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The European Union and the Habsburg Monarchy

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The threat that the EU now faces is as deadly as the one that confronted the Habsburg Monarchy a hundred years ago, writes British diplomat Robert Cooper, one of the intellectual architects of EU foreign policy. But getting it right does not need a miracle.

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

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

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

NATO and the presence of US forces in Europe have given European countries the assurance that the US would defend them against the Soviet Union. But almost more important, NATO also turned defence into a collective enterprise. Without this, each country would have had to make its



own provision against the Soviet threat; some might have felt compelled to create massive armies; some might have gone for bilateral alliances. Whatever the result, Europe would have been back to the old, failed games of balance of power and arms race. NATO also created an incentive to free riding on US military capabilities. This has been criticized by the US ever since; but paradoxically it is also a notable achievement that European countries have felt able to keep defence spending down: this shows that NATO has generated a sense of collective security in the best meaning of those words; security issues which for centuries have divided Europe at last unified it. And out of this the European Union was born. And the EU itself, by creating a collective identity outside the field of security - and without the US - has contributed to NATO's longevity by demonstrating that the US presence is an enabler of cooperation rather than an instrument of domination.

In any event, it is striking that after the unhappy interval of the 1930s and World War II, Europe - or rather Western Europe - found itself with a body that in many ways resembles the Habsburg Monarchy. Like the Habsburg Monarchy, the EU is not a nation state but a complex confection of states, nations, centralised bureaucracy and local autonomy. Both have grown by voluntary accession (in the old days it was called dynastic marriage) rather than by conquest. The EU is partly bound together, as the Habsburg Monarchy was, by transnational elites: in the Habsburg case it was the officer corps and the civil service; for the EU it is business elites and civil servants, both national and European.

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

These also included roads, railways, laws, police to enforce them, courts, parliaments, education, and a centralized bureaucracy to manage it all. The Habsburg Monarchy liberated its serfs some twenty years before Russia and America, and introduced universal male suffrage early in the twentieth



century. All these were useful and helped bring modernization to many parts of the Empire; but the peoples of central Europe could have got them from Germany and maybe even from Russia one day. What was unique in the Habsburg zone was that it enabled the small nationalities to survive, keep their culture, some level of autonomy, and even to thrive with it. The security it provided was political; but was backed – for this was the nineteenth century – by military force.

A further curious resemblance to the European Union is that the Monarchy was (as Robert Kann puts it) a power without a name; or rather a power with several names, none of them quite right: Habsburg Empire? Austro-Hungarian Empire? Habsburg Monarchy? None quite expresses its nature, because, like the European Union, it was complicated and did not fit into any convenient category. For Europe today, Common Market and European Economic Community are too little; European Union is too much: the EU is not a union in the sense that the United States or the United Kingdom is. This last name is an aspiration; but what is the use of an aspiration if nobody knows what it amounts to?

There are, however, two important differences. First, the EU (as, for want of better, we continue to call it) is not a state and the Habsburg Monarchy, for all its quirkiness, was. That meant that the Habsburg Monarchy was sovereign and it had a sovereign whose picture could appear on banknotes and on prints to be found in the humble huts of peasants in far corners of the Empire. And it had an army. And when the crisis came, it was the Monarchy that was in charge. One of the ways in which we know that, in spite of flag and anthem, the EU is not a state is that in the crisis of the Eurozone power quickly returns to its source in the member states. Just as it would also in a security crisis. Because the Monarchy was a state, its components were nations with limited autonomy. Because the EU is not a state, it is made up of states: sovereign, equal and ultimately its masters.

The second important difference is that, although the EU and the Habsburg Monarchy both enable the small to survive by providing the benefits of scale, they do it in different fields. Over the five centuries of the Habsburg Monarchy, its key contribution was the security that it provided against threats from outside, to begin with from the Ottoman Empire, later from nation states, against whose deadlier dynamism it was less successful. Thanks to NATO and to the end of the Cold War, security is no longer the big issue. Instead, the most visible benefit of scale that the EU brings is the



prosperity it has provided through a Europe without borders; the invisible benefit – perhaps more important – has been the security of good political relations. These come from joint enterprise of making the laws that govern Europe's borderless space. The practice of cooperation may be tedious and time-consuming but it creates relationships with neighbours such as no country has ever had before. So successful has the EU been in creating an environment in which small states can live comfortably, that the temptation for Flanders, Scotland, Catalonia and no doubt many others to enjoy the luxury of their own state may become a pattern of the future.

