

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 49

“Tales of Old Vienna”

Transcript

[music: fanfare]

In ancient times, there was a Gallic kingdom high in the Alps called Noricum by the Romans. It was incorporated into the Roman Empire in the first century, and in the fifth century ravaged first by migrating Germanic tribes and later by the Huns and the Avars. In the eighth century, Charlemagne conquered the region and it became part of his Frankish Empire, and later the Holy Roman Empire.

The former Noricum became a buffer region between the Germanic Empire to the west, and the Avars, Hungarians, and Slavs to the east. By the year 1000, the Holy Roman Empire was referring to this borderland as the Eastern Realm, or, in Old High German, Oesterreich. Since Latin was still the predominant language of the educated class at that time, the name Oesterreich was rendered in Latin as “Austria.”

Over the next 900 years, Austria would go from a neglected border region to the seat of the most important dynasty in Europe to the center of an Empire to a ramshackle realm in search of its destiny in a world that had passed it by.

Welcome to the History of the Twentieth Century.

[opening theme]

Episode 49. Tales of Old Vienna.

In the eleventh century, about the same time that the name “Austria” was being used for the first time, the count of Klettgau, a region of Bavaria that today is split between Germany and Switzerland, built himself a castle, and he called it Habsburg. There are different suggestions about where the name came from, but no one knows for certain.

A century later, his grandson took the Castle Habsburg as his seat, and started going around calling himself the count of Habsburg, as did his descendants for many generations to come.

Meanwhile, German-speaking people from these Bavarian regions were migrating east, downstream along the Danube River, as far as the Leitha, a tributary of the Danube, which had come to mark the border between German and Hungarian lands. One of the consequences of

these German migrations from the west and Hungarian migrations from the east was to separate the Slavs who lived north of the Danube from the Slavs who lived further to the south, as we saw back in episode 27.

The Danube valley was fertile, and the river itself became an avenue of trade between Germany to the west and Hungary and the Slavs and the Byzantine Empire, to the east. On the Danube, not far from the Hungarian border, was an old Roman outpost. This outpost had once been a Celtic settlement called Windobona. In Imperial times, when the Danube was the northern border of the Roman Empire, Vindobona became one of the many Roman army camps set up to guard the Imperial frontier. It also appears to have been a flourishing trade center. Vindobona was all but burned to the ground during the chaos of the fifth century, and that marked its end as a military outpost, but it was never completely abandoned. Vindobona continued on into the Middle Ages as a small settlement, now known among the Germans simply as Wien, and to Italian speakers as Vienna. Now, six hundred years later, with the influx of new German settlers and the revival of trade along the Danube, Vienna reclaimed its ancient role as a trade center, and began to prosper again. The region grew in wealth and importance, and was eventually upgraded to the Duchy of Austria.

A few generations later, a Hapsburg count named Rudolph got himself elected Holy Roman Emperor, which, as you might expect, boosted the standing of his house quite a bit. In the course of the give and take between the Emperor and the lesser nobles under him, Rudolph ended up with control of the Duchy of Austria in the year 1278, and Austria would remain a Hapsburg possession for the next 640 years.

It would be a while before another Hapsburg was elected Emperor, but the Hapsburgs became notorious as a dynasty that enlarged its power by marrying strategically. As the centuries passed, Hapsburgs came to rule over adjoining duchies, extending as far west as northern Italy and Burgundy, and the kingdoms of Bohemia and Hungary to the north and east, although they sometimes had trouble holding on to all this territory. As the power and prestige of the Hapsburgs grew, the Imperial electors would choose a Hapsburg to be Holy Roman Emperor more and more frequently, and Vienna became first the seat of the House of Hapsburg and then of the Holy Roman Empire.

