

# A EUROPE LOST

Kevin J. McNamara

*Heart of Europe: A History of the Holy Roman Empire*

By Peter H. Wilson

(Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap, 2016)

*The Habsburg Empire: A New History*

By Pieter M. Judson

(Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap, 2016)

Whether prompted by the liberation of Europe from its Cold War division, the dramas of the European Union, or the approaching hundredth anniversary of the demise of Austria-Hungary, books about united Europe's multinational past are gaining traction. Among the more interesting have been Simon Winder's amusing if wholly anecdotal *Danubia: A Personal History of Habsburg Europe*, and Adam Kożuchowski's postmortem, *The Afterlife of Austria-Hungary: The Image of the Habsburg Monarchy in Interwar Europe*.

The Habsburg dynasty leads one back to the fabled realm of Charlemagne, who inspired the creation of a *Sacrum Romanum Imperium*, which spawned the anomaly of Austria-Hungary, which collapsed in 1918.

What both the Holy Roman Empire and Austria-Hungary shared was a yearning to resuscitate ancient Rome's original empire of law, peace, and order, "the fairest part of the earth," said Edward Gibbon, "and the most civilized portion of mankind." They largely succeeded, then suddenly vanished, which raises existential questions about the fate of empires, nations, peoples—and of Europe. Grounded in scholarship and devoid of cant, Wilson and Judson make ambitious arguments on behalf of the strengths and legacies of these regimes.

Governing longer than a thousand years, more than twice as long as did imperial Rome, the Holy Roman Empire encompassed present-day Germany and all or part of Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark,

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France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, and Switzerland. Voltaire famously quipped that it was neither Holy, Roman, nor an empire, but he was wrong on all three counts. It was a very real empire, one built on faith and oriented toward Rome.

Viewing civilization itself as a blending of “Christianity and the ancient imperial Roman legacy,” Charlemagne and Pope Leo III jointly created the Holy Roman Empire. They consciously selected Christmas Day 800 for the coronation, Wilson says, which “that year fell on a Sunday and was believed to be exactly 7,000 years since the Creation.” Aiming to restore a western Roman Empire, Charlemagne “believed he was being made *Roman* emperor” (italics in the original), since the eastern Byzantine throne was vacant. Assisted by the seizure of the eastern Mediterranean by Muslim forces, Europe’s center of gravity shifted from the Mediterranean to a north-south axis centered on present-day Germany and Italy.

Still, relationships between popes and emperors were always tense; the first wanted protection; the second, God’s blessings. The low point came in 1527, when imperial troops sacked Rome. The Reformation elevated religious conflict, most famously in the anti-Catholic Defenestration of Prague in 1618, which sparked the Thirty Years War. The agreements of 1648 ending the war, the Peace of Westphalia, have long been touted as replacing Christian imperial rule with our nation-state system. Yet, Wilson notes, Westphalia “did not remove religion from imperial politics, still less inaugurate a fully secular international order, but it did signal the defeat of militant confessionism,” and thus the end of religious wars. It did this, however, by permanently fixing the official faith of each territory as it had existed in 1624. Rather than attack faith, the accords took aim at war.

Wilson explains why this might have been important: “Virtually all the men ruling the Empire before the sixteenth century were successful warriors, with many of them owing their position to victory over domestic rivals.” And while Wilson focuses on how the empire was governed, he does not neglect the endemic levels of violence that accompanied this governance. “Armed retaliation through feuds remained a legal way to seek redress under imperial law,” for example, and “considerable violence” could accompany changes in who was subordinated to whom. Disputes among princes in the Rhineland destroyed 1,200 villages in one period.

Despite the military orientation of its rulers, Wilson says, “The Empire’s hierarchy was not a chain of command, but a multi-layered structure allowing individuals and groups to disobey one authority whilst still professing loyalty to another.” Identity itself was multilayered, based on status, which was conferred on groups—such as princes, peasants, or members of a guild—rather than on individuals. Identity and status were in turn based on relationships, such that even social striving and economic mobility were determined by competition among groups. “Politics involved networks and chains of obligations and responsibilities, not uniform control of clearly bounded territories.” Over time, however, the imperial estates were arranged in an increasingly rigid status hierarchy, and emperors began to share power with bodies, such as the Reichstag, which represented not “the people” but the imperial estates consisting of princes, lords, and imperial cities.

