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The Habsburg Problem

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The year 1848 was a year of revolution in nearly every large town in central Europe. Hungary won her freedom from the Austrian Empire, ruled by the Habsburg Monarchy, through her impressive evasion of Habsburg control. No other territory in the Austrian Empire ever gained such liberties as Hungary did. However, Hungary consisted of Magyars, Slovenes, Romanians, and several other distinct nationalities; to unify them equally would have been nearly impossible. The Magyars were a minority, yet they came to power quickly and aggressively. Growing up as a Romanian, for example, in post-1848 Hungary would have been difficult. A Romanian had freedom from imperial control, but not from the ruling ethnicity in Hungary: the Magyars. The Magyars suppressed the non-Magyars with ferocity. A rural Romanian had to assimilate to Magyar culture, commonly referred to today as simply Hungarian culture. He was forced to speak Magyar in official business and schooling, even though Magyar was not his native tongue. Alan J. P. Taylor devoted his book, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918*, to the evaluation of the empire and its problems. Taylor comments, “the Magyar soldiers were persuaded that they could save their state only by murdering those citizens who did not speak their tongue” (Taylor 83). Being anything other than a Magyar in nineteenth century Hungary was tremendously difficult because of the clash of nationalities: this is the Habsburg problem.

The Habsburg Monarchy possessed an empire that stretched from the Alps to the Carpathian Mountains in modern day Romania. Its northern border included Prague, which is in the modern Czech Republic, while its southern border included modern day Croatia. An empire with such diverse peoples undoubtedly had diverse cultures. The twentieth century historian Paul Kennedy discusses this diversity in his book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. Kennedy notes, “Vienna controlled the most ethnically diverse cluster of peoples in Europe—when the war

came in 1914, for example, the mobilization order was given in fifteen different languages” (Kennedy 216). Such diversity was poorly handled by the Monarchy, so much so that by the time 1914 came, the peoples of the Habsburg Empire were in unrestrained conflict. Some nationalities pledged themselves to the empire hoping to win national freedom through the benevolence of the ruler Francis Joseph. Other nationalities sought national freedom through revolution and dereliction to the Monarchy. One contributing cause of the convoluted First World War was the ethnic and national conflict within the Habsburg Empire.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire included several different ethnic groups and one must be especially careful in their comprehension of such groups. To better understand the Habsburg nationalities, several distinctions must be considered. First, ‘Germans of Austria’ refers to Austrians that lived in the Habsburg Empire but spoke German. In fact, even Francis Joseph spoke German. However, Germany was to the north of Austria-Hungary and is not to be confused with the ‘Germans of Austria.’ The Germans of Austria were not involved with national Germany. The Habsburgs controlled a piece of modern day Germany which did indeed include true Germans. However, the ‘Germans of Austria’ simply refers to the peoples of Austria and parts of Hungary who spoke German. They were Austrians but they shared a language and culture with Germany. The official language of the Empire was exclusively German and therefore the word ‘German’ in Austria-Hungary was closer to meaning a social class rather than just an ethnicity. Similarly, the Magyars are a nationality that can cause confusion. Hungary was not comprised of peoples that spoke only Hungarian; the linguistic Hungarians were the Magyars. In order to better understand Hungarian demographics, one can refer to the Poles, Romanians, Serbs and Slovaks as the Slavic peoples. The Slavs were united by their language and culture. Hungary essentially had a conflict between the Magyars, who were the gentry, and

the Slavs. It was a conglomerate of peoples, generating contentious ethnic and cultural conflict. Keeping the German-Austrian, linguistic Hungarian, Slavic and Romanian populations in mind, the complexity of the Habsburg cultural diversity and its effects on internal and external tensions become clearer.

