

ROBERT-HERMANN TENBROCK  
A HISTORY  
OF GERMANY

Translated from the German  
by  
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*Chapter Eight*

THE HOUSE OF HABSBURG

*Germany and France*

After the conclusion of the Thirty Years War, Germany's real masters were France and Sweden. Both powers were guarantors of princely freedom against imperial encroachments, and both had the right to intervene at all times as arbitrators in Germany's internal affairs. Sweden owed its powerful position more to its skilful and powerful rulers than to the size of its population. For this reason its influence on German development was inevitably only transitory. It did succeed in strengthening its influence on the Baltic area in the Swedish-Polish War (1655—1660), but the Great Northern War (1700—1721) destroyed its sovereignty in the north once for all. Its place was taken by Russia, which now gained access to the Baltic region for the first time. Peter the Great shared with Louis XIV a high measure of esteem and admiration; both rulers exemplify to a high degree the spirit of the Age of Absolutism.

The absolute rule of the princes was the fruit of a development which had its origins, especially in the west European countries, in the struggle of the monarchy with the estates and feudal powers during the late Middle Ages. The monarchy had won the day in both France and Spain. The burghers of France, who had allied with the south French nobility in their resistance to royal aspirations, were bound to lose in the end. They were defeated and constrained to take over the task of sustaining, consolidating and advancing the aggrandizement of the realm. This, however, was ruled by the king by virtue of the "divine right". Indeed, the king was the embodiment of the state, and in him alone was the fulness of law and power. At the beginning of the 16th century the Italian Macchiavelli had developed his teaching about the omnipotence of the state, before which all other interests and even religious and moral considerations have to give way. At the end of the



same century the Frenchman Jean Bodin (1530—96) provided the theoretical basis for absolutism. Princely sovereignty was defined as absolute and eternally unlimited in power, task and time. With France as the foremost power in Europe, the 17th century became the age of the triumphant absolutist sovereignty of the princes.

This new attitude to the state as the sum of human power and to the prince as the representative of the omnipotent state had, however, inevitably to bring changes whose consequences would prove serious for Europe. The trial of strength between Charles V and France at the beginning of the 16th century had given a foretaste of what threatened Europe if the dynastic imperialism of absolute monarchs were to prevail. In his own interest the absolute monarch had to pursue a policy of unlimited conquest which took no account of geographical and language boundaries. However, the Netherlands and England, in resisting the efforts of individual powers to dominate Europe, gave birth to a new national spirit which also swayed the hearts of their peoples. This was something utterly new in European history. Of course its influence on the course of political events must not be overestimated, although it played a considerable role in the offensive wars of France and the rebuttal of French claims by others.

The 16th century had already proved that it was no longer possible for one European state to subject the whole of the Continent to its rule. Spain, for instance, had failed to impose its sovereign claims on England. The Habsburgs were not able to subdue France, and even state leagues were hardly in a position to smash existing power blocs, as had been proved once again during the Thirty Years War in the case of the Habsburgs. Thus the theory of the balance of power in Europe arose, according to which the great powers had to balance each other in power and influence in order to guarantee peace in Europe. England was the foremost advocate of this theory. She always intervened in continental wars when she feared the "balance of power" was about to be upset.

The balance of power in Europe had its Achilles' heel in the power vacuum which the peace of 1648 had created in central Europe, and which extended beyond Germany into Italy. It was inevitable that the western regions of Germany especially, as a consequence of their fragmentation into small states, should tempt France to try to gain influence in them which it could utilise at any time to obstruct an energetic imperial policy on the part of the strongest German power, the Austrian Habsburgs.

### *The Habsburg Revival*

Despite the serious defeat which the Thirty Years War had inflicted on the empire and the Austrian line of the Habsburgs, the bearers of the imperial crown, the century after 1648, until the early years of the reign of Maria Theresa, was almost entirely dominated, as far as Germany was concerned, by the Habsburgs. Although the Austrian Habsburgs no longer possessed any real power within the empire, they nevertheless succeeded in taking the lead in German history after the catastrophe of 1648 because, after a period of recovery lasting almost twenty years, they assumed responsibilities which were to benefit the whole of Germany, even the whole of Europe. It would certainly be a distortion of the facts if we were to presume that the Habsburgs were conscious of fulfilling a special destiny, when they accepted these responsibilities. Like all other European rulers, they allowed themselves to be swayed merely by consideration of personal advantage. In the event, however, their victories over the Turks have exercised a positive influence on European development.