The high point for the Hapsburgs came during the reign of Charles V, born in 1500. Besides the already extensive Hapsburg possessions in and around Austria, Charles inherited the Duchy of Burgundy, the Netherlands, and the throne of Spain, which at that time included Spain's increasingly valuable conquests in the New World as well as the Italian realms of Sardinia, Sicily, and Naples. And then in 1519, he became Holy Roman Emperor. This was as close as Catholic Europe would ever come to complete political unification. In fact, it's just as easy to describe Charles's empire by naming the Catholic realms that were *not* under his rule, i.e., Portugal, France, England and Scotland, Denmark and Sweden, Poland, and the Papal States. Not too shabby for a kid just 19 years old.

Of course, it was hard to manage. The other Catholic powers feared and resented Charles's vast holdings, particularly France, which fought an on-again-off-again war with Charles's empire for many years, mostly in Italy. The Ottoman Empire, flush with its recent conquest of Constantinople, and at the peak of its power under the Sultan Suleiman, known as The Magnificent, expanded into Europe, conquering the Balkans, then Hungary and finally laying siege to Vienna itself, while in the Mediterranean, the Ottoman Navy roamed and raided with impunity. And then there was that upstart monk in Germany, Martin Luther, who challenged the supremacy of the Pope, and got a favorable hearing from many German princes, since, hey, if the Pope isn't supreme, that kind of means I don't have to submit to the Holy Roman Emperor anymore either, so...where do I sign?

Charles V ruled over these vast and all but unmanageable holdings for 34 exhausting years before abdicating at the age of 56 and entering a monastery, where he would die just two years later. His Spanish holdings he left to his son Philip—that's Philip as in the Philippines—but he passed on his Austrian holdings to his brother Ferdinand, who would become the next Holy Roman Emperor.

And so there would be separate Spanish and Austrian branches of the Hapsburgs for the next 150 years, although they would always be close allies. The Hapsburgs decided that since strategic marriages had made them the most powerful family in Europe, and we wouldn't want any other family marrying into ours and chipping away at our holdings like, you know, we used to do to them, that means that the ideal spouse of a Hapsburg monarch is another Hapsburg.

This worked out about as well as you'd expect. Inbreeding led to infertility and physical and mental disabilities. The last Spanish Hapsburg King was Charles II, who inherited the throne in 1665 at the age of three, was profoundly disabled and incapable of serving as king. His reign lasted 35 years, during which time Spain experienced serious economic and military decline, and he died without heirs in 1700, ending his line and precipitating the War of the Spanish Succession. And if you want to know more about the War of the Spanish Succession, well, let me just refer you to Zach Twamley's *When Diplomacy Fails* podcast.

As for the Austrian Hapsburgs, they fared better until 1740, when the Emperor Charles VI died with no male heir. Technically, this marks the end of the Austrian Hapsburgs, but Charles had arranged for his daughter, Maria Theresa, to marry the Duke of Lorraine and inherit the Hapsburg holdings. Not everyone agreed with this, and this led to the War of the Austrian Succession, but in the end the couple would rule and would they pass the Hapsburg holdings on to their son, the Emperor Joseph II. They also married their daughter, Marie Antoinette, to the King of France. But that's another story, and a different podcast.

So the dynasty is now technically the House of Lorraine, or maybe the House of Hapsburg-Lorraine, but most people kept on calling them Hapsburgs. Joseph II is remembered today primarily as a patron of music. He made Vienna the home of the greatest musicians and

composers of the age, most notably Franz Josef Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Okay, and Antonio Salieri, too. You happy, now?

[music: Symphony No. 40 in G minor]

If you've seen the 1984 film *Amadeus*, which, hey, directed by Miloš Forman, who also directed the film version of *Ragtime*, how about that, you may recall Jeffrey Jones's portrayal of Joseph II as a sort of amiable goof. Joseph died in 1790. He had no sons, so his brother Leopold II took the throne, but he died in less than two years, and his son, Francis II, would succeed him.

Francis, seeing Napoleon crown himself Emperor of France, and perhaps also seeing the handwriting on the wall, declared himself the Emperor of Austria soon afterward, in 1804, and he would abdicate his position as Holy Roman Emperor two years later, after losing a war to Napoleon. This would mark the end of the Holy Roman Empire and the end of the reign of Emperor Francis II, but also the beginning of the Austrian Empire and the reign of Emperor Francis I. As for that two-year period in between he was, technically, Emperor of two different Empires at the same time, and supposedly he is the only person in history who can make that claim.