Habsburg domestic policy proposed several ways to deal with the tremendous diversity. Unfortunately, the voices crying out to the Monarchy could not all be satisfied. The Empire consisted mainly of Germans, Magyars, Czechs, Poles, Romanians, Croats, Italians, Slovaks and Serbs. Several other nationalities were present, but had little involvement in the Empire. Self-determination was the aspiration of the Habsburg minorities. For example, a coalition of Slavic peoples rose up in the mid-nineteenth century and even created their own congress in Prague; however, this only lasted briefly as the revolutions intensified (Taylor 69). The Slav coalition consisted of Czechs, Poles, Croats and Southern Slavs. The Slav congress of 1848 was a microcosm of the Habsburg disunity. Though they were considered part of the Empire, they did not rely on the Monarchy as much as the Germans did. Kennedy points out that this diversity was not evenly represented:

Once one examines Austria-Hungary's economy and society in more detail, however, significant flaws appear. Perhaps the most fundamental of these was the enormous regional differences in per capita income and output, which to a large degree mirrored socioeconomic and ethnic diversities in a territory stretching from the Swiss Alps to the Bukovina. (Kennedy 216)

The cultural and socioeconomic diversity among the Habsburg peoples created a nearly impossible Empire to rule. Ethnicities living in Vienna retained superior economic and political

opportunities. Favoring certain nationalities angered others, building more pressure among the peoples while also causing the Monarchy to become more desperate.

Unfortunately, no solution ever truly solved the Habsburg problem, though some did suppress the problem for periods of time. One such policy that tried to suppress the problem was the Stadion constitution of 1849. According to Alan Taylor, the Stadion Constitution caused the Empire to be regarded as one unified state which was ruled by Vienna. Such a constitution would have worked in a small unified state. However, the Habsburg Monarchy was far too large to unify such disjointed peoples. The Stadion Constitution quickened the process of the discord. Because the Monarchy could not please all of their subjects, they had to choose who to support. In 1914 the Empire, enraged by the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand by a Southern Slav nationalist, declared war on Serbia which had been in the Habsburgs "sphere of influence" (Taylor 229). The Slavs were certainly a fine example of disseminated nationalities in the Habsburg Empire, while other groups such as the Germans of Austria or the Magyars were far more concentrated and important to the Monarchy.

The Austrian Germans were tremendously important to the Empire. The nation of Germany did exist during this time, but the Habsburg Monarchy ruled over a substantial amount of German speakers south of the borders of Germany. The Germans of Austria were economically essential to the Habsburgs; they were the upper-class of the Empire. Alan Taylor discusses the Austrian Germans' dominance of the Habsburg Monarchy. He states, "the Germans, though only one-third of the population, paid two-thirds of the direct taxes; and an individual German paid in taxes twice as much as a Czech or an Italian, nearly five times as much as a Pole, and seven times as much as a Croat or Serb" (Taylor 25). One can certainly perceive why the Habsburgs favored Austrian Germans over smaller minorities such as the

Serbs. To the Monarchy it was simple: the Germans contributed more, and therefore had to be satiated. The Empire made unfortunate but understandable concessions towards nationalities according to each one's influence. If the Germans were lost, then Imperial funds would wane. The Germans of the Empire were undoubtedly essential to the survival of the Monarchy. In Bamber Gascoigne's compendious article on the history of the Habsburg Monarchy he states that "the Germans in these regions of the Habsburg Empire take it for granted that they are the ruling community and that German should be the language of government" (Gascoigne). The German peoples of the Habsburg Monarchy controlled their rulers with ease; they manipulated the Austrian court effectively.

