

The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 165
“You Die Waiting for It”
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

VIENNESE!

Learn to know the Italians.

We are flying over Vienna; we could drop tons of bombs. All we are dropping on you is a greeting of three colors: the three colors of liberty.

We Italians do not make war on children, on old people, on women.

We are making war on your government, the enemy of national liberties, on your blind, stubborn, cruel government that can give you neither peace nor bread, and feeds you hatred and illusions.

VIENNESE!

You are famous for being intelligent. But why have you put on the Prussian uniform? By now, you see, the whole world has turned against you.

You want to continue the war? Continue it; it's your suicide. What do you hope for? The decisive victory promised to you by the Prussian generals? Their decisive victory is like the bread of Ukraine: You die waiting for it.

PEOPLE OF VIENNA, think of your own fates. Wake up!

LONG LIVE LIBERTY!

LONG LIVE ITALY!

LONG LIVE THE ENTENTE!

Italian propaganda leaflet dropped over Vienna on August 9, 1918.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 165. You Die Waiting for It.

The year 1917 had been a difficult one for Austria-Hungary, as we've already seen. The Turnip Winter hit Austria at least as hard as Germany. The old Emperor passed on in November 1916, to be succeeded by the 29-year old Kaiser Karl, who inherited all the old nationalities problems that had festered for decades under his predecessor as well as the new problems caused by wartime shortages and unrest.

Then came the Russian Revolution. The new Kaiser and his ministers watched the centuries-old Russian Empire overthrown overnight, and the sight of it concentrated their minds wonderfully. By spring of 1917, the new Emperor and his ministers had come face to face with some terrible truths. First, there was no longer much hope of victory. Austria would not come out of this war with new territories. To the contrary, Austria would be fortunate to escape this war with its existing borders intact.

Second, even victory on the battlefield was unlikely to salvage Austria's hopes. The only hope of victory lay with the Germans, and as the Emperor himself put it in May, "A brilliant German victory would be our ruin." A victorious Germany, master of Europe, would surely seek to dominate Austria just as much as it would France or Russia. Third, the peoples of Austria-Hungary were growing sullen and restless. The policy since 1914 has been autocratic rule and state repression. But the state is losing its grip and the cork cannot be held in the bottle much longer.

The Austrian Emperor put out secret peace feelers to the Allies in 1917, as we saw in episode 141. He also decided to reconvene the Reichsrat, the Austrian parliament, for the first time since the war began. We saw how the Reichsrat had become hopelessly deadlocked back in 1913 as Czech nationalists used parliamentary procedures to bring the body to a screeching halt as a way of protesting the government's failure to enact Czech language rights in Bohemia. The Minister-President, Karl von Stürgkh prorogued the Reichsrat. Government went on as usual on the Hungarian side of the Dual Monarchy, but on the Austrian side, von Stürgkh and the Imperial Council have been ruling by decree. Or at least von Stürgkh was until he was assassinated in October 1916, just weeks before the death of the old Emperor. His assassin, Friedrich Adler, was the son of Victor Adler, the chair of the Austrian Social Democratic Party.

I've mentioned this before, but allow me to underscore that in 1914 the Austrian government went to war by decree, without consulting its own elected Reichsrat. And remember too that Austria was the first nation to issue a declaration of war, against Serbia, the one that began this whole mess. Even autocratic Germany went to war with the support of its Reichstag. Now, in 1917, after the February Revolution and Woodrow Wilson's call to "make the world safe for democracy," Austria's shuttered parliament and its police-state repression make it the epitome of everything the Allies say they are fighting against. Indeed, as Tomáš Masaryk and the Czecho-

Slovak National Council tour the Allied capitals, they are making this very point over and over again to justify independence for Czech and Slovak peoples.

So for all these reasons, and most of all for the anger and unrest in his empire, Kaiser Karl made the decision to call the Reichsrat back into session on May 30. And since you can't have a parliament and a representative government without a certain degree of political freedom, the Kaiser had no choice but to ease up on the political repression. And on July 2, he pardoned hundreds of political prisoners, some of whom were members of the Reichsrat.

