

The Politics of Managing Pluralism, Austria-Hungary 1867-1918

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Abstract

The multi-cultural nature of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the late nineteenth century created much unrest among the many different ethnic groups within the Empire. As each group struggled against the other groups for more rights, dissolution threatened the Empire. The Hapsburg government under Franz Joseph used two different strategies in Austria and Hungary to keep the country united, and these strategies successfully kept the Empire together for half a century. After the Emperor's death, opposing interests and separatism proved too powerful without Franz Joseph's uniting influence, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed.

The 1867 Compromise, or *Ausgleich*, converted the Austrian Empire into Austria-Hungary and introduced a Dual Monarchy to the state. This created an awkward political situation: the Empire was a conglomeration of many different ethnicities, and recognition of two hegemonic groups made national unity only more difficult to foster. Keeping the Empire together under this new system posed a challenge to the monarchical government. The government's management of the country's pluralism can be considered a limited success because for fifty years it held together many ethnic groups whose nationalist aspirations were not consistent with the maintenance of a pluralist empire.

The Compromise was Emperor Franz Joseph's initial attempt to keep the Austrian Empire together after the

disasters of the preceding decade.¹ Instead of granting ethnic Hungarian Magyar nationalists an independent Hungary, the Hapsburgs made many concessions to ethnic nationalists' demands in order to keep Hungary within the Monarchy. A proposed concession was to give Hungary the right to have an army separate from Austria's, and, although this was not ultimately accepted, an independent Hungarian foreign policy was granted. They also included the recognition of Hungary as a nation equal to Austria, which empowered Hungarian Magyars to govern most of their own affairs, answering only to the Emperor.² Edward Crankshaw asserts that if not for the Compromise in 1867, the Monarchy would have failed.³ The Compromise was the first attempt to keep the state's pluralist identity from breaking up the Monarchy.

The concessions granted to ethnic Hungarians offended the other ethnicities. These concessions undermined other ethnicities' faith that the Austro-Hapsburg Monarchy would look out for their best interests. Historians A. J. P. Taylor argues that Franz Joseph agreed to the concessions to Hungary begrudgingly, but did so to avoid granting other concessions to any other ethnic group.⁴ Conversely, Crankshaw argues that Franz Joseph was more even-handed and one could conclude from his historical narrative that it was the other ethnic groups squabbling amongst one another that prevented them from reaching similar compromises.⁵

According to historian Oszkar Jaszi, the ethnic groups in the Empire who were neither German nor Magyar were politically marginalized by the Compromise.⁶ The hegemony of the two groups led people who had previously felt loyal to the Monarchy to feel disillusioned by it, because of being neither German nor Magyar. In Hungary, the non-Magyar population faced harsher treatment than in Austria. They were denied linguistic freedoms, franchise, equality before the law, and the right to free assembly.⁷ They remained in a feudal-like situation under Magyar nobility who believed that granting freedom to the non-Magyar minorities would undermine Magyar power.⁸ Indeed, Alan Sked calls the restrictions placed on minority linguistic rights “outrageous” for their coercive elements designed to assimilate other ethnicities. Sked argues the well-received anti-minority speeches in the Hungarian Chamber by the premier are evidence that non-Magyars in dualist Hungary were essentially second-class citizens.⁹ Sked surmises that the Compromise “surrendered” the non-German and non-Magyar population to “the master races,” despite the loyalty shown to the dynasty by non-German, non-Magyar minorities.¹⁰

The Austro-Germans were also displeased with the Compromise. Historian Hans Kohn claims that they too felt alienated by the changes to the Monarchy. He said that they “felt part of a larger national entity[,] the majority of whose people lived outside of the monarchy.”¹¹ Sked believes that if any group were to

have abandoned the Monarchy, it would have been the Austro-Germans, who would have been annexed to the Hohenzollern lands in Prussia.¹² The Germans had been the hegemonic group in the Monarchy before the Compromise; after the Compromise, the Germans had to share this distinction. Some historians believe that the Hungarians actually became more powerful than the Germans in Austria-Hungary through the Compromise.¹³ The Hungarians certainly had more bargaining power, for they could simply threaten to declare independence, while the Germans had many more nationalities to contend with than just the Hungarians.¹⁴

The awareness of how one's own ethnicity set one apart from other subjects of Austria-Hungary, encouraging loyalties to one's own "people" rather than the Monarchy as a whole. This conflict was at the center of Austro-Hungarian politics. These nationalistic inclinations may have caused Austria-Hungary to disintegrate in the nineteenth century, were it not for the strategies of the Austrian and Hungarian governments. The two halves of the Monarchy adopted different ways of dealing with their ethnically diverse populations. Both strategies were successful until the First World War, if only to the point of preventing uprisings.