While not every king of the empire was also crowned emperor, the two titles merged after Habsburgs began succeeding one another in 1438; coronations moved from Rome to Germany, in part because emperors by the late 1550s were forced to recognize the

fifty principalities and three dozen imperial cities in which Protestantism was the official faith. Emperors maintained their vow to respect, if not always obey, the pope. In its early years, “secular power was inconceivable without reference to divine authority,” and even in the face of encroaching secularism, neither the empire nor Austria-Hungary ever abandoned its religious foundations.

The empire was neither state nor nation, lacking most things we associate with modern realms, such as a stable heartland, capital city, a shared language, a common culture, a single patron saint, or centralized institutions, such as a standing army (it raised its forces from its constituent imperial estates). Hierarchy mattered more than geographic boundaries, and control over people was the goal; it was the only way to exploit land. Today we are not so far removed from this state of affairs. The borders of Germany, the state that is the empire’s principal successor, have never stopped shifting, and human capital is again at least as important to economic success as territory.

Faith was central. “Medieval monarchs were expected to build churches and cathedrals,” Wilson says. Charlemagne founded 27 cathedrals and 232 monasteries and abbeys. “Otherwise, their role was primarily to uphold peace, justice, and the honor of the Empire. Changing circumstances, like violence, rebellions, or invasions were not seen as ‘problems’ to be ‘solved’ through new laws, better institutions, or more coherent frontiers.” If human nature was sinful, human behavior was to be managed. “As with justice, politics in the Empire was more about managing than resolving problems and was in many ways more realistic and often more humane than methods employed in other countries.”

The empire “placed a premium on pre-

serving peace through consensus rather than through any absolute concept of justice,” Wilson says, perhaps because Christianity defined the absolutes. This encouraged certain freedoms, yet freedom was never seen as an individual right but rather “as local and particular, shared by members of corporate groups and incorporated communities. These were local and particular *liberties*, not abstract *Liberty* shared equally by all inhabitants” (italics in the original). Freedom for *us*, in other words, which was granted only to select groups by the state. Group rights, so relentlessly promoted by the left today, clearly have a strong European lineage, though the groups that eventually won complete sovereignty within separate states were based on ethnicity and language, and some of these promoted individual rights among their kin.

Yet the empire’s decentralization also promoted widespread cultural activity, patronage, and educational opportunities, and may have also provided the spark for two innovations of the empire: printing and a regular postal network, both of which linked disparate lands. Literate residents enjoyed daily newspapers long before the French or English; censorship would prove difficult. “For most of the empire’s history,” Wilson notes, “its most dynamic economic regions were those of the greatest political fragmentation.”

Halfway through Wilson’s epic history—which includes 35 illustrations, 16 tables, 22 maps, 7 family trees, and a 55-page chronology—the author introduces Count Rudolf I, the first Habsburg to be elected Holy Roman emperor. Rudolf used his election in 1273 to secure the old duchy of Austria for his family, whose holdings continued to expand from this new base. Through alliances and strategic marriages, the Habsburgs amassed the largest heredity realm inside the empire

but also acquired a separate dynastic realm outside the empire, as large as the empire. This gave them a freer hand, and the wealth required to rule the older empire. By 1700, Prussia's Hohenzollern dynasty, the only other German dynasty ruling sovereign lands outside the empire, was a growing threat, and their rivalry began to eclipse the empire, now increasingly squeezed between the Prussians and the Austrians. By the 1740s, the two powers had come to blows.

This is where Judson's history picks up the story of the Habsburg dynasty, with the reigns of two successive Habsburg reformers, Empress Maria Theresa and her son, Joseph II. Judson does not pretend to offer a comprehensive history of the Habsburg realm and instead focuses on its last 170-odd years, which the author believes left a lasting legacy.

When not feuding or fighting one another, both Austria and Prussia led late eighteenth-century reform efforts that expanded the traditional definition of the "common good" to include happiness, and, Wilson says, "happiness was now defined by material welfare and physical well-being, rather than in moral-religious terms." Sacred church properties were converted into schools and hospitals, and over time cash and contracts replaced the status-and-privileges economy. The modern world dawned in Central Europe through the growing power of the empire's Prussian and Austrian regimes, which tended to make the empire itself look weak and antiquated. The empire's formal demise, Wilson says, "coincided with the emergence of modern nationalism," and revolutionary and Napoleonic France indeed lit the fires of European nationalism, which sooner found a home in Protestant Prussia than in Catholic Austria-Hungary.