These were laudable moves, but if the goal was to bring the Empire together in a new spirit of harmony and reconciliation, it fell well short. All these reforms accomplished was to take the lid off the pot, as it were, and reveal the same simmering ethnic resentments and conflicts that had been paralyzing Austria-Hungary through those last years before the war. Czech nationalists, including many in the Czech delegation to the Reichsrat, now freed from the threat of arrest, openly embraced for the first time the calls of their expatriate cousins for an independent Czecho-Slovak state. (South Slavs, too. I'll have more to say about them in a minute.) Or if not outright independence, there was a renewal of calls to reorganize Austria-Hungary from a bi-national state into a multi-national federation of ethnic states.

And as we've seen before in Austria-Hungary, even modest steps to grant the Empire's Slav subjects more ethnic and cultural rights triggers a backlash from the German and Magyar communities. Angry officials in Budapest spoke of severing the Dual Monarchy rather than give up Hungarian rule over Slovak or Croatian lands and German-speakers in Bohemia regarded elevating Czech to the status of an official language tantamount to treason, even when it was the Emperor suggesting it.

Equally significant was the fact that the opening of the Reichsrat and the more open political climate made it apparent just how unpopular the war was. Even as the Reichsrat session began, protests and riots broke out in the major cities of the Empire over the latest cuts in the bread ration. Industrial workers in Bohemia, the industrial heartland of the Empire, went on strike. These strikes and demonstrations quickly turned political. In Prague, workers were marching through the streets chanting, "Long live Masaryk!"

Things weren't going so well for Austria-Hungary on the battlefield either. It was in the midst of all this internal unrest that the Russians began the Kerensky Offensive, episode 146, which may have ended badly for the Russians, but it began badly for the Austrians, with the rout of the Austrian Fourth Army. The Italian front saw the Tenth and Eleventh Battles of the Isonzo at about the same time, episode 150. Austria surely would have collapsed militarily by the end of 1917, had it not been for timely German intervention on both of these fronts. In the East, the Germans turned a defeat into a victory. Then came the October Revolution, armistice, and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. On the Italian front, German assistance made possible the Battle of Caporetto, a humiliating defeat for Italy.

By early 1918, the Germans were moving large numbers of their soldiers to the Western Front in the hopes of finishing off the French. This included withdrawing all German units from the Italian front, but here's the thing. The Eastern Front is no more, and the Italians are still rebuilding from last year's disaster. Italian command currently estimates that the Italian Army will not be able to mount another offensive until 1919 at the earliest.

What the current strategic situation means is the Austrian Army is enjoying an unusual respite. The only front lines it has to defend now are the Italian front, where not much is happening, and the Balkan front, where Austria and Bulgaria are keeping a wary eye on the Greeks and a few French and British units. In other words, nothing much is happening there, either. So Austria was safe enough for the time being, but the Empire's secure strategic position masked its crumbling domestic political position. In December 1917, the United States declared war on Austria-Hungary, though Woodrow Wilson was careful to state that "we do not wish in any way to impair or rearrange the Austro-Hungarian Empire." In his January 1918 statement of war aims, David Lloyd George told the Trades Union Congress that "a break-up of Austria-Hungary is no part of our war aims." And when Woodrow Wilson set out his Fourteen Points, he merely asked that the peoples of Austria-Hungary "be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development," whatever that might mean.

Meanwhile, in Austria-Hungary, the winter of 1917-18 was unusually fierce. Food was in short supply, a replay of the Turnip Winter. By April 1918, the Austrian military command was expressing doubts about whether the nation could continue to feed its own army. The hoped-for grain imports from Ukraine following peace with Russia never amounted to more than a trickle.

There were shortages of other necessities. The government solicited donations of used underwear for the troops and encouraged the public to bury the dead naked to save on clothing.

[music: Kreisler, "Liebeslied"]

Okay, I promised you a look at the South Slavs, so let's now turn our attention to them. Remember that the Slavic peoples are divided into three groups, East, West, and South. The South Slavs are the Slavs of the Balkans and include Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, and Bulgarians, among others.

