FEATURED REVIEW


Important, summative assessments of the Habsburg Monarchy have been appearing with increased frequency in recent years. One factor is the series of rolling centenary anniversaries beginning with the outbreak of World War I followed by the death of Franz Joseph, the fall of the Monarchy and the foundation of the successor nation-states. Another is the maturation of a generation of historians who emerged in the decades from the 1970s to 1990s. Many were trained in America and are associated with the “revisionist” trend, which emphasizes the continued viability of the Monarchy and the contingent, constructivist, multivalent nature of nationalism. Pieter Judson (born 1956) and Steven Beller ( born 1958) have both recently published general histories of the Habsburg Monarchy in its last century. The monumental series published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences entitled Die Habsburgermonarchie, which covers the period 1848 to 1918 and provided much impetus to the “revisionist” trend, is nearing its end. Other general histories, whether by single authors or multi-authored, are also planned for publication.

A previous generation of historians undertook a similar process of summation and synthesis in the 1960s. The prevailing viewpoint then portrayed a decaying, anachronistic Monarchy weakened by rising nationalism. Historians such as A. J. P. Taylor, Robert Kann, Hans Kohn, Hugo Hantsch and Erich Zöllner, who all published or revised general works in the post–World War II period, had built on the nationalist focused work of the inter-war period, especially the influential analysis of the Hungarian emigré Oscar Jaszi. Kann, Kohn, Hantsch, and Jaszi were born within old, pre-war Austria-Hungary and had thus personally witnessed the end of the Monarchy and the difficult, tragic aftermath. By the 1960s their views dominated the historiography. The influential series of volumes in the Austrian History Yearbook of 1967 were largely ordered around competing nationalities and the concepts of centripetal and centrifugal forces, inspired by Jaszi’s framework. The English historian Carlile Macartney (born 1895) capped a lifetime of work with his massive general history published in 1968. He begins the book with the failure of Austrian state centralism in Hungary in the late eighteenth century and proceeds in admirable breadth and detail to outline the gradual retreat of the state and Empire in response to the
multiple challenges of the nineteenth century, including rising nationalism. Thus by the late 1960s, the general consensus was of an old-fashioned, dynastic Monarchy out of step with the modern world of nation-states. Broadcast in 1968, Edward Crankshaw’s BBC documentary series entitled “The Fall of the House of Habsburg, 1848–1918”—largely based on his book published five years earlier—encapsulated this interpretation for a wider audience.

From the 1970s onwards these paradigms of a rigid, feudal, reactionary Monarchy torn apart by competing nationalisms have increasingly been questioned. Starting with reassessments of economic history then spreading to aspects of the governmental system, the administration, legal practice, politics, education, civil society and the military—amongst many other topics—the older assumptions have gradually been overturned. According to this “revisionist” view, the economy was developing well, the legal and educational authorities were mostly fair, the military was creating a relatively coherent, loyal army and the political and administrative framework showed significant flexibility when faced with the demands of an engaged, organized, active populace.

Pieter Judson’s acclaimed book brings together many of these “revisionist” arguments into a sophisticated, compelling conceptual framework. The guiding theme is the changing relationship between the state (defined broadly) and the populace. For the pre-1848 years this was mainly a triangular schema of ruler/state, local elites (mainly aristocrats) and people (especially the peasants). Judson shows how the Habsburg state and ruler often appealed over the heads of the aristocrats directly to the people, thus empowering the central state against local structures and traditions and also slowly forming a loyalty or patriotism amongst the common people towards the distant, abstract, beneficent ruler and her (Maria Theresa’s) or his (Joseph II’s) institutions. The wars against an assertive revolutionary and Napoleonic France further encouraged this gestating loyalty and patriotism. The subsequent Metternich years emerge in Judson’s account not as a stagnant, oppressive interregnum but as a dynamic, engaged, developing and stimulating era.