This should not be a surprise since, for most purposes, small states are better than big states: more intimate, more cohesive, closer to the citizen. Only two things make big states desirable: the security of a big army and the prosperity of a big market. The Habsburg Monarchy provided the first while allowing diverse nationalities to flourish; the EU has provided the second while enabling small states to flourish and to have a voice in making the rules to run it. [1]

The Habsburg Monarchy was threatened first by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which brought it physically too close to Russia and in consequence also became politically too dependent on Germany. Long before the Great War it had begun to lose its multi-national character (visible in the use of German as the official language of the Empire). And then it was destroyed by the War itself and by its manifest inability to provide physical protection for its people and political protection for its nations.

These were then awarded self-determination by the victorious nation states. This turned out to be a poisoned gift, since they were left naked in the face of powerful neighbours and their own weak political culture. That they have regained their freedom and re-established democracy within the European Union is their credit, and also that of the EU and of NATO.

In contrast to the world at the beginning of the last century, the geopolitical environment in Europe today is benign. The Middle East and the Mediterranean are disturbed, but no worse than usual; the Cold War is over and Russia is preoccupied with making money, a peaceful activity; even the Balkans makes halting progress. No one is thinking of war.

But the threat that the EU now faces is, in its way, as deadly as the one that confronted the Habsburg Monarchy a hundred years ago. Instead of the



uncontrolled expansion of armies and navies of the early twentieth century, when few understood the implications of the new military technology, we live today in a world of uncontrolled global financial markets dealing in instruments that few comprehend. And the crisis strikes at the heart of the EU. If the EU ceases to be a bringer of prosperity but becomes instead a cause of impoverishment, it too will collapse. Because, unlike the Habsburg Monarchy, the EU is not a state but a community of states, its collapse will not begin at the centre, but at the edges. If it ever dies, it will do so with a whimper, rather than a bang. This fish rots from the tail, not the head. The explosion will come not in Brussels but on the streets of Athens, Rome or Madrid. Perhaps we are seeing the first signs. And if the explosion comes, it will bring down with it the open borders, the single market, the practice of cooperative relations with others, the collaboration in many fields, and at its centre the good political relations that have delivered peace and a sense of community over fifty-five years.

At the beginning of *The Struggle for the Mastery of Europe*, his great book describing the diplomacy that led to World War I, A. J. P. Taylor wrote: "In the state of nature which Hobbes imagined, violence was the only law, and life was 'nasty brutish and short'. Though individuals never lived in this state of nature the Great Powers of Europe have always done so." Taylor, strangely, omitted Hobbes' first two adjectives. The original says: "and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". Hobbes is writing about man's life outside society. But Taylor's analogy with states works even more powerfully if we include these two adjectives: it is the solitary nature of states that has made them both poor and dangerous. States, like men, live better in communities. Our greatest achievement is that the Great Powers of Europe no longer live by the rules that Hobbes evokes (or the lack of them). If Europe loses that, it will lose again everything that was lost with the Habsburg Monarchy.

The stakes in the Euro-game are high: monetary union was meant to bring prosperity (and to bind Germany closer!). If the result is penury and political instability, then the EU will share the fate of the Habsburg Monarchy.

This is not inevitable. Unlike war, there are no winners when financial markets collapse (no, not even George Soros). If we fail, it will be by errors in our economics or misjudgments of our politics or through collective stupidity. Getting it right does not need a miracle. It requires only open debate, open minds, a readiness to listen and to learn. Intellectual clarity



and human sympathy is all that we need, plus some understanding what we stand to lose.



Footnotes

1. Small states are pleasant for their citizens, but there is a question whether they impose costs on the system as a whole by making consensual decision making more difficult. The experience of the EU is that problems come more from large states than small ones. However, a system that consisted entirely of small states, without the leadership (or bullying) of large states might operate differently.