We've talked in the past couple of episodes about the rising tide of Czech and Slovak nationalism that sought first autonomy, and later independence, from the Empire. We also saw the development of a joint Czecho-Slovak national aspiration, based on the principles that larger states are more secure than smaller states and that ethnically similar Slavs could more readily trust one other to honor their respective national identities than they could the ethnically more foreign Germans and Magyars.

Nationalism was also rising among the South Slavs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which would lead to the creation of the Croat-Serb Coalition in 1905, and later the Yugoslav

Committee. Now, the word “Yugoslav” is simply a Slavic way of saying “South Slav,” although in practice the term would be limited to the South Slavs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbia, or to put it another way, it would exclude Bulgarians from the definition.

There are historical and cultural reasons for this. Most importantly, the Croat and Serb languages are very similar, leading some in these movements to conclude that Croats and Serbs were not so much separate ethnic groups as a subdivision within one nation of people. Others would include Slovenes, and argue that Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were really three subgroups of one people. Not everyone agrees, of course. And notice how when I’ve discussed these ethnic similarities between Czechs and Slovaks or among the South Slavs, I keep coming back to language as the marker of ethnic difference. This is the way ethnic identities were understood during this period. In our time, ethnographers would put less of an emphasis on language and more on other cultural factors to determine which ethnic groups are distinct, similar, or the same. But in the early twentieth century, language was everybody’s favorite ethnic yardstick.

The Yugoslav independence movement within Austria-Hungary saw the same advantages in banding together that the Czecho-Slovak independence movement saw. Like the Czechs and the Slovaks, Yugoslavs were divided between Austria, which was where most of the Slovenes lived, and Hungary, which was where most of the Croats lived, with the added complication that the recently annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, where most of the Empire’s Serbs live, was governed jointly by Austria and Hungary.

And then there was the Serbian state. Most Yugoslav independence advocates envisioned including Serbia and Montenegro in the future Yugoslav state they hoped to build. Exactly how this overarching Yugoslav state would be governed was an open question. Would it be a centralized monarchy, a Greater Serbia? Or would it be a federal state, with distinct and autonomous ethnic provinces within the larger nation? Of course, how you envision the structure of the Yugoslav state depends on how closely related you believed these ethnic groups to be. Those who believed they were distinct but related ethnic groups, in the way Czechs and Slovaks were distinct but related, then you liked the federalist idea. If you were among those who believed that Croats and Serbs and Slovenes were mostly the same ethnic group, you would more likely support a more centralized state, and believe that political unity would eventually lead the South Slavs to embrace ethnic and cultural unity.

This latter idea was most definitely what was going on in the minds of the Serbian government in exile, led by Nikola Pašić. You remember him. The prime minister of Serbia since 1912. During the collapse of Serbia in 1915, the Serbian government moved to the island of Corfu, where it still exists as a government in exile, still led by the now 71-year-old Pašić.

The secret London agreement of 1915—the same agreement that bribed Italy into joining the Allies by promising the Italians Austrian territory in the Alps and along the Adriatic coast—had also promised Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia after the war. A significant portion of the

population of Bosnia is Serb, and these Bosnian Serbs are among the most oppressed of Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the most militant of nationalists. (Remember Gavrilo Princip? The young Bosnian Serb who started this whole mess by assassinating Archduke Ferdinand?) Those Bosnian Serbs certainly would be happier living within the Kingdom of Serbia after the war, but why not the other Yugoslavs as well?

The Serbian government had always tended toward the view that the Bosniak Muslims and the Croats and the Slovenes were all simply Serbs who didn't know it yet. In the view of Serbian leaders like Pašić, Yugoslav nationalist yearnings would be best satisfied by a Greater Serbia. Simply take the existing Serbian state and expand its borders northward until all the kingdom's Slavic cousins are included under the rule of its existing King and government and constitution and using the Serb language, in a manner similar to how Italian unification went down.

