it is best to see Habsburg nationalisms as a compound product, successively assimilating new elements as 'modernity' itself evolved" (p. 285).

The particular potency of nationalism in the nineteenth century, according to the author, derived from its interaction with the process of social mobilization. In that regard, Okey devotes as much attention to how ordinary people appropriated nationalism and how it influenced their lives and behavior as he does to elites' formulation of nationalist ideologies. He maintains that the bulk of the Habsburg monarchy's subjects were peasants or petty bourgeoisie who did not ponder portentous questions. "The task of the historian" he writes, "is to follow them and recreate the framework in which they lived their lives" (p. vii). If they became drawn to nationalism it was not primarily for ideological reasons. Nationalism on that level was remote from popular concerns which were social and economic. Linguistic nationalism appealed to the "masses" among the non-dominant peoples as an organizational principle which allowed them to express their concerns in their own languages, thereby doing away with a "ceiling on their mobility" (p. 398). Thus "the social and national questions became fused along the lines of a [...] split between dominant and non-dominant ethnic groups" (p. 398). Over time "the dominant non-dominant relationship took on a peculiar and increasingly poisoned form" (p. 398). "Without awareness of the bitter-

ness and continuing sense of ethnic subordination and injustice which infected the monarchy's political life, the slogan 'The prison of peoples' is hard to understand" (p. 366), however much it now strikes historians as undeserved. Okey's interpretation of nationalism is certainly more subtle and nuance than that found in earlier surveys, but his analysis would have benefited from more precise definitions of "ethnic," "nationality" and "nation".

Okey states several times that, despite the deep resentment of their subaltern status in the "prison of peoples," the non-German nationalities accepted the state and "were more concerned with competition within the empire than with secession from it" (p. 369). Their struggle "was to control the state rather than leave it" (p. 355). Thomas G. Masaryk's "famous advocacy of 'small deeds' in place of windy nationalist megalomania" (p. 340) is offered as an example of the non-German nationalities' pursuit of their goals within the existing structure. Other of Okey's statements, however, cast doubt on the nationalities' commitment to the empire as such. They suggest a resigned acceptance in the face of existing political and diplomatic realities. Commenting on the loyalty of the larger Czech parties after the outbreak of the war, Okey writes that "their Austrophilism [...] was tactical, based on the assumption that there was no alternative to the Monarchy, except a Pan Germanism which would be worse" (p. 380). This pragmatic stance was true of most of the major non-German political parties until the fortunes of war turned against the Central Powers. Masaryk, himself, "had given up on Monarchy from 1907" (p. 355).

At the end of the book, Okey concludes that it is "hard to see that the modernization of the Habsburg Monarchy begun by the Enlightenment could have ended without the dissolution of this multinational community" (pp. 400-1). At the same time, he somewhat inconsistently maintains that the Habsburgs and their advisers had any number of opportunities along the way to avert

that fate, all of which they missed. The most hopeful ones occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century. Emperor Joseph II set the Habsburg polity's agenda for the future with a legacy of a non-nationalist German language oriented central administration joined by a program of social reform, religious and ethnic tolerance and bureaucratic state service. Metternich squandered that legacy by breaking the Josephinian nexus between centralism and social reform and "his [Metternich's] failure to use the favourable outcome of the Napoleonic wars to shape strategic decisions for an empire which was still pliable and loyal" (p. 76). The Kremsier Constitution of 1849 which combined competing ideas of historical-political territorial units and ethnic-linguistic ones was, despite its limitations, "the most wide-ranging agreement reached between Germans and Slavs in the Habsburg Monarchy" (p. 155). The "folly" of the "state coup" against the Kremsier parliament and its constitution by the counter-revolutionary government of Prince Felix zu Schwarzenberg "can hardly be overstated" (p. 156).