The recovery and rise of the Austrian house of Habsburg to a new position of power in Europe is linked with the reign of the emperor Leopold I (1657—1705). It was he who determined that south-east Europe should be the Habsburgs' main sphere of interest for the future. When we recall that during the age of absolutism the territorial expansion of the state was considered more important than its internal integrity based on the unity of the people's way of life, traditions and language, these expansionist aims towards the south-east become understandable. The Habsburg possessions in the west of the empire had always been in danger, and the outcome of the Thirty Years War had shown this again. French supremacy in western Europe under Louis XIV, and France's close relations with the west German territorial lords, frustrated Habsburg hopes of being able to defend their possessions in western Germany. That Austria's attitude here could cause a German ethnic area to be lost to a non-German power was a consideration of no importance to the rulers of the day. In this respect the Habsburgs were neither better nor worse than other European powers. The age of the national state still lay in the distant future.

During the 16th century the Turks had pursued a policy of conquest which had enabled them to incorporate the Balkans in their Afro-Asian empire. Hungary, too, was a Turkish province. Not until 1606 did the Ottoman Empire recognise the Roman emperor of the house of Habsburg as a sovereign of equal rank to the padishah. Constantinople's



"Sublime Porte" had not intervened in the Thirty Years War because the Ottoman rulers were hamstrung in their foreign policy by the rebelliousness of the janissaries. Only under Sultan Mohammed IV (1648—1687) did the Turks begin to pursue an active foreign policy again. Its objective was to advance the frontiers at the expense of Venice, of that part of Hungary still in Austrian hands, and of Austria itself. In 1663 the Hungarians were forced to fall back in the face of the advancing Turks. Tartar hordes appeared before the Bohemian towns of Brünn (Brno) and Olmütz (Olomouc). The German diet, the representation of the estates, declared its readiness to provide financial aid and to muster a small imperial army. A strong Austrian army, supplemented by French auxiliaries, was able to defeat the Turks in 1664. Germans and French were fighting on the same side again for the first time since the crusades. Unfortunately, it was also to be the last time for centuries to come. In the peace which was concluded after a short passage of arms, the Turks still retained half of Hungary, an arrangement which was not to the liking of the Hungarian magnates. Louis XIV fanned their indignation at the Habsburgs' "treacherous game". A rebellion of the Hungarian nobles against the Habsburg sovereignty, planned for 1670, was put down in good time.

A secret agreement between Vienna and Paris in the year 1668 marks the withdrawal of the Austrian Habsburgs from western Europe. In it Leopold I concluded a treaty of partition with Louis concerning the Spanish possessions. According to this, Louis's share in the Spanish heritage was recognised in principle and the Spanish Netherlands, Naples and Sicily conceded to him. This treaty was complemented three years later by a treaty of neutrality.

Even the successful quelling of the Hungarian uprisings by the Habsburgs had not been able to induce the Turks to restrain their expansionist aspirations in the north. In this they were supported, as in the days of Charles V, by France, to whom any weakening of Habsburg strength was welcome. The imperial efforts, too, to raise help from the empire for a war against the Turks met a cool reception from many princes of the empire and a flat refusal from Brandenburg. On the other hand, Saxony, Hanover and Bavaria were prepared to furnish troops. The combined efforts of pope and emperor were finally successful in persuading Poland to abandon its policy of friendship towards France and to take the emperor's part. Hardly, however, had the individual armies joined that of the emperor, when Europe was startled by the news that the Turks were before the gates of Vienna and laying siege to the city. The city was saved by the Battle of Kahlenberg in 1683

under the generalship of the Polish King John Sobieski. This European victory over the Ottomans marks a turning point in Europe's relations with the Turkish empire. In his efforts to crush the Turks once for all, Leopold signed a twenty years truce with Louis XIV at Regensburg (1684). In it he confirmed the problematic legal claims of the "chambers of reunion" and French possession of the city of Strassburg in Alsace. France, however, never attempted to dispute the German character of Alsace or of the city of Strassburg.