Rather than encourage pluralism, Hungary implemented a series of laws to assimilate the non-Magyar population in Hungary by suppressing non-Magyar cultural practices and languages. This suppression included legislation that

Magyar was obligatory in schools. For many groups, it was the sole language of instruction.¹⁵ Sked contends that the Magyars used this process because they believed that they were culturally superior, sustaining a mission to “civilize” the non-Magyars.¹⁶ The Hungarians took control of the newspapers.¹⁷ They prohibited the newspapers from inciting any ethnic group into conflict with another, specifically, this meant any ethnic minority against the Magyars. Political dissidents who petitioned for change were imprisoned. For example, in 1906, the Slovakian priest Andrej Miletic was imprisoned for two years for supporting the Slovakian National party in an election.¹⁸ The Hungarian government introduced harsher measures on wide segments of the population to undermine local authorities in favor of Hungarian nationalistic interests.¹⁹

Austria, conversely, attempted to unite the minorities with Germans through social, political, and economic reform. Its 1867 Constitution ensured equal rights to each ethnic group in “the preservation and cultivation of its nationality and language,” and provided the right to education in each one’s native language.²⁰ It also guaranteed equality in judicial matters and freedom of press, speech, and assembly. Oszkar Jaszi believes that the Monarchy needed to offer its subjects “real solidarity” in order to unite them.²¹ Austria tried to create this solidarity by making everyone equals in the constitution. The problem with the constitution, according to A. J. May, was that it was not enforced. Sked

indicates that this may have been because of its ambiguity.²² The lack of specificity as to how certain clauses were to be applied, such as in the aforementioned equality of languages in school, led to contrary understandings of rights and “equality.”²³ The Germans were particularly outraged at the Czech assertion that theirs should be a constitutionally official language, as it would require Germans to be bilingual in German and Czech to hold government office, cutting many Germans out of a position of supremacy.²⁴

The Universal Suffrage Bill in 1907 was aimed at gaining support from “the people” and using that support in Parliament for Austrian interests.²⁵ This bill reinforced the idea of equality for all ethnicities, regardless of whether it existed in practice. In theory, universal suffrage ensures that all ethnicities and levels of social status had a say in government elections. Having a voice in the government convinced minorities that they were participating in the destiny of the state. Parliament’s ineffectiveness did not matter so much in this case; the importance was the equal value of all citizens to the Monarchy.

In Hungary, the Magyars resisted implementation of universal suffrage because they understood that the people would not vote on their side. In Sked’s opinion, had the non-Magyar peasantry been able to elect leaders, they would have chosen pro-Habsburg, anti-Hungarian leaders.²⁶ The Hungarian strategy for

managing the ethnic pluralism was to suppress it in order to reinforce Magyar hegemony. Allowing universal suffrage would have encouraged pluralism, which was the opposite of promoting Magyar interests.²⁷

Less controversial than the Universal Suffrage Bill in Austria was the plan to use nationalized railroads to “weld” the Austrian economy together. This plan sought to regulate while the economy to everyone’s benefit overcoming the geographic obstacles that encouraged nationalism in territories that were almost cut off from Vienna, such as Galicia.²⁸ The geographic isolation of certain areas fostered nationalism, and building railroads to eliminate some of that isolation helped support Austrian unity.

One of the most effective tools that the Austro-Hungarian governments had for keeping their citizens united under the Monarchy was the emperor-king himself. A. J. May argues that the peasantry had an “impressively vast” loyalty to their monarch, if only because they were thoroughly indoctrinated that he was “their divinely appointed guardian.”²⁹ Barbara Jelavich claims that between 1867 and 1914, with the exception of the Italian subjects in Tyrol/Trentino, none of the subject peoples of Austria-Hungary wanted to leave or dismantle the Monarchy, but aspired to recognition as their own nations within the greater Empire under their sovereign Franz Joseph.³⁰ The loyalty of the Austro-Hungarians to the Monarchy motivated them to find solutions to their

nationalistic interests within Austria-Hungary, rather than outside it.³¹ By the turn of the century, some ethnic groups were able to unify and form political groups with which the Austro-Hungarian government was able to successfully compromise. Before the outbreak of the First World War, Moravia, Galicia, and Bukovina worked out compromises with the Monarchy.³²

The management strategies used by the Austro-Hungarian governments may not have been designed specifically with this loyalty in mind, but they certainly benefitted from it. The opposite strategies of the Hungarians and the Austrians were all relatively successful in that there were no major rebellions and no secessions from the Monarchy between 1867 and 1914, but it was perhaps not these strategies that were behind the success. It was the affection felt by all of the ethnic groups for Franz Joseph that bound them to the Monarchy.³³ Franz Joseph's death and the absence of a strong leader to succeed him, however, stalled negotiations for other compromises.³⁴

What ultimately broke apart the Monarchy was that the strength of nationalistic feeling among the various ethnicities proved, in the end, to be stronger than the unifying measures implemented by the government. Jaszi goes so far as to claim that "dynastic patriotism... was powerless against the popular enthusiasm of the exuberant national identities."³⁵ It was impossible to give each group all of the concessions that they demanded

without offending or impinging on the perceived rights of another group. The government's attempts at reconciling such contrary ambitions resulted in a bureaucracy-driven Monarchy, with all sorts of agreements and red tape, but with little achieved for a long time.³⁶ Some compromises that aimed to deal even-handedly with the rights of other groups were rejected. For example, the Czechs claimed their ancient Bohemian right to freedom in territory that was home to other, non-Czech ethnicities too. Taylor even calls these rights "imaginary," for, he says, the German population present was just as Bohemian as were the Czechs.³⁷ Nonetheless, the Czechs boycotted the Reichsrat, which they saw as an oppressive government body because its membership did not represent the real ethnic proportions of the population.³⁸