The political situation for reform became less auspicious after the Compromise of 1867, but there were still opportunities that were missed. The Hohenwart-Schaeffle "Fundamental Articles" of 1871, satisfying Czech demands for autonomy in Bohemia, was "the most ambitious attempt between 1867-1918 to respond to the non-dominant peoples' dissatisfaction with the Dualist system" (p. 223). The plan failed when the emperor, "not for the first time abandoned a government whose bold policies encountered resistance" (p. 307). The Czech-German compromise of 1890 and the Badeni language ordinances of 1895 suffered the same fate. The Badeni decrees, which made Czech and German equal languages of administration in Bohemia and Moravia, represented "the biggest initiative in internal Austrian politics since the Hohenwart government of 1870-71" (p. 305). All of these reform initiatives were opposed by the Magyars or German Austrians or the monarchy's German ally, sometimes by all three. Okey implies

that Emperor Franz Joseph should have stuck to his guns despite that resistance. According to Okey, he did not do so because of his "lack of imagination" (p. 367) and his feeling unable "to challenge the rigidities of Dualism" (p. 368). Both might have been true, but a more likely, and more important, reason was that the support of all three was necessary to maintain the monarchy's status as a Great Power. Franz Joseph showed no reluctance to defend that status by facing down the Hungarian government in 1905, when it appeared that its nationalist demands threatened the unity of the *k.u.k.* army.

There were some positive political signs in the years before 1914. National compromises were reached in Moravia (1905), Bukovina (1910) and Galicia (1914). All of these attempts however, were deficient. The Moravian and Galician compromises incorporated inequalities favoring dominant nations, and Okey points out that the Moravian and Bukovinian compromises were the product of non-replicable conditions unique to those provinces and that all three compromises "highlighted national differences rather than softening them" (p. 355). In the end these positive signs "do not outweigh more negative ones in Bohemia, Hungary, and the South Slav lands in the decade before the war" (p. 368).

In the beginning of his book Okey poses the broad question of "whether its [the Habsburg Monarchy's] conservative-liberal accommodation was inextricably rooted in its hierarchical past, or whether it contained the seeds of further evolution into the democratic age" (p. vii). His answer is that it did not. "The unique fusion of authoritarian Josephinist bureaucratism with the bourgeois spirit of the age" made possible "a transition from the Baroque oriented court society to the nineteenth century *Rechtsstaat*" (p. 401) but it "showed few signs of developing further into a democratic federation of equal nations" (p. 401). As Gary Cohen has pointed out, however, a narrow focus on the Habsburg state's failure to de-

mocratize obscures a respectable record of advances towards that goal.[4] In that vein, Okey argues that the monarchy was relatively backward economically when compared with more advanced Western states and Germany. The story is different, however, when the standard of measurement is the other states in its region. Measured by that standard the Habsburg empire experienced gradual and impressive economic growth throughout the nineteenth century. Hungary lagged a bit behind Austria as economic growth moved from west to east. "Whatever else their problems, the last years of Habsburg Austria," he writes, "were not a time of economic sclerosis." (p. 233)

The story is equally impressive in the social and political sphere. Okey details considerable achievements in the areas of civil society, civil rights, education, associational life, influence of public opinion, expansion of the franchise culminating in universal manhood suffrage (1907) and mass political parties. All of these developments resulted in a significant redistribution of political power in favor of the non-dominant peoples. It was symptomatic, however, of the chronic nationalities problem that "on balance the democratization fueled by social and economic advance fed into rival nationalisms" (p. 368). Nonetheless, "it is the interplay between political crisis and relative buoyancy in other spheres that gives its [the monarchy's] last years their intriguing poignancy" (p. 337). Okey does not hide the monarchy's blemishes: the authoritarian features that bedeviled reformist approaches; the poverty of many of its inhabitants; and anti-Semitism. In his judgment, however, the negative aspects do not cancel out the monarchy's record of achievement, which allows him to conclude that "the fairest verdict on the politics of late Dualist Austria is no doubt failure with extenuating circumstances" (355). I can agree with that conclusion with the caveat that a significant part of that record of achievement was the result of grass roots efforts by the monarchy's

peoples as distinct from the actions of the dynasty and the imperial government.