The Yugoslav Committee, on the other hand, was created and led mostly by Slovene and Croat intellectuals from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They were more educated and cosmopolitan and tended to look down on Serbia as an underdeveloped mountain backwater, populated by illiterate shepherds and rustics badly in need of the enlightening influence of their more advanced cousins to the north. The members of the Yugoslav Committee, operating in London and Paris and Rome, were far more likely to believe in the federalist model and far more likely to be skeptical about the benefits of merely incorporating their nations into a Greater Serbia. They had friends in the British and French governments, and like the Czechs and Slovaks, they also had substantial émigré communities in the United States that supported the Yugoslav Committee politically and financially.

For a time, their differing visions for the postwar Yugoslav state prevented the Yugoslav Committee and the Serbian government from coming to terms. But the fact remained that they would be stronger and more influential if they worked together. Italian territorial ambitions in the region also loomed as a threat to Slovene and Croatian national ambitions. And after the February Revolution of 1917 and the overthrow of the Russian Emperor, Serbia lost its staunchest supporter among the Allied governments, and the danger now existed that the British and the French might prefer to recognize the Yugoslav Committee as the government of postwar Yugoslavs. Both sides thus found the need for unity outweighing the issues that divided them, and in July of that year, the Serbian government and the Yugoslav Committee came together to sign the Corfu Declaration.

This was a compromise agreement that called for a post-war Yugoslav state in the form of a constitutional democracy, under the current Serbian King Peter and his Karađorđević dynasty, but also with a Constituent Assembly, to be elected under universal suffrage that would establish a constitution respecting freedom of religion and the national rights of the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, including the use of both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets for official purposes.

The devil is in the details, as they say, but for now, the various Yugoslavs are agreed that their common interests are more important than their differences, and have promised to bridge those differences in a respectful and democratic way. So that's a start.

[music: "Igre iz Bele krajine"]

In the spring of 1918 the British and US governments were still disavowing any interest in breaking up the Habsburg Empire. The Czecho-Slovak National Council and the Yugoslav Committee both welcomed the US declaration of war against Austria in December, but both continued to insist on independence for their respective constituencies.

The rest of 1918, though, would see the fortunes of these Slav independence groups rise as Austria-Hungary descended into a spiral that would lead to the destruction of the Empire. The year began with another wave of strikes and labor unrest in the Empire's major cities. The striking workers organized worker's councils modeled after Russian soviets and chanted Bolshevik slogans.

After the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed, the Russians began repatriating the two million plus Austrian Army prisoners they held in Siberia, but because of the deteriorating situation in Russia, this process was anything but organized. In many cases, the Russians had simply thrown open the doors of the POW camps, leaving the prisoners to make the journey home by their own means. Returning POWs crossed the frontier into the Empire by the thousands every day, hungry, sick, and in many cases brimming with Bolshevik ideology. Understandably, these bedraggled prisoners wanted nothing more than to return to their homes and families, but first they were put through quarantine and questioning, in an effort to filter out Bolshevik sympathizers. Then they were re-equipped, though given the shortages, hardly anyone got new uniforms. Soldiers were lucky to get a new cap. Some were simply given armbands to wear over civilian clothing.

Next the returning POWs were put through another round of military training. Then and only then, after having been treated like traitors and subjected to conditions hardly better than what they had left behind in Russia, they were given four weeks' leave to visit their homes. Soldiers who spent years in Siberia dreaming about the happy land they had left behind now returned to find towns falling into disrepair, food shortages, protests, and a general breakdown of order. You can imagine their reactions after they returned from leave and the Army sent them back to the front.

Austria was desperate for soldiers; the POWs were just as desperate not to fight. Desertions and mutinies became endemic, and Austria-Hungary, like Russia before her, became plagued with soldiers turned bandits roaming the countryside, hundreds of thousands of them.

On January 6, 1918, in what would be called the Epiphany Declaration, 150 leading Czechs in Prague, including Czech representatives in the Reichsrat, made a public call for independence

and for Czech representation at the treaty talks in Brest-Litovsk. That never happened, but on April 13, at a demonstration at Smetana Hall in Prague, hundreds of Czechs swore an oath to take up arms for independence.