Austria would declare war on France six times during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras, in the Wars of the First, Second, Third, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Coalitions. Somehow, she missed the Fourth Coalition. Austria lost the first four of the wars she participated in, but she won the last two, and that's what matters. It's not like this is a football league. It's a sign of how much prestige the new Austrian Empire had by 1815, at the close of the Napoleonic era, that it hosted the Congress of Vienna, the landmark international conference that would establish the new order in Europe, shepherded in by Clemens von Metternich, the Austrian foreign minister, and later Chancellor, a new order that would endure for 99 years. Austria had arrived.

Francis I died in 1835 and was succeeded by his son, Ferdinand. Now, Francis had married another Hapsburg, Maria Theresa of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and they were double cousins, so there's that Hapsburg thing again, of not wanting to marry anyone but another Hapsburg. So here we go again. This led to Ferdinand having a number of congenital physical and neurological disabilities that made him effectively unable to rule his Empire. A regency council would take care of that for the time being.

The year 1848 saw liberal revolutions break out across Europe, beginning in France, where the monarchy would be overthrown, again, and a Republic established, again. We've already seen how the revolutions of 1848 affected Italy. The Austrian Empire was also deeply affected. On March 15, 1848, a revolt broke out in what were then the separate Hungarian cities of Pest and Buda, demanding a constitution and parliament for Hungary, along with internal self-government, a separate Hungarian military, and the withdrawal of non-Hungarian military forces from Hungarian soil.

Now, I haven't said much about Hungary yet. Hungary had been a separate Catholic kingdom before it had been conquered by the Ottoman Empire. Thanks to the Hapsburg gift for bagging new territories by strategic marriages, the Hungarian crown became a Hapsburg inheritance, and when Hungary was freed from Ottoman rule, she found herself with Hapsburg kings; these same men who were Holy Roman Emperors, except that Hungary was never officially part of the Holy Roman Empire. Technically, Hungary was in personal union with the Empire.

So when Francis II declared his Austrian Empire, he simply lumped together all Hapsburg domains into his little project, including Hungary. But this never sat well with the Hungarians, who saw themselves as a separate kingdom and didn't accept the right of their king to incorporate them into an alien empire, or to send in German-speaking soldiers and officials to police and govern them. Bear in mind as I explained back in episode 27 that Hungarians are a unique ethnic group, relatively late arrivals in Europe, with a language and culture not Germanic, not Slavic, and basically not related to anyone else. You can understand if the Hungarians felt alone and threatened by cultural assimilation, and you can sympathize if they get defensive about retaining the Hungarianness of Hungary.

So in 1848, effectively what they were demanding was that Hungary go back to its status as a separate kingdom in personal union with the Austrian Empire, but not a part of it, as well as the usual liberal demands for a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament.

Austria had no choice but to accede to the Hungarian demands. For now. Because, besides having a regency council—never a good thing when quick and decisive action is needed—Austria had its other problems. Liberals in Vienna were also revolting, and also demanding the usual liberal constitutional and democratic reforms. And, as you may recall, Italian nationalists in Milan and Venice had also risen up, expelled their Austrian garrisons, and were asking for support from Piedmont-Sardinia.

With its armies fighting against German Austrian revolutionaries, Hungarian rebels, and Italian secessionists all at the same time, it seemed quite possible for a while there that the 44-year old Austrian Empire would simply disintegrate. Vienna had no choice but to grant the Hungarian demands, while it struggled with the German Austrian unrest and fought to retake its Italian territories. But the rebel cities in Italy were retaken, and the Imperial government conceded a constitutional system to the Empire as well as to Hungary. Metternich resigned as Chancellor, and, in December, 1848, the Emperor Ferdinand was persuaded to abdicate in favor of his 18-year old nephew, Franz Josef, who would rule as Kaiser for the rest of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth.