Yet Wilson makes the point that "the Empire fractured incrementally under relentless French battering." Judson's history

confirms that the Habsburgs had perhaps fifty years to drag their own realm into the modern age before the wars with France began. With Prussia holding his jacket, Napoleon in 1805 conquered Vienna, home of the last Holy Roman emperor, Francis II, who dissolved the empire in 1806 and ruled Austria-Hungary as Francis I. The locus of multinational rule shifted to the Habsburgs, whose realm by 1914 occupied present-day Austria, Hungary, Czech and Slovak republics, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, northern Italy, southern Poland, and western Ukraine and Romania. Austria-Hungary entered the Great War as a great power, the second-largest in land and the third-most populated.

Judson has gone to a lot of trouble to make a strong case for the Habsburgs but fails to persuade that this particular dynasty brought a greater good to Europe than other regimes or left a more positive legacy. His argument seems aimed at those who believe the Austro-Hungarian Empire was an uncultured anachronism suffering under dictatorial rule; they may find Judson's work enlightening.

Yet even Judson concedes that Maria Theresa's reforms were driven by the military defeat Austria suffered at the hands of Prussia in her first year. "She needed funds, she needed troops, and she needed both immediately," he says. Her reform initiatives were really nation-building efforts designed to produce higher tax revenues and a standing army. She and her successor emancipated the serfs, mandated education requirements for children, took a regular census with queries on literacy and hygiene, instituted house-numbering, and allowed a proliferation of civic institutions and associations.

"For many Austrians," Judson says, "the empire constituted an alternative source of

symbolic and real power that might not outweigh the power of local elites, but could at least temper it.” A tepid endorsement even for Austrians, this sidesteps how the Habsburg Empire was perceived by its Croats, Czechs, Hungarians, Italians, Poles, Romanians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenes, and Ukrainians. An example of peasant loyalty offered by Judson is the slaughter of Polish nationalists in 1846 by Polish peasants who feared that independence for Polish Galicia would sever their ties to the Habsburgs. Vienna’s always-turbulent yet entrenched partnership with Budapest, for another example, consigned Hungary’s own minorities—who included Croats, Romanians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenes, and Ukrainians—to second-class subjects who were strongly “encouraged” to learn Hungarian. Judson celebrates the great socialist victory in the election of 1907, the first one after universal manhood suffrage was enacted. Yes, the Social Democrats “became the largest single party in Parliament,” but that election also smashed the German majority in the Austrian Reichsrat (or parliament), electing 233 Germans to 283 non-Germans to the lower house, including 103 Czechs. Alas, many Czech socialists were also strong nationalists; they opposed Habsburg rule.

Judson is correct that many of Vienna’s subjects served in a common military, voted, followed parliamentary debates, read newspapers, discussed issues in coffee houses, celebrated military victories, and developed attachments to Habsburg rule, yet these civic roles were both circumscribed and exhibited in other states. The author offers up individual paintings and specific acts of military heroism as additional examples of the peoples’ love of their multinational regime. Yes, “the survival of empire would require some degree of popular legitimation,” which Habsburg rule did, in fact, enjoy, but almost

every regime has enjoyed “some” support. Yes, the Habsburgs undermined the power of the nobility over time, but Vienna did this in service to state power and higher taxes.

The underside of Habsburg reforms included a greater centralization of power and governance in Vienna, and an insistence on one-size-fits-all solutions, which were not appropriate in every corner of their own empire. Centralization required a single language of administration; when German was chosen, it provoked opposition from other language groups, stoking nationalism. As Catholic piety and dynastic respect eroded, Vienna came to rely on the modern, and more secular, instruments of power, a large bureaucracy and standing army. Police-state tactics were also employed, prompting one critic to quip that Habsburg rule rested on the support of “a standing army of soldiers, a kneeling army of worshippers, and a crawling army of informants.” To his credit, Judson recounts all this, but such behaviors make the regime like any other.

On the subject of nationalism, Judson’s arguments diverge from reality. “The existence of nationalist movements and nationalist conflicts in Austro-Hungarian politics did not weaken the state fatally, and they certainly did not cause its downfall in 1918,” he says, yet written evidence to the contrary could bury Vienna in paper. Regarding the First World War, he writes that “stories about mass Czech desertions or refusals to fight were in fact myths—often propagated by German nationalists or military leaders—to help the military deflect attention from its utter incompetence especially in the first year of the war.”