Okey assigns responsibility for the shattering of the monarchy to the inflammation of the South Slav question by Magyar nationalism, the movement of German Austrians from an all-Austrian patriotism into the German nationalist camp, and a Slav power drive that paid too little attention to the difficulties their ever swelling demands caused for the Germans. He also maintains that the main structural weakness of the Dualist period was the elites' dependence on Germany psychologically and diplomatically. The author does not take into account the monarchy's structure as an empire, and the way he uses the two terms interchangeably throughout the book indicates that he does not attribute any special importance to it. This is not the place for a discussion of empire as a political structure *sui generis* on which there is now a substantial amount of literature.[5] Suffice it to say that the Habsburg empire bore some key characteristic of imperial structures. The Habsburg monarchy/empire was a political entity with no overarching idea of Austrian patriotism. There was no "common Austrian national feeling. [...] Only the will of the Emperor united possessions too diverse to give rise to a shared philosophy of government" (p. 165).

The author approvingly cites the view of Josef Redlich that in the absence of any commonality the dissolution "in all probability was long unavoidable" (p. 398). It was the lack of a commonality that was the real structural weakness of the empire. The dependency on Germany stemmed from the determination of the emperor and his advisers to preserve as much as possible of the control of the imperial center in Vienna over the peripheral territories and to maintain the status of their empire as a Great Power. In the end, Okey sees the failure of the monarchy to develop into a democratic federation of equal states as "neither surprising nor discreditable, because such an association still exists no where (Switzerland? Euro-

pean Union?)" (p. 401). That would seem to make the Habsburg monarchy a harbinger of a future multinational political entity based on national cooperation. Was it that or was Late Imperial Austria the end stage of an historical empire?

Okey's conclusion with regard to the outbreak of the war is ambiguous. It was the decision for war in 1914 that brought about the monarchy's collapse, but "the seemingly endless nationality conflict impelling that decision cannot be overlooked" (p. 400). Fritz Fischer's thesis of "the domestic roots of German belligerency in 1914 applies to Austria-Hungary too" (378). On the other hand, as shown earlier, Okey thinks that the monarchy would have collapsed with or without war. He approvingly cites Oscar Jaszi's view in the *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (1929), that the social and ethnic cleavages of the monarchy were such, "that the balance of forces was shifting against the Monarchy's chances of survival, irrespective of the First World War that brought its doom" (p. vii). This view on Okey's part is inconsistent in light of his litany of missed opportunities that could have avoided that fate. Be that as it may, the Habsburg war machine, he claims, functioned far better and longer than the Tsarist one. He strongly suggests, however, that the Habsburg monarchy would have succumbed well before 1918 without the support of German troops and war materiel. If it had survived the war, "the fate of satellite in German-dominated Central Europe beckoned" (p. 382).

Okey offers a sympathetic, fair-minded survey of the Habsburg monarchy, written in a clear and crisp prose style. Its inconsistencies and contradictions do not detract from its value. A synthesis that wants to reconcile everything offers little to historical discussion. It is the most sophisticated one volume treatment we now have of the monarchy in the last century and a half of its existence, and it will remain so for a long time to come. It can profitably be read not only by students and the general public but by historians as

well. The book contains a number of errors, but only one worth mentioning. The attribution of Jewish ancestry to Foreign Minister Count Alois von Aehrenthal is false (p. 375).[6]

#### Notes

[1]. Gary B. Cohen, "Neither Absolutism nor Anarchy: New Narratives on Society and Government in Late Imperial Austria", *Austrian History Yearbook* 29 (1998): 37-61; 38 for the quotation.

[2]. Robin Okey, *Eastern Europe 1740-1980: Feudalism to Communism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

[3]. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1983).

[4]. Cohen, "Neither Absolutism nor Anarchy," 38

[5]. On theories of empire see, Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986). See the following for the application of empire theories to historical case studies: Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen, eds., *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); Richard L. Rudolph and David Good, eds., *Nationalism and Empire: The Habsburg Monarchy and the Soviet Union* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992); and Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds., *The End of Empire? The Transformation of the USSR in Comparative Perspective* (Armonk and London: M.E Sharpe, 1997).

[6]. Solomon Wank, "A Note on the Genealogy of a Fact: Aehrenthal's Jewish Ancestry", *Journal of Modern History* 41/3 (September 1969): 319-26.

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