

# Kaiser Karl and the End of the Habsburgs

**Fifth in line to the throne, Karl I was not expected to become the Habsburg emperor. By the time he did, in 1916, it was already too late for the crumbling empire.**

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*Karl I in Chernivtzi, Ukraine, 6 July 1917. Granger Historical Picture Archive/Alamy.*

The Emperor Karl was the last of the Habsburg line of rulers, succeeding his great-uncle Franz Joseph in 1916 as head of the Austro-Hungarian empire. After a reign of less than two years, Karl died in penurious exile in Madeira 100 years ago on 1 April 1922. He was 34.

Many Habsburg emperors were unexpected, plucked from obscurity to serve as rulers due to political intrigue or biological misfortune higher up the chain of succession. Franz Joseph had only come to the throne in 1848 because the military men who had seized power wanted his vague and childless uncle, Ferdinand I, out of office. They had no time either for Ferdinand's brother, the irresolute Franz Karl. So they lighted instead upon Franz Karl's impressionable 18-year-old son Franz Joseph, convincing Ferdinand to abdicate and Franz Karl to renounce his rights in his son's favour.

## **And then there was one**

Whereas Franz Joseph had always been second in line to the throne, Karl was born a distant fifth. One by one, the higher-ranking Habsburgs perished in unforeseen circumstances, clearing Karl's way. To begin with, Franz Joseph's son, the heir apparent Rudolf, acquired a morbid fascination with death. Curious to watch someone die, he shot his teenage mistress and, curiosity sated, turned the revolver on himself. The next in line was Franz Joseph's brother, Karl Ludwig, who was so

incompetent that all he could be trusted to do reliably was open events on the emperor's behalf. The press knew him as the 'Exhibition Archduke'. Deeply pious, Karl Ludwig died of dysentery in 1896, contracted by drinking water from the River Jordan while on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Next up were Karl Ludwig's sons, Franz Ferdinand and Otto. Otto was a rake and womaniser. Having contracted syphilis, he hid the consequent facial disfigurement behind a prosthetic nose. He died of the disease in 1906. Franz Ferdinand was irascible, bombastic and a compulsive killer of animals – these included two elephants and a tiger, shot while touring India, his own cat and 274,889 small creatures, mostly partridges that beaters drove before him to give him a clear shot. (Franz Ferdinand's game books survive.)

But Franz Ferdinand offended Habsburg etiquette by marrying a subject, the Bohemian duchess Sophie Chotek. Emperor Franz Joseph was ruthless when it came to protocol, even obliging Franz Ferdinand's brother to change his family name from Habsburg to Burg because he had married the daughter of a mere professor. He forced Franz Ferdinand into a morganatic marriage, which deprived both his wife and children of rank.

Franz Ferdinand was murdered by a Serbian terrorist in Sarajevo in June 1914, thus starting the sequence of events that led to the First World War. He had two young sons, but because his marriage had been morganatic neither was eligible to succeed to the throne. Franz Joseph's heir now became the late Otto's son, Karl, whose arrival at the top had required the deaths of four of his kinsmen, plus a morganatic marriage that excluded two more.



Karl was dutiful and diligent but scarcely equipped or prepared for high office. He married well, to Princess Zita of Bourbon-Parma, who, although the scion of a deposed dynasty, still counted as royal. Together they rapidly produced eight children, the eldest of whom was a future Member of the European Parliament, Otto von Habsburg.

*Archduke Franz Ferdinand hunting with his family, c.1910. Everett Collection Historical/Alamy Stock Photo.*

Karl became heir in 1914 and emperor in 1916 at a singularly bad time. His only training comprised occasional briefings by his great-uncle and intermittent service on the general staff. His political naivety shocked his first prime minister, Ernest von Koerber. As Koerber remarked of his new master, 'The emperor Karl is 30, he looks 20, and thinks and speaks like a 10-year-old child'.