Someone should have told the nearly 10,000 Czechs and Slovaks who defected to the Allied Russian Army on the Eastern Front, and the tens of thousands more

who defected to the Allied Czecho-Slovak Legion, which gave Czech independence leader Tomas G. Masaryk an army of 50,000–65,000 battle-hardened soldiers, whom he lent to France, Austria-Hungary's enemy, as I recount in *Dreams of a Great Small Nation* (2016). This was crucial to the fall of the Habsburgs, whose regime survived the end of the Holy Roman Empire by only 112 years.

The nationalist movements might have failed but for the war—with its dire food and fuel shortages, cold, hunger, desperate refugees and army deserters, mutinies in the army, and martial law for civilians—yet war happened, and the nationalists triumphed as a result. The Habsburg Empire might have survived, but it was in fact succeeded by nation-states. “Contrary to the perceptions of contemporary protagonists and later historians,” Judson argues, “November 1918 did not mark a radical break with the past.” This may be true in an anthropological sense, but his work is a history of a government that ruled a certain territory, and both governments and their territories radically changed in 1918.

The Holy Roman Empire, Wilson says, “was neither a bucolic, harmonious old-worldly utopia, nor a direct blueprint for the European Union.” If not a blueprint, it was—and I believe, remains—an inspiration. Charles de Gaulle characterized Franco-German cooperation in 1950 as “picking up Charlemagne’s project, this time on modern economic, social, strategic and cultural grounds,” and the last Habsburg heir, Otto von Habsburg, asserted in 1976 that “the imperial idea will rise again in the form of European unity.”

European unity has indeed risen from the dead but, like Frankenstein’s monster, it remains only half-alive because Europe’s

elites disavow the kinds of ideals, principles, or beliefs that have always held together our political communities. Most everyone is hostile to dynasties, kings, and emperors. Unlike the masses, however, European elites are also hostile to other value systems that have long held Europe together, namely, Christianity, nationalism, and democracy.

Both Catholicism and Protestantism, along with an important Jewish element, were essential public supports of both the Holy Roman Empire and the Habsburg Empire. Indeed, since at least AD 800, this thing we call “Europe” has been largely a by-product of Judeo-Christian civilization. Its more recent love affair with nationalism has offered a substitute value system, but since both religion and nationalism are now deemed retrograde, one can only wonder what value system will unify Europe now. What spirit, aspiration, or ideal might animate European hearts and provide the connective tissue or civic glue for its peoples?

More to the point—how might the EU survive potentially fatal blows from Islamic terrorism or Russian aggression? Who will die to defend the EU? An alarmist question, yes, but the EU’s weaknesses are striking. Its leaders are unable or unwilling to stop a million-plus refugees from swarming its cities, and it has persistently failed to assimilate Muslims who have lived in Europe for decades. Even its currency and trade benefits are in crisis. Answers to the above questions are not forthcoming because, while secularism was draining Europe of its traditional faiths, a successor faith, relativism, has drained Europe of any faith in itself—its values, its self-confidence, and its desire to assert itself in any way.

The European Union could probably survive without the symbolic unity provided by an emperor or dynasty. Surviving the loss of the unifying power of its Judeo-Christian

heritage, which sustained the Holy Roman Empire and Austria-Hungary, may prove more problematic. Its Judeo-Christian values were downplayed, even disavowed, in the EU constitution adopted in 2004, shortly after its fifteen members added another ten, almost all of them former Soviet satellites, most of them Slavic, whose only commonality with western Europe was their Judeo-Christian faith. All that these twenty-five nations now share is a somewhat-common culture and a commitment to democracy—except that the ten new members are infant democracies whose cultural legacies were shattered and suppressed by Nazi and Soviet rule. Culture is unlikely to save the EU while millions of Europe’s Muslims adhere to very different cultural values, and while indigenous Europeans are discouraged from cultivating religious, ethnic, or nationalist ties at the same time Muslims are protected and encouraged to pursue their own values.