So, problem solved, right? It looked that way for a while. The move to replace Ferdinand as Emperor was a popular one with the rebels. The coronation of the youthful Franz Josef was seen as inaugurating a new and more modern Austrian Empire. This emperor would always be called Franz Josef, or Francis Joseph if you like, though it was unusual for an emperor to use two

names like that, because this was a conscious effort to evoke the names of the two recent successful Holy Roman Emperors, Joseph II and Francis II, a reminder of better times before, and a promise of better times to come.

Ha, ha. Psyche! Actually, while all this was true, another aspect of the change of emperors was that the promises to liberalize the governance of Austria and Hungary were the personal promises of Ferdinand, and therefore not binding on the new Emperor. Or so claimed the Austrian elites. Fooled you! That'll teach you guys. Remember to read the fine print next time.

Oh, right. The Hungarian rebels still have an army and so the Hungarians revolted again, declared their country not only independent of Austria, but also a republic, independent of the Hapsburgs, on the grounds that the Hapsburg kings had lied to the nation, and therefore lost their right to rule. Meanwhile, the Italian states, led by Piedmont-Sardinia, saw another opportunity to claim Italian lands held by Austria, and, as you may recall, invaded again. Again, the Austrian Empire seemed on the brink of disintegration.

But again, the Empire survived. First of all, the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary, as it was defined in the nineteenth century, is much larger than the Hungary we know today. It included what we know today as Slovakia, and much of Croatia, and also Transylvania, a region containing both ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians, which today is part of Romania, and which in the English-speaking world would come to be strongly associated with vampires, owing to the publication of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in 1897.

These ethnic minorities in Hungary, though, Slovaks and Croats and Romanians, not to mention a few Serbs and Jews and Ukrainians and German speakers as well, they weren't at all keen to be ethnic minorities within a Hungarian state. They felt their interests would be better protected as part of a polyglot Austrian Empire, and so they revolted against the revolt, so to speak. And then Franz Josef appealed to fellow Emperor Nikolai I of Russia, who sent soldiers across the frontier to assist his brother Emperor in putting down the Hungarians.

So this revolutionary period ended with Franz Josef still the Kaiser, still an absolute ruler, although he did agree to end serfdom, which helped Austria modernize and industrialize its economy. As for Hungary, it was under something like a military dictatorship for many years afterward, not a good situation. For a few years though, Austria looked strong, and Franz Josef looked like the master of central Europe.

[music: "Tales of the Vienna Woods"]

But as you may recall from the story of Italian unification in episode 22, things went south again in 1859, when the Austrian Empire lost most of its Italian-speaking territories after losing a war with France and Sardinia. Adding to this humiliation was the rising power of Prussia and the decline of Austria's prestige and influence among the German states. This led to more ethnic

unrest in the Empire, a loss of faith in what increasingly seemed a corrupt and incompetent Imperial government, and once again Austria seemed to be on the verge of collapse.

Franz Josef had no choice but to concede some liberal reforms. He drafted a new constitution in 1860, which disappointed everyone, but on a second try in 1861, created a new government with a bicameral Imperial parliament, the Reichsrat, with an upper house of nobles and bishops appointed by the Kaiser, and a lower house with seats to be apportioned among different regions and ethnic groups of the Empire. This arrangement was only partially effective, because as far as the ethnic Hungarians of Hungary were concerned, it didn't even come close to addressing their grievances, and they refused to send representatives to fill the Reichsrat seats allocated to them.

Now, as I've already said many times, the nineteenth century was an age of rising nationalism. You can see that in the uprisings in Hungary. Other ethnic groups in the Empire were also getting restless, and we'll come back to them. But there were also the Germans.

The Congress of Vienna in 1815 replaced the Holy Roman Empire with something called the German Confederation, which included basically everyone who had been inside the borders of the old Holy Roman Empire, but was weaker—hah! Weaker than the Holy Roman Empire? Mind blowing. It was really just a sort of mutual defense treaty and free trade zone, but it laid the groundwork for German unification.

