The European Union and the Habsburg Monarchy

BY ROBERT COOPER

The Habsburg Monarchy lasted five centuries. It was both solid and flexible; it aroused genuine affection among its citizens. But it vanished in a puff of smoke. Should we expect the European Union, shallow in history and unloved by those it serves, to do better?

Security issues which for centuries have divided Europe at last unified it. And out of this the European Union was born.

To be fair, it was more than a puff of smoke. The bullets from Gavrilo Princip’s revolver killed the Arch-Duke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sofia. What killed the Habsburg Monarchy was the four years of pounding by artillery that followed. This brought death and ruin to the old Europe; in Russia it brought revolution and tyranny; and in Germany regime change accompanied by failed revolution, then inflation and depression, and finally world war and genocide.

What arose from the ashes? The answer is: the European Union and Nato. It is the EU and its resemblance to the Habsburg Monarchy that is the subject of this essay, but something needs first to be said about NATO which was and is its indispensable partner.

NATO and the presence of US forces in Europe have given European countries the assurance that the US would defend them against the Soviet Union. But almost more important, NATO also created an incentive to free riding on US military capabilities. This has been criticized by the US ever since, but paradoxically it is also a notable achievement that European countries have felt able to keep defence spending down: this shows that NATO has generated a sense of collective security in the best meaning of those words; security interests which for centuries have divided Europe at last unified it. And out of this the European Union was born.

Security issues which for centuries have divided Europe at last unified it. And out of this the European Union was born. And the EU itself, by creating a collective identity outside the field of security—and without the US—has contributed to NATO’s longevity by taming national aspirations. (In the old days it was called dynastic marriage) rather than by conquest. The EU is partly bound together, as the Habsburg Monarchy was, by transnational elites: in the old days it was courts, parliaments, education, and a centralized bureaucracy to manage it all. The Habsburg Monarchy liberated its serfs some twenty years before Russia and America, and introduced universal male suffrage early in the twentieth century. All these were useful and helped bring modernization to many parts of the Empire; but the peoples of central Europe could have got them from Germany and maybe even from Russia one day.

Above all, both the Habsburg Monarchy and the EU have provided a home for the small nations of Europe who would have difficulty surviving alone: in the nineteenth century, their need was to avoid being at the mercy of the less liberal German and Russian Empires. In the twentieth, belonging to a larger framework has brought both political and economic security. Had it not been for the catastrophe of war, the Habsburg Monarchy would have continued to develop in its haphazard way; no doubt giving more autonomy to those who wanted it but still providing the smaller states with things that mattered a lot to them.

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What was unique in the Habsburg case it was the officer corps and the civil service, for the EU it is business elites and civil servants, both national and European.

In any event, it is striking that after the unhappy interval of the 1910s and World War II, Europe—or rather Western Europe—found itself with a body that in many ways resembles the Habsburg Monarchy. Like the Habsburg Monarchy, the EU is not a nation state but a complex confection of states, nations, centralised bureaucracy and local autonomy. Both have grown by volun-

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If the EU ceases to be a bringer of prosperity but becomes instead a cause of impoverishment, it too will collapse.

The word “crisis”—once a common noun on the eastern side of the Berlin Wall—has, in the last few years, come to be heard everywhere in the European Union. Indeed, one might ask whether our habituation to the rhetoric of crisis signals the disappearance of the final vestige of the Cold War... the facts, however, are incontrovertible. First, since the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008, there has been an international recession. Second, there is a general crisis of political leadership in the democratic nation-states, visible not only in the European Union. Third, the eurozone has undergone serious perturbations. Although many European countries remain wealthy, in other states it has become impossible to overreach voices saying that making a living has become a nightmare. Simply talking to people from the countries unfurling their flag in the press “is true” confirms that the bad times are truly bad. Ulrich Beck’s theory that the EU develops by overcoming successive crises comes to look overly optimistic. It seems that a spectre is haunting Europe once again; this time, however, it is the specter of disintegration. But what does “disintegration” mean? What is the difference between disintegration, decay and the breakdown of a political organism? What lessons can be drawn from the history of national political entities such as the Habsburg Monarchy and Yugoslavia? These were some of the questions discussed by the participants of the conference The Political Logics of Disintegration 1, organized on October 26 and 27, 2012, by the Institute for Human Sciences. Conceived by Ivan Krastev, the meeting convened eminent scholars from a range of disciplines alongside political analysts.

No Prison of Nations: The Habsburg Empire

Opening the first session on the disintegration of Austro-Hungary, Timothy Snyder argued that if we were to find today that the European Union was lost anther 60 years, in other words for as long as the Habsburg Monarchy, we would consider it to be a spectacular success. Despite often being denounced as “a prison of nations,” Austro-Hungary was a political organism with a highly sophisticated political culture, where compromises were sought not only among the elites but also between nations. The search for explanations for the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy cannot, therefore, be limited to simple causes—but it World War I or the rise of nationalism (read the full text of his presentation on page 3). Panelists emphasized three causes of disintegration of the Monarchy: competing concepts of integration, including the unification of Germany and the Yugoslav project (Snyder); asymmetries of power, particularly between Austria and the small states it has become impossible to overreach voices saying that making a living has become a nightmare.

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