The complex turning point of 1848–49 is covered extremely well. Rather than the familiar battles and political intrigue, Judson shows how the populace actively participated in the newly opening public sphere to articulate potential reforms to the Empire. This burgeoning grass-roots political culture and the issue of representative bodies gradually transformed the relationship between ruler/state and the people. Layers of administration and representative bodies, along with a myriad of changing political actors and organizations, meant
increased state involvement in everyday life as well as increased demands from the citizens. A complicated, contested, rowdy, fluid set of constitutional and political institutions and practices evolved. Amidst the many difficulties and challenges, there was also adaptation and accommodation—from the state, the political actors and the general populace. Throughout the book Judson illustrates his arguments with examples from across the Empire—Dalmatia, Bosnia, Bukovina, Transylvania, Tyrol, Galicia, Croatia, South Styria as well as Bohemia, Moravia and Hungary—giving a sense of the Monarchy’s tremendous geographical diversity and grounding his arguments in specific contexts. Nationalism is, to some extent, presented as tool for instrumental, pragmatic purposes—whether to form and integrate a political movement or for tactical maneuvering within the system. This mirrors the approach of Judson’s previous book *Guardians of the Nation* and of Tara Zahra’s work on national indifference or flexibility.

Judson has reflected on the latest scholarship—much of it “revisionist” in nature—and provided a general narrative framework based on the relationship between ruler/state and the people. He has questioned and rethought countless issues within the historiography of the Monarchy. He has also provided some comparative perspectives, placing the Habsburg Monarchy within general European developments. His book is an impressive achievement and is full of provocative ideas and formulations that point towards possible future directions for new research.

Steven Beller, in a prolific career, has written books on Vienna’s Jews, anti-Semitism, Theodore Herzl and Franz Joseph as well as a general history of Austria. In his acknowledgements he concedes that his present book has some overlap with previous works yet he, nevertheless, wished to outline his interpretation in response to recent historiography, in particular Judson’s book. Beller’s book is more traditional and less “revisionist” than Judson’s. It provides more of a standard narrative based around high politics and foreign affairs.

There are some constant themes—modernization (only defined near the end as representative government, national self-determination, popular sovereignty and rule of law [p.275]), successive challenges (Beller uses the term “squaring the circle” [pp.77, 119, 135, 151, 185, 227]), the Habsburg Monarchy as a “European necessity” (p.7; pp.273–86) and an awareness of the Empire’s possibilities (p.21; p.220). Nevertheless, it is sometimes difficult to trace the connecting threads through the book, while the overall argument is rarely stated in an explicit, integrated manner. This is partly because Beller covers more ground then Judson including cultural developments (especially the Biedermeier
and c1900 eras), foreign entanglements and the financial strains of maintaining a military befitting a “Great Power.” Beller is best in the final chapters of the book when he combines historiographical comment with interpretive exposition. For example, chapter 6 “1897–1914: Modernization” presents a fascinating portrayal of a flourishing Empire (a stable society and economy, intellectual ferment and achievement) coupled with “everlasting political crisis,” an aging Monarch and an elite embroiled in the Balkans.

Throughout the book, Beller conveys the multiple options and possibilities for the Habsburg Monarchy. Beller outlines this theme in the introduction:

Central European culture was not one which encouraged certainties…. It was a culture fated, almost, to see ironies rather than coming to definite conclusions, not definite theories but rather the penumbra of possible alternative interpretations that connected, one to the other…. As we shall see, this lack of a decisive approach, a lack of a definite national identity, or of a unified national culture, or even of an obvious, straightforward political purpose, was a large part of what brought the Monarchy down, repeatedly, during the course of the nineteenth century, a century of modernization on national, decisive lines. (pp.22–23)

Beller’s characterization of the governing elite is of a conservative, fearful, aristocratic closed circle generally in opposition to the wider populace. This is a stark contrast to Judson’s schema, which postulates a flexible, symbiotic, if sometimes difficult, relationship between the state (in a broader sense than the Viennese ruling class) and the people. Beller’s view is from the centre—of the governmental, military and administrative elite trying to control and direct events and people. Judson’s focus is primarily from below—on the local, everyday level of engagement between the expanding state and its citizens. These are not necessarily incompatible viewpoints. The Monarchy was a vast, diverse and complex entity, as is evident from the myriad of topics and viewpoints in Die Habsburgermonarchie. Amidst perpetual crisis there was reform and adaptation, amidst despair there was hope, amidst extreme nationalism there was fervent patriotism—sometimes simultaneously, sometimes changing over time and often in the same individual or movement. How does Beller, then, navigate the Monarchy’s bewildering variety and diversity?