That same day, the Austrian foreign minister, Count Czernin, gave a speech attacking Tomáš Masaryk and the expatriate independence movement, as well as those in Prague supporting them. Perhaps it was because of German successes on the Western Front, perhaps something was in the air, but Czernin felt confident enough that day not only to make these ringing denunciations of the Czech turncoats at home and abroad, but also to make the entirely false claim that the French government had contacted Vienna with a request for peace talks. The French government denied this story, but Czernin kept repeating it.

Back in episode 141, I told you about the secret negotiations the Austrian Kaiser had attempted with the French last year. Czernin hadn't know about those, but his insulting claims that the French were looking to talk peace provoked French prime minister Georges Clemenceau to make public those secret discussions, which led to humiliation for Kaiser Karl, who at first denied it, prompting Clemenceau to release documents that proved it, which in turn led to Czernin's resignation and exit from the foreign ministry.

This incident created a worldwide sensation, not to mention strains in the alliance between Austria and Germany. Even some Austrians criticized their Emperor for going behind the Germans' back to negotiate with the Allies. In May, Kaiser Karl would be forced to take a humiliating trip to Spa, the Belgian town where the German Army headquarters is now located, in order to grovel before Kaiser Wilhelm and the German high command and sign a new alliance agreement with Germany. The Germans already had effective command over the Austrian Army; this new agreement increased that authority as well as giving the Germans control of Austrian railroads and arms industries and put Austria into a customs union with Germany, effectively making Austria-Hungary into something close to a German protectorate.

Also in the month of April, Italy hosted a conference in Rome of dissidents from Austria-Hungary representing a spectrum of ethnic minorities: Czechs and Slovaks, South Slavs, Poles, Romanians, and Italians. They all pledged to work together against Habsburg rule and support their mutual aspirations for independence. The Italian government organized Czecho-Slovak units within its army and on April 21 Italy and the Czecho-Slovak National Council entered into a formal alliance agreement. France and the Council had entered into a similar agreement back in February, meaning that two of the four major Allied powers were now treating with the Council as a Czecho-Slovak government in exile.

Also by this time, unrest had broken out even in the province of Galicia. Galicia is a majority Polish province, and the Poles there have a degree of autonomy that made them traditionally Austria-Hungary's most loyal Slavic population. That changed after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed in March. Over the weeks that followed, it gradually emerged that Austria had

secretly agreed to cede a predominantly Ukrainian region of Galicia to the new Ukrainian nation in exchange for those shipments of grain. This arrangement was derided among Galician Poles as “the bread peace” and “the Fourth Polish Partition.”

Add to this the same food shortages, banditry, and breakdown of order that other parts of the Empire were experiencing, and by spring there were anti-government protests and rioting in Galicia, too. In the city of Kraków, a community with a large Jewish population and a long tradition of peaceful relations between its Jewish and non-Jewish citizens, the anti-government unrest turned into anti-Semitic violence. Many of the city’s merchants and shopkeepers were Jewish, and as food shortages and price increases became intolerable, rumors flew that these Jewish merchants were hoarding food in order to raise prices. The fact that Austrian Jews have traditionally been among the Habsburg emperors’ most loyal subjects probably didn’t help. Violence against Jews and Jewish retribution were on the rise across the Empire, until the Empire’s inability to protect its Jewish subjects began to turn even Vienna’s elite and influential Jewish community against the Dual Monarchy.

Woodrow Wilson had listed an independent Poland as one of his Fourteen Points back in January. By June 1918, Britain and France had also endorsed a Polish state as one of their war aims. Wilson however, continued to resist the idea of breaking up Austria-Hungary. The US Secretary of State, Robert Lansing was convinced from the beginning that this was not good enough, and that the Empire would have to be dismantled. You’ll recall that Tomáš Masaryk had arrived in the US in May 1918 and was being received warmly as he toured the country, arguing the case for Czecho-Slovak independence, even as in Russia, the Czechoslovak Legion was seizing control of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

On May 31, in Pittsburgh, a city that was home to many Slovak-Americans, representatives of the Czech and Slovak communities in the United States came together the day after Masaryk arrived to speak and signed the Pittsburgh Agreement, calling for a joint Czech and Slovak state with special guarantees of Slovak autonomy. This agreement was similar to the Cleveland Agreement of two years ago, but it included greater protections for Slovak interests, and it was signed by eight Czech and eight Slovak representatives of the Czecho-Slovak National Council. A couple of weeks later, Tomáš Masaryk finally got his meeting with Woodrow Wilson.