## **War**

By the time of Karl's accession in November 1916 the war had been going on for two years. It had not gone well for the Habsburgs. It is untrue that the Austro-Hungarian high command mislaid an army in August 1914 on account of shambolic mobilisation and deployment, for the generals always knew where it was; they had simply sent it to the wrong place. The same incompetence was replicated everywhere else on the Austro-Hungarian side: the dress swords that tripped up officers, the yellow gaiters that made them a target for snipers, the tin lids that had to serve as shovels, the cavalry saddles that were designed for dressage and the trains that ran at 'maximum parallel graphic', or no faster than the slowest train in the sector, meaning at times a speed of just five

kilometres per hour. Austria Hungary had over decades underspent on its armed forces and only one man in 20 had done military service. Neglect showed.

In the first few months of the war, the Russians captured a large chunk of Galicia, or Austrian Poland, and had for a time been within striking distance of Kraków. Then came the Italian declaration of war in May 1915, which forced the deployment of Austro-Hungarian troops to the Alps. In the summer of 1916 a crushing Russian offensive convinced Romania into entering the war against Austria-Hungary. To withstand the Russians, the Austro-Hungarian armies depended on German reinforcements, which had to be rushed from the western front. In return for their help, German generals took increasing control of the Austro-Hungarian army, subordinating it to their own strategic goals.

On top of its military insufficiency, Karl's empire was constitutionally unbalanced. It was divided up into provinces, or what were at the time called 'Lands and Kingdoms', which mostly kept to their medieval boundaries, straddled by different national groups. In each of the lands and kingdoms, generally one national group held sway, bullying the province's minorities. Confrontations were sometimes violent. Elsewhere, the different national groups kept to different neighbourhoods, having their own churches, schools, banks and fire brigades. In the Bohemian countryside, separate hiking trails kept Czechs and Germans apart.



*Karl I, Empress Zita and Archduke Otto at Karl's coronation, Budapest, 1916. Interfoto Picture Library/Alamy.*

Distrust spilled into the empire's two parliaments. Since 1867 the empire had been divided in half. In the eastern part, Hungary had self rule and its own parliament in Budapest. The Hungarian politicians cracked down on the national minorities, pushing a contentious policy of assimilation and trying to force Slovaks, Romanians and Serbs to learn Hungarian and think of themselves as Hungarians. There was a separate parliament (or Reichsrat) in Vienna for the empire's western half, including what is now Austria, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and southern Poland. But it had been so paralysed by conflict between German and Czech MPs that Franz Joseph had closed it down in 1914, afterwards ruling not through parliament but by emergency decrees.

### **Coronation problems**

The complexity of the empire's political life is nowhere better demonstrated than by Karl's coronation in December 1916. There had never been a coronation ceremony for the empire as a whole; a simple proclamation was thought sufficient. But the empire contained within it four kingdoms: Bohemia, Hungary, Croatia, and Galicia and Lodomeria.

The last of these, the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria, was a nonsense place with a fake name, amounting to the part of Poland that the Empress Maria Theresa had procured at the time of Poland's first partition in 1772. She had called it a kingdom as a sop to the Poles, but there was never a coronation. In Bohemia the monarch had always been crowned until 1836, after which the ceremony had lapsed. From the 12th century

onwards, the Kingdom of Croatia had been part of Hungary, which meant that the Hungarian monarch was automatically Croatia's king. There was no separate coronation.

Only Hungary had a tradition of coronation and Karl's crowning in Budapest counted symbolically as his inauguration as ruler of the whole empire. The glittering ceremony took place in December 1916 in the recently rebuilt Matthias Church next to the royal palace. About five minutes of film survive of noblemen and women solemnly processing in ancient robes with extravagant headpieces. The last king to have been crowned was Franz Joseph in 1867. Many of the fine costumes on display for Karl's crowning had been literally mothballed for almost half a century. The smell of camphor must have been overwhelming



Karl was crowned with Hungary's Holy Crown. Although named after St Stephen, Hungary's first Christian king, the crown was probably introduced in the 13th century. Made of two crowns welded together, the lower portion was likely to have been intended for a queen, and was wide enough to accommodate a full head of hair. Protocol demanded that Karl should not try on the crown before the coronation, so when it was finally set on his head it slid sideways, which some thought to be an ill omen.