Starting with 1815 Beller provides an overview of the Metternich system—both internationally and domestically. While acknowledging that Metternich’s security state was not particularly efficient, Beller still states that:
the suppression of an active political scene meant that the emerging German-speaking middle class and intelligentsia in the Monarchy never gained the practical experience in representative politics that their equivalents in northwestern Europe did at this stage of social and economic development…. Had there been more of an active forum for political debate in these crucial post-war decades, a more Viennocentric, albeit German-speaking, but Austrian political consensus might have been able to mitigate, or even co-opt the centrifugal forces of nationalism that would dominate politics later in the century. (pp.35–36)

Yet was such political reform in a Catholic Empire recovering from decades of revolutionary and Napoleonic violence and upheaval ever possible or realistic? Which other countries undertook progressive political reform directed by forward-thinking elites towards representative, constitutional government and freedom of expression immediately after 1815? None of the “Great Powers.” The small states of Baden and Wurttemberg had constitutions in 1818 and 1819, Belgium and France experienced Revolutions in 1830 and the British Reform Bill was passed in 1832. The elites in all of these cases were generally reactive, moderate and pragmatic.

Interestingly Beller pursues the idea of missed opportunities in the following section, beginning with Ferdinand’s ascension to the throne in 1835. Certainly there was even less possibility for reform under the mentally incompetent Ferdinand. Nevertheless, society, the economy and nationalist culture were rapidly developing, despite the “drag” (Beller’s term) of Metternich’s system. The 1848–49 Revolutions, in Beller’s account, exposed further and deeper questions of modernity—Germany, nationalism, representative and constitutional government, the place of Jews, amongst the more significant. Franz Joseph became the ruler and he is well characterized by Beller as “brave, but not imaginative; conservative, even reactionary, but also practical and empirical in his approach, prepared, ultimately, to let the ends justify the means” (p.90). Yet the 1850s “revolution from above” was, according to Beller, not accompanied by sufficient support or loyalty (p.100). From 1861 onwards, then, the task facing the Monarchy was “to achieve the necessary basis of political and financial support” (p.107). Beller’s assessment of the 1867 Compromise is mostly negative, principally because it perpetuated national strife (pp.126–27). This was exacerbated by the onset of mass politics leading to the world of c1900; politically chaotic but also culturally, intellectually, creatively innovative, indeed evincing a form of modernity (p.191). In the context of regional and local administration,
Beller acknowledges that some indistinct sort of “multinational federation” was emerging and that “national groups were realizing their goals within the Monarchy’s parameters” (p. 211). Nevertheless, the administrative costs and the ongoing political crises crippled the military budget. The Monarchy, it seems, was trying to balance between incompatible goals and viewpoints, without truly committing to any fundamental new direction.

Here, on the cusp of World War I, Beller summarizes his overall argument. The relationship between state and citizen “was still mainly ‘top-down’”—a contrast with Judson’s representation of a complex negotiation between state and citizens (pp.223–24). According to Beller, it was up to the decision-makers to “square the circle” and introduce decisive, fundamental reforms.

The Monarchy could have, hypothetically, developed as a progressive, federal, prosperous, efficient and law-abiding state, where each nation’s equal status was protected, and acted as a magnet for the rest of southeastern Europe, becoming a real European necessity. (p.225)

These sentiments are reminiscent of Taylor’s and Kann’s view (recently also asserted by Helmut Rumpler) that the only a federalized Monarchy could have survived into the modern era. In addition to these domestic problems of “everyday empire,” the ruling class of 1914 continued to believe in the Monarchy as an old-fashioned “Great Power,” which had to project prestige and power—hence the decision for war. Ironically, when the ruling class was finally decisive, it led to the destruction of the Monarchy (p.248).