Any commitment to democracy, on the other hand, remains a pipe dream as long as the EU itself suffers from a persistent “democratic deficit” that is alienating its peoples. There is no real EU “government,” since there is no European polity, just a collection of nations failing to create a multinational regime. A 2014 Pew Research Center poll of more than seven thousand EU residents found that only 30–36 percent approved of the European Parliament, European Commission, or European Central Bank. Seventy-one percent “think their voices do not count in the EU.” Worse, critics of the EU are found on both the left and the right, which implies that possible solutions to the EU’s defects that might please some may anger others.

Political communities much stronger than the EU have vanished in the past, which is the relevant lesson of the Wilson and Judson histories. The most recent of

them, Austria-Hungary, was eerily similar to the EU—except that its peoples enjoyed stronger dynastic, religious, parliamentary, and even ethnic-nationalist loyalties that bound them together as one.

Viennese culture in its final decades was advanced, modern, and experimental. It enjoyed lively theaters, vigorous newspapers, and exquisite museums, and its intellectuals debated Marxism, psychoanalysis, and the avant-garde in art as well, all of which confirmed a rising liberal faith in science, reason, and progress, much like today. Austria-Hungary was also more prosperous than ever in its last decades, in part because, like the EU, it enjoyed the largest free-trade area in Europe outside Russia, as well as a currency union, like the euro zone. This monetary union operated for almost fifty years without serious disruption, according to British scholar Richard Roberts, “during which time income per head doubled.” Another strength was the formidable authority of the Austro-Hungarian Bank, which other scholars have called “the pioneer, and prototype, of a modern central bank.”

Vienna welcomed industrialization and urbanization, with modern factories and railways, even submarines. It hosted the latest technologies—electric lights, automobiles, telephones, and the second metro line in all of Europe. Austria and Hungary also had vigorous parliaments. The Austrian Reichsrat in particular evolved into a growing and increasingly raucous political arena, where one official observed “eight nations, 17 countries, 20 parliamentary groups, 27 parties,” many of which openly fostered ethno-nationalist loyalties. While the Habsburgs may have been dictators disguised as constitutional monarchs, their subjects enjoyed democratic institutions and leverage sufficient to hold their rulers accountable and, eventually, to replace the

dynasty with Europe's current independent states.

Doesn't this sound eerily similar to the metrics of our good life, and of the strengths of Western civilization—free-trade, technology, democracy, prosperity, central banks, currency zones, and “modern” culture? Yet Austria-Hungary and its Habsburg rulers vanished so completely that almost no one alive today can recall anything about them—the European Union could likewise disappear as completely as did the Hanseatic League, League of Nations, and Holy Roman Empire.

The European Union needs to become either a Europe of civic-minded, independent nations that work in concert or a Continent-wide popular democracy. Yet EU leaders and elite opinion are hostile to nationalism and patriotism, which makes the first option highly unlikely. The second option would require uniting Europe's peoples with shared ideals, principles, or beliefs, so that a European-wide democracy, or polity, can be reestablished. Yet EU elites are also hostile to the ideals and principles that united Europe in the past, as well as to democracy, so this second option is also unlikely. Europe certainly appears lost.

The principal irony that emerges when considering the legacies of the Holy Roman Empire and Austria-Hungary is that one of their principal achievements was the defense of Europe from Islamic conquest. Rome became a beacon for Europe primar-

ily because the other Christian centers of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria fell to Arab armies by 642. Even Rome was temporarily sacked in 846 and Constantinople was finally lost to Ottoman conquerors by 1453. While this loss gave birth to the idea of the empire as “Christendom,” and likewise helped to convey a sharper geographic definition to the dawning idea of “Western civilization,” the attacks continued. Ottoman Turks seized the Balkans in 1521, then placed Vienna under siege in 1529. Unable to penetrate Vienna's fortress walls, Muslim armies returned to the city's gates in 1683, but Austria and its allies launched counterattacks over many decades that expelled the Turks from Hungary and the lands beyond, confirming Austria-Hungary's status as an essential European power. EU leaders—having allowed millions of Muslim refugees and unassimilated immigrants into Europe, including perhaps thousands of terrorists—cannot hold a candle to Christendom's achievement. Still, they expect the EU—and Europe—to survive.

Nationalism has been dismissed as “a construct,” but the two histories under review here also make it clear that Europe's earliest tribes, many kingdoms, and glittering dynasties used oral histories, myth, fanciful family trees, and even forged documents to establish their realms and enhance their legitimacy. All political communities, even the EU, are “constructs,” and Europeans today appear in need of constructing a new one. †