The revolutions of 1848 also hit Germany. German liberals singing “Deutschland Über Alles” wanted to see a combined German state. The more radical wanted a republic, encompassing all German-speaking lands, including the German-speaking portions of the Austrian Empire. More moderate liberals sought a German constitutional monarchy. Who would be the monarch? Well, how about a Hapsburg, seeing as how the Hapsburgs had been more or less running the Holy Roman Empire for some time. But the Hapsburgs didn't want to give up their rule over Hungary and the other non-German regions of their Empire, and no one thought it was a good idea to try to include the Hungarians, not to mention Poles, Czechs, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Slovenes, Serbs, Romanians, Italians, yadda, yadda, etc., etc., into a German state, and so that idea went nowhere.

Prussia and Austria increasingly became rivals for leadership within the German confederation. In 1866, Prussia and Austria went to war, ostensibly over the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, but it's probably simpler if you just think of this as a civil war within the German Confederation. The Prussians, along with their ally Italy, defeated Austria in a matter of weeks.

Why did Austria lose so quickly? Well, a lot of it had to do with mobilization. Prussia was better organized, with regional military units, so that when reservists were called up, their unit was nearby. And Prussia had lots of railroads. Austria had fewer railroads, and a habit of stationing its military units far away from their home region, as a way of preventing ethnic uprisings. So Czech units would be stationed in Croatia, Hungarian units in Venice, and so on. So when the mobilization orders went out, Austrian reservists had a much harder time making it to their units.

Beyond that, let's face it, the Austrian Army has a history of looking good on paper and then humiliating itself in the field. We saw that in the Napoleonic era, here in 1866, and, spoiler alert, it isn't going to get any better in the twentieth century.

Anyway, the result of the war was that the old German Confederation was no more. There was a new North German Confederation of Protestant German states, dominated by Prussia. Prussia annexed the north German states that had allied with Austria during the war, and Austria was left with only four southern Catholic German states as allies, most notably Bavaria, the largest German state not named Prussia or Austria.

Once again, heavily in debt and exhausted by war, Austria teetered on the brink of collapse. But once again, it managed to hang on. This time, Franz Josef was forced by circumstances to give the Hungarians much of what they wanted. Now, a lot of Hungarians wanted full independence by this point, but there were those who were willing to settle for autonomy. Under the Compromise of 1867, Hungary would have a separate parliament, and Franz Josef would be recognized as the king, not emperor, of Hungary. The Hungarian parliament would control most government functions in Hungary. Only foreign affairs, the military, and finance would be fully national within this Dual Monarchy, and those matters would have to be voted on by both the Austrian and Hungarian parliaments, effectively giving Hungary a veto.

One of the advantages to Hungary in accepting this arrangement as opposed to holding out for full independence was that Austria at this time was more economically developed, with more industry and more railroads, than was Hungary. Staying in the Dual Monarchy insured that Austrian capital would remain available for investment in Hungary. As a sweetener for Austria, part of the deal was that the Hungarian parliament would take the responsibility for a portion of the Empire's war debts.

And the Austrian Chancellor saw another advantage in pacifying the restless Hungarians: revenge on Prussia. His chance seemed to come three years later, when the French declared war on Prussia. Here was a chance for Austria to jump in that war as a French ally and give Prussia payback for...oops. It turned out that the Hungarian prime minister was not interested in fighting a war against Prussia, and under the new arrangement, he has veto power, so, no war. Bummer.

In fairness, it has to be pointed out that given the Austrian military's miserable record, it's not likely that Austrian intervention in the Franco-Prussian war would have made much of a difference in the outcome anyway, but it's an ominous sign for the future of the Dual Monarchy that Hungary has that veto power over declarations of war, and her governments aren't afraid to use it.

As you know, the 1870 Franco-Prussian war led to the creation of Imperial Germany, and Germany and Austria quickly set aside their differences and entered into an alliance. This was part of Otto von Bismarck's scheme to deprive France of allies, and Austria was an obvious potential French ally, so let's make nice with Austria. Austria and Germany would mutually ally

with Russia, at first, in the Dreikaiserbund, the Three Emperors' League, and later with Italy, in the Triple Alliance.