*Karl visiting troops on the Italian front, 1917. Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy © The History Collection/Alamy*

### **The Sixtus Affair**

Karl was a decent man and committed to peace. Even before he came to the throne he had remarked, while on a visit to general staff headquarters in 1915, that 'he does not understand why we make so much effort, since everything is in any case pointless; the war cannot be won, and he will be pleased if he is left a palace in Vienna'. Whenever on the losing side, previous Habsburg rulers had always done a deal with the enemy, giving up territory and the occasional princess. Once in power, Karl sought to do the same, using Empress Zita's brother, Prince Sixtus of Bourbon-Parma, as his intermediary.

Prince Sixtus was an officer in the Belgian army, but in early 1917 he managed to make it to neutral Switzerland and even to Vienna to discuss peace terms between Austria-Hungary and the allies. The French and British governments encouraged the negotiations, partly out of a genuine wish for peace, but partly too in the hope of driving a wedge between Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Karl's plan, as relayed by Sixtus to the French president Raymond Poincaré in March 1917, involved a major territorial adjustment of Europe. France would recover Alsace-Lorraine, lost to Germany after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Austria-Hungary would compensate Germany with Galicia and Lodomeria. German troops would leave Belgium, and Serbia would be restored and enlarged, swallowing up chunks of Albania. In an early draft, Karl even imagined handing over Constantinople to Russia, but the outbreak of the Russian Revolution took this proposal off the agenda.

Karl's peace plan was a mixture of fantasy and megalomania, involving territories that were not his to give away. On top of this, Karl was unaware that the allies had in a secret treaty promised Italy a whole swathe of Austrian territory in return for joining the war. It was not in the allies' interests to make a deal with Karl. To fulfil their obligations to Italy, they needed to crush Austria-Hungary militarily. By July 1917 the secret talks had broken down.

*Wilhelm II and Karl I visit the front,  
1917. Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy.*



But that was not the end of it. In April 1918 the French prime minister Georges Clemenceau published the text of Karl's proposals with the aim of embarrassing the Austro-Hungarian government. Absurdly, Karl had not retained his own copy, so he was unable to see whether Clemenceau had added to the text. Although Karl had kept Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany informed in general terms of his peace feelers, he had concealed the full extent of his underhand diplomacy.

In May 1918 Wilhelm summoned Karl to the German headquarters at Spa in Belgium to explain himself. By all accounts the meeting was friendly, but to prove his loyalty Karl had to agree to subordinate Austria-Hungary economically, militarily and diplomatically to German war aims. As German officers took command of the Austro-Hungarian army, any prospect of escaping the war was lost. The fate of both Austria-Hungary and Karl were now tied to Wilhelm II and Germany.

Spa sealed Austria-Hungary's destruction. The allies saw Karl as Wilhelm's poodle or (in the expression of the time) his 'baggage carrier'. Whereas before the allies had imagined that Austria-Hungary would survive the war in a reduced form, now they began to call for it to be 'wiped off the map of Europe'. The US Secretary of State Robert Lansing's announcement at the end of June 1918 that 'all branches of the Slav race must be completely liberated from German and Austrian domination' was almost immediately endorsed by the British and French. Allied propaganda openly supported Austria-Hungary's dissolution and its replacement by independent nation states.

### **Trouble at home**

Austria-Hungary was kept together by two things: the dynasty and the bureaucracy. Karl benefitted from the charisma of the House of Habsburg. Police reports from Vienna noted the esteem in which he was held and the popular conviction that he was dedicated to peace and his people's welfare. But they noted, too, the collapse of the food supply, the queues for bread and the strikes, which intensified in 1918. The bureaucracy had extended its power and reach during the war, taking over wide swathes of the economy. Even so, it had failed in the most basic task of government, which was to keep people fed and warm.