After an account of World War I, Beller concludes with a section entitled “Conclusion: Central Europe and the Paths Not Taken.” In the first section, largely covering possible domestic reasons for the failure of the Monarchy—liberalism, nationalism, the 1867 Compromise—Beller concludes that “the Monarchy was still a viable entity in 1914” (p.276). Nevertheless he stresses that the military and the Monarch remained old-fashioned and dangerously detached from wider society. In the final pages Beller states that:

In an era when modernity meant allowing societies to govern themselves, when modernization went hand in hand with Kantian self-determination, the old Habsburg role of being an imperial power, of governing people well, whether they accepted your legitimate authority as their ruler or not, would not work… The problem was that the Monarchy, as a political enterprise, was unable to create in modern
form the authority and legitimacy that it had possessed before the modern age…. The Habsburg leadership was never able to square the circle that could turn a dynastic conglomerate of possessions into an all-embracing home for all its people, as well as peoples. It could never come up with a way to convert necessity into a coherent identity. The “Austrian Idea” never achieved cogent meaning. That is why the Habsburg Monarchy collapsed in the crisis of 1918. (pp.284–86)

Fundamentally, Beller’s argument seems to have two crucial aspects—war and democracy. According to his analysis, dealing effectively with these twin aspects of “modernity” remained mere possibilities or “paths not taken.” The spectre of war haunts the book, even if there is little explicit discussion of it. The Monarchy survived the Napoleonic Wars intact and even expanded its territory. It had its chances to continue as a “European necessity” or a vital component of the international scene. Yet throughout the nineteenth century according to Beller’s book, the military did not keep pace with its rivals and the political system could not provide the necessary funding or legitimacy. While the Monarchy survived minor upheavals and defeats in 1848–49, 1859 and 1866, it did not have the coherence or loyalty to withstand the total war of 1914–18. Neither, Beller notes, did Germany, Russia or the Ottoman Empire. If the measure of a state is its ability to wage war, then, the Monarchy was an ailing, declining state in its final decades. Would a democratic, federalist Monarchy have survived the war? What form of democracy could have been implemented, taking into account the delicate balance of interest groups within the Monarchy? In fact, there had already been considerable progress towards a wider democracy, particularly in the Austrian half. For example, the 1907 introduction of equal, universal manhood suffrage in Cisleithania preceded similar reforms in Sweden (1909), Holland (1917) and the United Kingdom (1918). It proved, however, no panacea for the Monarchy’s problems.

In conclusion, the books by Judson and Beller have clearly contrasting goals and arguments. Judson focuses on the dynamic between the Imperial state and the wider populace, especially in provincial and local contexts. Empire, in Judson’s book, is conceived of as a large umbrella, multi-national entity. Judson emphasizes the everyday interactions of the people with a contested, inefficient system, which nevertheless facilitated discussion, participation and distribution of resources. Beller views Empire in more traditional terms—territorial acquisition, monarchical power and the assertion of military prestige and strength. His book is about the governing elite’s traditional conceptions of
the Monarchy and their difficulties in the modern world of representative bodies and rising nationalism. While acknowledging the “revisionist” trend and never conceding the “inevitability” of the Monarchy’s collapse, Beller’s assessment is considerably more pessimistic than Judson’s.

What framework will future general histories of the Habsburg Monarchy adopt? The multi-faceted nature and role of nationalism will always be an important aspect of the Monarchy’s history but it will probably never return to the prominence and dominance within the historiography that it occupied in the inter-war and immediate post–World War II eras. My wish list includes more comparative history, some focus on the nexus of military/civil society/politics and on the everyday experience of politics. The historiography of the Monarchy could go in any number of directions. For now, at least, despite Beller’s reservations and caveats, the “revisionist” viewpoint has become the new orthodoxy.

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