The German peoples of Austria-Hungary, however, connected the Habsburg Monarchy to the Great Power of the north: national Germany. When the war broke out in 1914, Germany had to come to the aid of Austria-Hungary on several different fronts. The Germans of Austria-Hungary indirectly increased pressure because the ruling class desired to suppress the other nationalities of the Empire. They would not allow minorities such as the Croats and Serbs, who contributed less, to gain independence. Ironically, it was on those two peoples that Austria-Hungary declared war after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. The German control of the Habsburgs can be observed through their diplomatic actions. Alan Taylor illustrates this using the example of the conflict between the Germans and the Slovenes over a specific school language. The decision was put through the Reichsrat, which was the Austrian parliament. Taylor comments, "the government carried a grant for Slovene classes in the Celje grammar school through the Reichsrat; the Germans withdrew from the ministry, and the parliamentary coalition broke up. Thus ended the last attempt at constitutional government in Austria" (Taylor 172). The Germans of Austria ruled the Empire decisively. They would not allow other

nationalities to increase their foothold and gain power. The Empire did prefer to please the Germans more often than not, which created frustration among the other nationalities that intensified around the turn-of-the-century. Equally important were the Magyars who became an aggressive and significant nationality in Hungary, the eastern portion of the Empire.

The Magyars were unequivocally the most accomplished nationality in geographic Hungary. The Magyars were certainly not the majority of Hungary. However, similar to the Germans, they made up a large portion of the gentry. Alan Taylor in his evaluation of the Magyar peoples notes, “the Magyars, though a minority of the population of Hungary, included all the propertied and educated inhabitants, with the exception of the German bourgeoisie, and even these were being rapidly ‘magyarized.’ The Magyar national state was achieved in the ‘lands of St. Stephen’ at the expense of the Croats, Slovaks, Serbs and the Romanians” (Taylor 66). Beginning with the truculent policies of the Hungarian minister Kossuth, the Magyars ruled over all of Hungary tendentiously. The other nationalities had no force against the Magyars: Magyar nationalism was prolific. However, their true accomplishment came in the freedom of Hungary from direct Habsburg power. Though they were still part of the Monarchy, they had a parliament and could control their own peoples. Hungary officially became its own territory in the wake of the revolutions of 1848. Hungary, however, continued to be tied to the Habsburg Monarchy in foreign policy. It was essentially its own nation in domestic affairs, but one with Austria in foreign affairs. The dilemma of this union was that Hungarians no longer fought mindlessly for the Habsburgs, as many such nationalities had done in the past. The introduction of a free Hungary also further complicated Habsburg foreign policy. Paul Kennedy saw such flaws in the Austro-Hungarian union:

The strained relations with Hungary, which despite its post-1867 status as an equal partner clashed with Vienna again and again over such issues as tariffs, treatment of ethnic minorities, 'Magyarization' of the army, and so on, were such that by 1899, western observers feared the breakup of the entire empire. (Kennedy 216)

Magyar control of Hungary created a heavily strained Austrian foreign policy. Furthermore, if Magyar enthusiasts did not hold such nationalism for Austria then the Imperial army would have little effect. Similar to the German dominance of Habsburg focus, the Magyars held a particular significance at the Imperial court in Vienna. Though they were only a minority in Hungary, the Magyars *were* Hungary. The Magyars organized Hungary; they politicized Hungary; the Magyars *freed* Hungary. The other nationalities did not have enough education and political power behind them to influence Vienna. Thus, the Magyars became a very important nationality to the Habsburgs.

Because of the Magyar dominance of Hungary, other nationalities were tyrannically disallowed significant involvement in Hungarian affairs. The Magyars did not allow for any other ethnic groups to gain control of the parliament. The effect of such a dominance was that the other underrepresented nationalities became increasingly voracious for self-governance. A coalition of several different nationalities came out of this conflict in Hungary: the Slavs.

The Slavic peoples primarily included the Czechs, the Croats, the Serbs, the Poles, the Slovenes and the Slovaks. The Slavic peoples lacked serious attention from the Habsburgs, otherwise they would have been given far more political independence than what they were allowed. They were simply part of the Empire, but not at the level of the Germans or Magyars. However, the Habsburgs did acknowledge Slavic peoples. Vienna was certainly not

discriminatory against the Slavs, but the Monarchy was tied to the Germans and Magyars who controlled the Empire's economy and political scene. George Guins, in his article "The Politics of Pan-Slavism," discusses how the Slavic peoples interacted with the Monarchy. He asserts, "the Austro-Hungarian Slavs considered it more advantageous and realistic to remain loyal toward the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and correspondingly, the Slav congress of 1848 proclaimed the loyalty of the Slavic nations to Vienna" (Guins 125-126). The Slavs hoped that the Habsburgs would give them self-determination eventually. However, the Monarchy never gave the Slav nations full self-governance which created immense Slavic disapproval of Vienna. Vienna was not the only opposition to the Slavs; the few ruling nationalities of the Habsburg Empire notoriously clashed with the Slavs.