With the help of Poland and Venice, the imperial arms were able to liberate the whole of Hungary from the Turkish yoke. In 1687 Hungary was united to Austria in a personal union. While the Habsburgs and their allies were successfully continuing the fight against the Turks, France invaded the Palatinate (1688). Louis XIV based this new offensive against west Germany on the hereditary title of his sister-in-law, Liselotte of the Palatinate. At the instigation of William of Orange, who became King of England as well in 1689, the Grand Alliance was formed against France. Besides Spain, Sweden, Brandenburg, Saxony, Hanover, England, Holland, and Savoy, the Habsburgs also joined the league. The war dragged on for nine years. Its most enduring results were the devastation of the Palatinate, the destruction of Heidelberg castle, the desecration of the tombs of the German emperors in Spire cathedral, and the pillaging by French troops of many places along the left bank of the Rhine. Although the Alliance was superior at sea, it did not succeed in breaking the military supremacy of France. At the Peace of Ryswick (1697) Louis XIV was confirmed in his possession of the Alsatian territories including Strassburg; Freiburg-im-Breisgau and some areas east of the Rhine, which had been annexed by France, reverted to the empire.

After the successful conclusion of the Turkish wars, Austria secured by the Peace of Carlowitz (1699) the union of Transylvania, Slavonia and Croatia with its crown; Poland obtained parts of the Ukraine and Podolia; Azov fell to Russia. Austria had become one of the European great powers. A Turkish attempt to reconquer lost territory was frustrated by the military genius of Prince Eugene of Savoy, a great general who had offered his services to the house of Habsburg and had already won important military successes in the European war to decide the Spanish succession (the so-called War of the Spanish Succession, 1701—1713/14). The Spanish possessions in Europe, namely Milan, Naples, Sardinia, and the Spanish Netherlands (present-day Belgium) fell to Austria in consequence of the coalition of European powers formed to resist the claims of Louis XIV to the Spanish succession after the extinction of



the Spanish line of the Habsburgs. In the struggle against the Turks, Prince Eugene took Belgrade in 1717; the treaty of Pasarowitz (1718) guaranteed Austria's possession of that town and of the largest part of Serbia.

Austria's acquisition of these ethnically very diversified areas established German influence in the Balkans for more than two hundred years. At the same time Austria acquired the character of a multinational state, a character particularly emphasized by its possessions in Italy and western Europe (Belgium). Its internal structure was from the beginning extremely loose because the ties of the individual parts with the reigning dynasty were founded on a wide variety of ethnic, historical, and cultural factors. Prince Eugene, who until his death in 1736 was commander-in-chief and organizer of the army, and Austria's leading statesman, tried to give new life to the imperial concept in Vienna as well, in order to create a broader German basis for Austria's new position as a great power. Here his efforts were entirely without success. His posthumous fame was wholly founded on his military gifts and the catholicity of his interests and tastes, to which he gave eloquent expression in his Belvedere Palace in Vienna, his extensive library, and his rich collection of engravings and antiquities. When he died, the young crown prince of Prussia and the future Frederick the Great remarked that in him Austria had lost "the Atlas" who had borne the burden of the imperial throne and state.

During the 17th and early 18th centuries Vienna had developed from a frontier town, the south-eastern gateway of the empire, into the hub of a great European power whose every action was closely watched not only by German states but also by the great courts of Europe. Austria, the country from which all this had grown, and Vienna, its capital, looked back on a centuries-old tradition deeply rooted in a Roman past, a history in fact very similar to that of the western regions of Germany. Christian faith and culture had been absorbed by this tradition, as had also the spirit of medieval chivalry and of the burgher of the late Middle Ages in his aptitude for the crafts and trade. The Reformation had been able to gain a footing only among the upper classes of the population, and this, too, only for a short time. With the victory of Catholicism a great second flowering of Italian and Spanish Renaissance culture blossomed throughout the land. Thus right from the beginning, Austria, without having forfeited her own special character, was geared to the culture of the whole of Europe. Most typical perhaps of life there was its moderation; differences of opinion tended to become blurred, so that there was aversion to any extreme measures.

Nature had been very helpful too. Austria had never been excessively rich, but was blessed with valuable mining areas which gave the Habsburgs their financial backing. Arable land, pasturage, and woodlands provided for the needs of its inhabitants, the Danube was an important commercial waterway, and the roads which led south—to Venice, Milan and Genoa—were short and for the most part in Austrian hands. The country thus possessed a certain natural prosperity which had been considerably increased by the Balkan conquests.