It was such grievances that encouraged nationalism to overpower the dynastic patriotism of the population. Franz Joseph died in 1916 and was succeeded by his grandnephew Karl who was not unpopular, but did not embody the unity of Austria-Hungary. Sked writes, "the old Monarchy seemed to have died with the old Emperor."³⁹ Karl's 1918 attempt to reform the Monarchy as a federal state in the face of defeat in WWI proved useless. By that time, the Monarchy's organized minorities had all begun to declare independence.⁴⁰ In Taylor's opinion, they hoped that new national states might be able to give them independence from the other ethnic groups that had comprised Austria-Hungary, a

concession that the Monarchy had not been able to give.⁴¹

Ultimately, the government of Austria-Hungary was successful at managing pluralism to some degree. As C. A. Macartney has said, it is obvious that the Compromise was a success, at least because, it “supported fifty million people for fifty years.”⁴² In the face of all the nationalistic sentiments felt by all the different ethnicities in Austria-Hungary, the government was about as successful as it could have been in the circumstances, constantly having to deal with nationalities lobbying for special recognition. The unequal pluralism of Austria-Hungary sowed the seeds of its destruction for two reasons. Treating various ethnic groups differently ensured that the people would identify themselves by their ethnic group before they would identify themselves as Austro-Hungarian subjects. In addition, preferential treatment consistently created conflicts between the various groups. The splintering of the Empire during the First World War demonstrated that the nationalist sympathies of the various groups in Austria-Hungary were strong enough to tear the country apart without a stronger dynastic loyalty to keep together. As long as nationalist ideas were kept under control with the promise of renegotiations under Franz Joseph, pluralism was manageable. As long as he ruled the Monarchy, pluralism was successfully managed, but after his death, it was this pluralism that caused the end of Austria-Hungary.

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- ¹ These disasters were the war with Prussia and the resulting Peace of Prague. The Hungarians sided with Prussia in the conflict, which was a blow to the Austrian Empire. Edward Crankshaw, *The Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy* (London: First Sphere Books, 1970, c1963), 186.
- ² Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire, 1815-1918* (London: Longman, 1989), 192.
- ³ Crankshaw, 252.
- ⁴ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809-1918* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1952, c1948), 130.
- ⁵ Crankshaw, 305.
- ⁶ Oszkar Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, c1929.), 276.
- ⁷ These will be discussed below.
- ⁸ The Magyar nobility controlled the Hungarian government because of their power over the rest of the population as feudal lords. Jaszi, 276.
- ⁹ Alan Sked, "Historians, the Nationality Question, and the Downfall of the Habsburg Empire," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5, Vol. 31 (1981): 183.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.
- ¹¹ Hans Kohn, "The Viability of the Habsburg Monarchy." *Slavic Review* 22, no. 1 (Mar., 1963): 40.
- ¹² Sked, *Decline and Fall*, 187.
- ¹³ according to Crankshaw, 211.
- ¹⁴ Crankshaw, 210.
- ¹⁵ Sked, *Decline and Fall*, 209.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.
- ¹⁸ Sked, *Decline and Fall*, 210.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.
- ²⁰ Arthur James May, *The Hapsburg Monarchy, 1867-1914* (New York : W.W. Norton, 1968, c1951), 43.
- ²¹ Jaszi, 449.
- ²² May, 44, and Sked, *Decline and Fall*, 220.
- ²³ Sked, *Decline and Fall*, 220.
- ²⁴ Crankshaw, 312.
- ²⁵ Crankshaw, 367.
- ²⁶ Sked, *Decline and Fall*, 217.
- ²⁷ The one exception is Croatia, with whom the Hungarians negotiated their own "compromise." The Croatians kept their autonomous government and linguistic rights, but their Diet was forbidden to communicate with Vienna. Even its Governor, chosen by the Hungarian Ministry, could also only communicate through Budapest. Thus, they remained subject to "Magyar goodwill." Taylor, 137-8.
- ²⁸ Crankshaw, 367.
- ²⁹ May, 172.
- ³⁰ Sked, *Decline and Fall*, 231.
- ³¹ Bosnia is not included in this conclusion, because it was administered by Austria-Hungary 1878 as a protectorate rather than a territory of the Monarchy until 1908 when it was officially annexed. Bosnia was a hotbed of Serbian anti-Austrian sentiment. May, 409.
- ³² Sked, *Decline and Fall*, 228.

³³ Ibid., 232; May, 487.

³⁴ Taylor, 241.

³⁵ Jaszi, 449.

³⁶ Sked, *Decline and Fall*, 223.

³⁷ Taylor, 142-3.

³⁸ Sked, *Decline and Fall*, 223.

³⁹ Ibid., 260.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 261.

⁴¹ Taylor, 245.

⁴² Sked, "Historians, the Nationality Question, and the Downfall of the Habsburg Empire," 180.