The primary nationality within the Slavic coalition were the Czechs. The opposition of the Germans to Czech self-governance and cultural respect displayed a chronic conflict within the Empire. The Germans controlled much of the Austrian Empire, which did not allow for Czech self-determination. Alan Taylor further evaluates the subject, asserting, "the Czechs lived under the shadow of German nationalism and, alone of all the Slav peoples, had the Germans as only rivals" (Taylor 67). Unfortunately, the Czechs could not argue for self-governance without infuriating the Germans. If the Habsburgs had not ruled over such an array of ethnic and national cultures, they may have been able to survive the war. Far too many nationalities existed within the Empire: all asking for much, few contributing.

Geographically, the Empire was too rural. Austria-Hungary could not compete with the rival Great Powers. While Germany had 14.4% of the World Manufacturing Output in 1914, and Britain had 13.6%, Austria-Hungary had a meager 4.4% (Kennedy 202). The Habsburgs even struggled to increase the Empire's income. In 1914, Germany had a national income of \$12

billion while Britain had a national income of \$11 billion (Kennedy 243). The Habsburgs, along with their Hungarian partners, had a national income of \$3 billion (Kennedy 243). Austria-Hungary could not contend with Germany, for example, who had a far more unified and efficient nation. Paul Kennedy's chart on national income shows that the average income of Austria-Hungary was \$57 per capita while Britain, France and Germany had incomes well above \$100 per capita and even exceeding \$200 per capita (Kennedy 243). The effect of German and Magyar dominance had crippling consequences to the Empire both economically and politically. The Magyars did not allow the Slavic peoples to gain much economic or political equality in Hungary, while the Germans had such a grip on the Monarchy that any legislation given to the Slavs immediately enraged the Germans. As a consequence, Austria-Hungary could not compete militarily or economically with any other Great Powers. The "Pan-Slavism" that was suppressed by the Germans and Magyars of the Habsburg Monarchy could have possibly saved the Empire. Specifically, the south Slavic nationalists may have not assassinated Franz Ferdinand which would have changed the course of history. The Czechs' conflict with the Germans and Magyars created an impossible Empire to govern, the Habsburgs could barely keep their own interior lands peaceful. All such cultural conflict within the Empire possibly caused the Empire to become agitated. They had been desperate for peace since 1848; however, no solution solved the Habsburg problem. The Empire was simply too diverse and its peoples increasingly demanded self-determination. The end of the Monarchy was overdetermined with the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. He had been assassinated by a southern Slav nationalist. Austria-Hungary invaded Serbia, beginning the Great War.

World War One was not mono-causal. Many historians point to the many alliances between various European powers as the main cause; however, they cannot omit the national

conflict within the Habsburg Monarchy. As Austria-Hungary invaded Serbia, Russia came to the aid of their Balkan allies. Germany had been the ally of Austria-Hungary ever since the Austro-Prussian war of 1867 in which Bismarck transformed the foreign policy of the Habsburg Monarchy to fit his needs. Germany came to the aid of Austria-Hungary, as Britain and France joined Russia. The war was essentially fought by Germany. Austria-Hungary had a rudimentary military that had little funding or technological advances at its disposal. Germany could not fight on four fronts, and the allies prevailed after four long years of arduous fighting. Austria-Hungary was on the verge of absolute collapse. Alan Taylor adds, “the dynasty was not rejected only by the subject peoples; the master nations, too, lost interest in it once their supremacy over the ‘lower races’ was destroyed” (Taylor 249). The Habsburgs had lost all military and diplomatic power. What caused their “supremacy” to diminish? The Habsburgs dealt poorly with their national dissidence for the major part of the nineteenth century and this unrest and resentment eventually disintegrated the Austria-Hungarian Empire’s economic and political well-being. By 1914, the Monarchy could no longer arbitrate the cultural conflict and turned to war out in desperation. The Habsburgs could not control their subjects any longer, and as a consequence war became the only possible action.