Most Americans at this time probably couldn’t have shown you on a map where the Czechs and the Slovaks lived, but the newspapers were full of stories of the plucky exploits of the Czechoslovak Legion in faraway Siberia, those soldiers who, despite the fall of Russia and Bolshevik pacifism, refused to give up the fight for their homeland. Add to that the publicity efforts of hundreds of thousands of Czech- and Slovak-Americans campaigning for independence and packing the halls whenever Masaryk spoke.

In August, the British government joined the French and Italian governments in recognizing the Czecho-Slovak National Council. In September, Washington followed suit. Czecho-Slovakia, the

state not yet born, now had in addition to an army, an internationally recognized government, albeit a government in exile.

In June, the Austrian Army attempted an ill-advised offensive on the Italian front, an effort to break the Italian line along the Piave River and force another retreat. Austrian soldiers were short on food, equipment, and morale, and the offensive accomplished nothing, other than costing Austria another 100,000 casualties it could not afford. In the aftermath, recriminations flew during the debates in the Reichsrat, as deputies questioned the wisdom and the sanity of the military command. You will not be surprised to hear that General Conrad was one of the commanders of the failed offensive.

On August 9, Italy retaliated with a dramatic propaganda gesture. A squadron of Italian planes made the 1,200 kilometer round trip flight from Italian-controlled northern Italy to Vienna. The squadron was led by the flamboyant Italian writer and fighter pilot Gabriele D'Annunzio, a celebrity in Italy, and it dropped hundreds of thousands of propaganda leaflets on the Austrian capital. I read the text from one of them at the top of the episode. This was a risky and arduous undertaking in 1918, but it was successful, a propaganda coup that delighted Italians and further undermined morale in Vienna, where people began to refer jokingly to their Emperor, Karl the First, as "Karl the Last."

For indeed, in the aftermath of that final, failed offensive, Austria—her military, her government, her Emperor—have no more options. It was not even clear what Vienna ruled anymore. The different ethnic regions of the Empire increasingly were going their own ways, simply disregarding dictates from the capital. Austria seemed on the brink of collapse and it was not clear what the Kaiser or the government in Vienna could do to prevent it.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks to every one of you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Martin for his donation, and thank you, Bill, for becoming a patron of the podcast. You know, I always try to show appreciation to our donors and patrons, because some podcasts give donors or patrons exclusive content. I don't want to do that here, because I want my podcast to be available to everyone, every bit of it, all in one place, without regard for ability to pay. I realize that many of my listeners aren't in a position to donate money, and that's okay! The most important thing you can do to support the podcast is just be a listener. But I am always grateful to all of you who have donated or continue to donate. You help keep the podcast going, for yourselves and for everyone else. Thank you again.

And I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we check in on the latest developments in Bolshevik Russia, a nation that is, as Winston Churchill will put it twenty years from now, "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. As Austria spiraled into destruction, vicious rumors began to circulate aimed at the Kaiser's wife, Kaiserin Zita. Remember the cruel accusations made against the

German-born Russian Empress Alexandra in the final days of Imperial Russia? In 1918, Zita was subjected to the same treatment. Zita had been born in Italy and spoke German with an Italian accent. In the final days of Austria-Hungary, she was rumored to be secretly in league with the Italians and the French to undermine the Empire. It was her brother who had written the letters to the French government that had embarrassed the Emperor so. Now it was suggested that she had tipped off the Italians to the Austrian offensive along the Piave, which was why it had ended so badly. Rumors flew that she had been imprisoned, locked up in a castle by her husband, so that she could do no further harm to the Austrian war effort.

None of this was true, but as with Russia, it demonstrates how in the final days of the Empire, even the wealthy, the powerful, the aristocrats, began to turn against the Imperial dynasty, and how the wife always makes a convenient stand-in when it is too dangerous to criticize the husband.

[music: Closing War Theme]