During 1918 law and order broke down. In the countryside, deserters and draft-dodgers formed their own quasi-military units of so-called 'Green Cadres', robbing food transports, derailing trains, feasting in barns and taking over whole villages. In total there were probably about 100,000 renegades, with large concentrations in Galicia, northern Hungary and Croatia. Local mayors added to the chaos, diverting supply trains to plunder their cargoes. Vigilante gangs of farm labourers fought with foragers from nearby towns and cities who came at weekends to steal crops.

Karl was convinced that, if Austria-Hungary was to survive, it had to embrace some sort of constitutional reform that would mollify the empire's quarrelsome nations. In May 1917 he reconvened the parliament in Vienna, which had not sat for three years, and shortly afterwards released 2,500 political prisoners. Many of them favoured Austria-Hungary's comprehensive refashioning and even its obliteration. Ideas that had previously been marginal were now amplified on the floor of the parliament. The first was that the Southern Slav peoples of the Habsburg empire, which included the Slovenes, Croats and Bosnians, should join together with Serbia. The second was the vision of the exiled Czech leader, Tomáš Masaryk, the future Czechoslovak president, that Czechs and Slovaks should join together in a single state.

### **The taxi is waiting**

The end came swiftly. The failure of the German summer offensive in 1918 and the collapse of Bulgaria left Austria-Hungary's southern flank exposed to invasion. Early in October 1918 the German government began negotiations for a ceasefire. Their fates entwined, Germany's defeat also became Austria-Hungary's. As leaders of the national groups clamoured for independence, Karl tried to accommodate their demands by

issuing a manifesto that promised to restructure the empire along national lines. But it was too late. New national committees had taken power in Prague, Kraków, Zagreb and elsewhere, claiming that they were now the legitimate governments, while a new ministry in Budapest under the 'Red Count' Mihály Károlyi had announced an independent Hungary.



*Demonstration following the proclamation of the Austrian Republic, Vienna, November 1918. Granger Historical Picture Archive/Alamy.*

On 11 November Emperor Karl relinquished his involvement in public life (he did not formally abdicate, imagining that popular demand would see him eventually restored). The Austrian socialist leader Karl Renner visited him in the Schönbrunn summer palace, bidding him farewell with the words: 'Herr Habsburg, the taxi is waiting.' The next day what was left of the imperial parliament in Vienna declared a republic.

The fate of the murdered Russian imperial family haunted King George V, who sent a British military police unit under the command of a Royal Scots colonel to extricate Karl and escort him to exile in Switzerland. In 1921 Karl made two bids to seize power in Hungary. Both attempts failed, the second disastrously so as troops still loyal to Karl fought with Hungarian government forces on the outskirts of Budapest in a battle that claimed three dozen lives.

By this time, Karl's health had given way. Having already suffered several heart attacks, he finally died of pneumonia in 1922 on the island of Madeira, where he had gone into exile. His body was buried there in the baroque Church of Our Lady of the Mount in Funchal. As was Habsburg practice, his heart was interred separately in the abbey of Muri in Switzerland.

Karl failed. He had two great projects: to secure peace and to reform Austria-Hungary. By the time he came to power it was too late to achieve either. We can speculate whether the allies would have spared Austria-Hungary had they accepted Karl's proposals and whether the growing demands of the empire's nations for separate statehood could have been arrested. But Karl may yet have won a greater glory. In 2004 Pope John Paul II beatified Karl for his services to peace, putting him on the first rung to sainthood. Historians are balancing these interpretations by raising their objections, not least to Karl's authorisation of the use of poison gas on the Italian front. But, as the miracles attributed to his intercession mount up, the unexpected emperor may yet become the unexpected saint.

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