Franz Joseph knew the end was near; he tried to negotiate for the survival of the Monarchy. However, he died in the middle of the war. The Monarchy was left to crumble. The subjects of the Monarchy had succeeded in their goal of self-determination. They had pushed the Empire to violent despondency. The ethnic disunity that was one contributing cause of the war was evident in the Treaty of Versailles. The solution to the Habsburg problem came through a surprising source: an American professor named Woodrow Wilson.

Some argue that the ethnic conflict within the Habsburg Empire was not a possible cause of the war. Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points exemplify the global perspective of what may have contributed to cause the war. Wilson's opening speech accurately denotes his solution:

An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak.

(Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library)

Wilson's fourteen points solved the Habsburg problem completely. Though Franz Joseph had died years earlier, the Monarchy was not yet dissolved. Wilson's tenth point deals exclusively with Austria-Hungary. He declares, "The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development" (Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library). The key of the solution sought through the tenth point is the word "peoples". The allies, specifically the Western powers, did not wish to see Old Austria survive through the Treaty of Versailles. Wilson called for justice to be brought to the peoples of Austria-Hungary who had been calling for self-determination since 1848. The fourteen points were undoubtedly a solution for the problems that the Great War had incurred, but also a prevention of another World War. Unfortunately, the fourteen points could not prevent an entirely different problem in 1939: a desperate people following an insatiable leader. Wilson's fourteen points sought to end the Habsburg problem and find its potential solutions.

The Habsburg problem of ethnic and national conflict contributed to the outbreak of World War I. Cultural diversity within the Empire paired with ethnic inequality caused great tension within the Empire for nearly a century. Franz Joseph and his court could not solve their

problem, for they saw only one solution which did not include self-governance. The Monarchy would continue to survive through the contributions of the gentry nationalities while flirting with revolution numerous times. The unjust treatment of the peoples under the rule of the Habsburg Monarchy culminated in diverse nationalism that had been stirred by French nationalistic and revolutionary philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, an 18th century French philosopher, argued for the rights of man. Rousseau declared, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains” (Rousseau). Rousseau’s liberal ideas spread into the next century and were adopted by the Habsburg peoples who fought for their freedom. The Treaty of Versailles was overall a victory for man. The Slavs gained independence in the north with Czechoslovakia and in the south with Yugoslavia. The Romanians gained Romania in the eastern portion of the old empire. Finally, the Poles rejoiced in the creation of the northern nation of Poland. Austria and Hungary were dramatically reduced in size; they would never again hold such power and dominion. The cultural problems of the Habsburg Empire are not over, however, as ethnic conflict continues in the twenty-first century. Ukrainians fight for their freedom from Russia; Irish Protestants clash with Irish Catholics; America displays its cultural conflict through gang violence and neighborhood ethnic distinctions. In the United States, for example, one finds Southern Europeans versus Northern Europeans; Latinos versus Asians; whites versus blacks.

The Habsburgs could not control their tremendous cultural conflict, which ended with the dismantling of the Empire. America, despite her freedom and opportunity, continues to have cultural conflict. Is collapse inevitable? Large entities such Austria-Hungary, Rome and the United States inherit an ethnic problem of several distinct elements. Rome collapsed and Austria-Hungary was dissolved. Rousseau may have predicted what a future America may resemble. The democracy of the West has spread to every corner of the world. However, are all men free? Can

Federalism prevent inherent cultural conflict? Americans are born free, but everywhere are in chains.

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