As we have seen, Germany would never be able to repair its relationship with Russia. Its relationship with Britain deteriorated in the early years of the twentieth century, due largely to Germany's naval buildup, and German relations with France were never very good in the first place. As the Triple Entente gradually came together, and Germany felt increasingly isolated, Austria became more and more valuable as an ally. Partly by the process of elimination, I mean, who else is Germany going to turn to for an alliance? The Ottoman Empire?

On paper, Austria-Hungary looks like a valuable friend. It was the second largest nation in Europe by area, after Russia, and third largest in population, after Russia and Germany. It had a sizeable army and even a naval presence in the Mediterranean. On the down side, Austria bought its military on the cheap, largely because Hungary doesn't want to pay for a larger military and has the power to veto any increase in spending, and also there's Austria's shall we say unimpressive military performance in the wars of the nineteenth century.

As for Austria's own relationship with the entente powers, well, we know that Austria and Russia were often rivals in the Balkans. They both coveted expansion at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. Now, you might think, wasn't there enough territory in the Balkans for Austria and Russia to come to some kind of agreement? Well, yes, there was, and the two countries did make attempts to divide the Balkans between them, but it never worked out. One major obstacle to an agreement between these two powers was that appeals to Slav nationalism were the cornerstone of Russia's efforts to gain influence in the Balkans, while Austria, with her own restless Slav population, was doing everything she could to tamp down Slav nationalism. So, yeah, that's a difference that's hard to resolve. We'll talk more about that next week.

Austria and France grew apart after 1870, partly due to Austria's alliance with Germany, partly because conservative autocratic Catholic Austria was leery of the new, anti-clerical Third Republic. As for Britain, relations between Austria and Britain were traditionally friendly, with Britain seeing Austria as a partner in managing the Mediterranean and in keeping the Russians out. And since Austria had no colonial holdings, there were no conflicts with Britain on that score. On the other hand, the German naval buildup did damage here as well. Because Austria was allied with Germany, and was a naval power herself, the British government began to lump the Austrian Navy together with the German Navy when making their calculations of who was stronger, and by how much. Which meant that any improvements in the Austrian Navy started looking to the British like a threat to their interests.

And so we see Austria, gradually drifting away from the entente powers and into a tighter and tighter embrace with Germany, contributing to the evolution of a bi-polar Europe, with two mutually distrustful coalitions. In many ways, Germany and Austria are far from ideal as alliance partners for each other, but increasingly they find themselves shackled together, like it or not.

We'll have to stop there for today, but I hope you'll join me next week on the History of the Twentieth Century, as we continue the story of Austria-Hungary into the early years of the new century, and examine how this old-fashioned autocratic power copes with, or fails to cope with, the challenges of rising nationalism in the emerging modern world. That's next week, on the History of the Twentieth Century.

Oh, and one more thing. Whenever I think about the Austrian Kaiser, Franz Josef, I am reminded of the Roman Emperor Honorius, who reigned for 28 years, and yet seemed to do little or nothing for all that time, even as the Western Empire was crumbling around him. In his *History of Rome* podcast, Mike Duncan called Honorius "a couch potato of an Emperor." I feel much the same way about Franz Josef.

A French diplomat in Vienna in 1878 wrote of Franz Josef that "[h]e's sympathetic and well liked, but he has no character to speak of; he's a drifter, floating from one system to the next; he has no real friends or confidants; he trusts no one, and inspires confidence in no one, nor does he even believe in himself."

One thing Franz Josef did believe in was the Hapsburg marriage rules. When his heir, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, married a woman who was merely the daughter of a count, the Emperor was infuriated. He insisted that the marriage be morganatic, meaning that it wouldn't count for dynastic purposes, meaning that the Archduke's wife would not be regarded as a Hapsburg and the children would be excluded from the line of succession. The Emperor would enforce protocol strictly against his niece, not even allowing her to sit with her husband and the other Hapsburgs at court functions. This pettiness would continue right up to the couple's funeral in 1914. If only he had been so scrupulous about maintaining and modernizing his Empire.

[music: "On the Beautiful Blue Danube"]