

The Ponderous Tower: A Historiographical Examination of Austro-Hungarian Military Failings in the Great War

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Thesis

- On the eve of the Great War (1914-1918), the Austro-Hungarian Empire appeared to be one of the most powerful states in Europe.
- The large size of the empire and its army belied a nation whose unstable, rotting foundations were giving way.
- When the empire's military impotence was revealed following the failed conquest of Serbia (1914), observers were astonished.
- For the remainder of the war, Austria-Hungary would play a backseat role to their ally, Germany, suffering great defeats.
- No single factor is responsible for the failure of the Austro-Hungarian *Landwehr*, but rather a confluence of many factors.



Nibelungen Swansong

- Facing ethnic conflict with their Slavic subjects in the Balkans, the Austro-Hungarians drew ever closer to Germany
- In 1909, German Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow invoked a national myth to proclaim their undying loyalty to their (largely) Teutonic ally
- The alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary would prove a fatal one
- Many German historians as well as contemporary observers viewed the alliance as detrimental to the German war effort

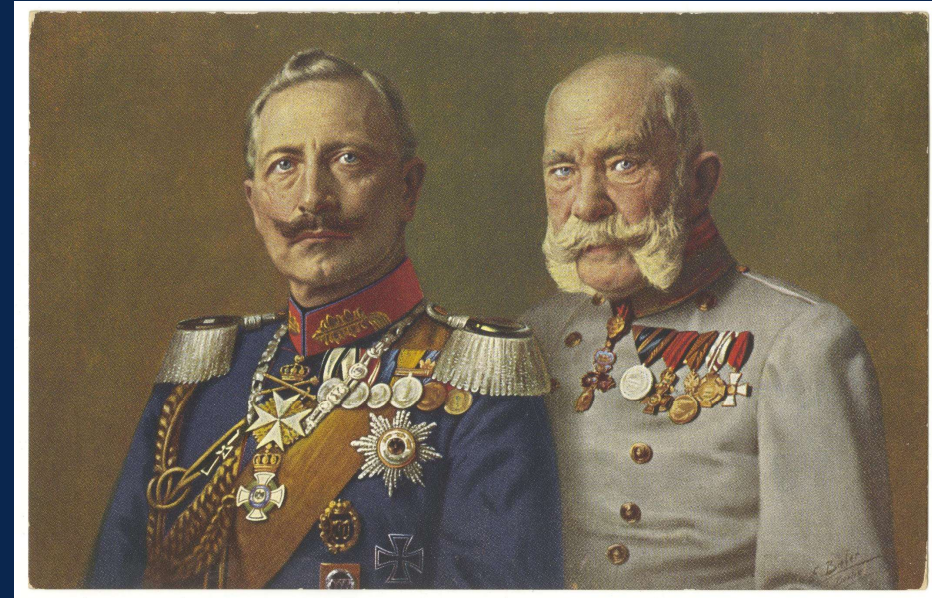


Figure 2. Double portrait of Emperors Wilhelm II and Franz Josef. Postcard, Andrew Laurie Stangel Collection, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Box 2: Postcards, gf 0033.



Outmoded and Outgunned

- While their principal opponent, the Serbs, had recently weathered the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), the Habsburg Empire was woefully underprepared
- Most soldiers of the empire had not seen war in their lifetimes, and social standing had become the chief qualifier for high military officials
- Overall command of the *Landwehr* was left in the hands of the inept and arrogant Baron Conrad von Hötzendorf, whose blundering earned him the resentment of both his allies and his own sovereign
- In terms of firepower, Austria-Hungary lagged behind Germany in both man-portable arms as well as artillery



Figure 3. Archduke Friedrich, Duke of Teschen, and Baron Conrad von Hötzendorf standing in front of a large group of military officers at the general headquarters of the Austro-Hungarian Army. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-26152.



Babel on the Front

- Though the *Landwehr* was chiefly composed of German and Hungarian troops, thousands of Poles, Ruthenians, Czechs, Croats, and other minority groups pledged to fight for the empire
- Language barriers abounded between the army's officer cadre (primarily German) and their troops, leading to several, often fatal misunderstandings
- While the vast majority of multicultural units remained loyal to the Habsburgs, there were instances of deserters, especially Serbs
- The troops were truly united in only one respect: their fealty to Kaiser Franz Josef, the only emperor and commander they had ever known



Figure 4. Soldiers and their sweethearts. Photograph, Nov. 30, 1915. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Reproduction Number ds-00227.



Indivisibiler ac Inseparabiliter

- The public became gradually disillusioned with the war following fruitless campaigns across Galicia and Italy from 1917-1918
- Millions had been lost in service to Habsburg aims and Kaiser Franz Josef had passed away peacefully in 1916, not seeing the war's end
- Discontent swept through the ranks and cities of the empire alike, leading to large scale anti-war and socialist demonstrations
- By the time of their surrender on November 3, 1918, the empire was aflame with revolution, leading many to desert the army and return home



Figure 5. Demonstrators in Vienna. Photograph, Sep. 17, 1920. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-anrc-12461



Conclusion

- The military blunders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire still color the historiography of the Great War today
- The complex issues of the Habsburg State, including the rampant disunity of its subjects, rising ethnic tensions, complex bureaucracy, and a general lack of preparedness—among others—led to the disaster of 1918
- The conditions that led to Austria-Hungary's ultimate collapse are not a thing of the past, but rather are reflected in problems faced by the West today

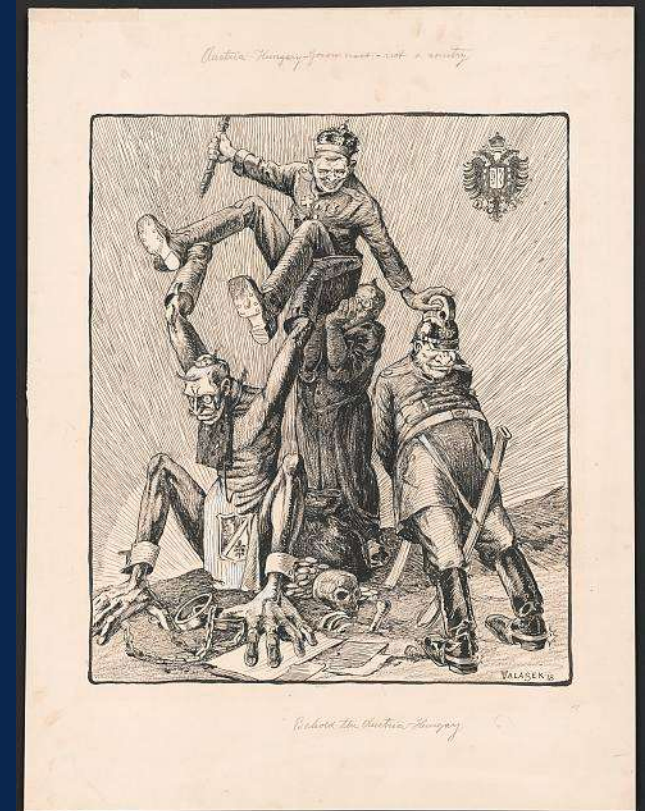


Figure 6. *Austria-Hungary - Government not a Country* by Otakar Valasek, 1918, Library of Congress.



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