

9. Secret Enemies? Austria-Hungary and Germany in World War I + Prussian/German militarism

Prussian/German militarism

We previously discussed militarism with regard to the Prussia of Frederick William I and his son, Frederick the Great, although what has been called ‘the foundations of Hohenzollern despotism’ were laid by the Great Elector, Frederick William, in the second half of the seventeenth century. **Under Frederick William I, of course, over 70% of state expenditure was spent on the army**, all civil and military administration was centralized under his very personal control and all civil administration was subordinated to military interests. The king preferred to use generals as heads of civil departments and used them for all sorts of military tasks. He would prefer the advice of the lowest soldier to that of any civil administrator. Soldiers were used to obeying orders while civil servants might offer counter-advice. The king did not like that and once wrote: “When I give an order to an officer, I am obeyed, but the cursed “ink-shitters” want to have preference and to disobey me. I will put them to fire and sword...” Civil officials who were held to have embezzled or mismanaged funds were hanged in chains; military ones were often let off. When some judges complained about this, the king thrashed them about the head with his cane.

There were good reasons for the military’s pre-eminence. In the words of Walter L. Dorn: **“The army was Prussia’s trump card in the international political game. Prussia’s economic resources were inconsiderable and in population she stood twelfth among the states of Europe in 1740. A national state like France could sustain military reverses and still remain a Great Power. For Prussia, however, a military defeat must always be disastrous, since Prussia was not a nation but a purely artificial state. With an astonishing singleness of purpose all resources of the monarchy were concentrated on making the army an incomparable instrument of warfare. It is no exaggeration to say that it was not Prussia that made the army but the army that made modern Prussia.”**

The army, of course, was to be officered by the nobility. Any noble taller than 5’ 4” was to enter the army not the civil service. By 1767, therefore, of 1.300 Brandenburg and Prussian nobles, 960 were officers and only 340 were officials. Nobles, however, also

dominated the higher ranks of the civil service. In return, the Junkers resisted any attempts at reforming the condition of the peasantry and became the preponderant class in the state.

With the reign of Frederick the Great, matters remained the same; the great difference of course, was that the new king, unlike his father, not only drilled his army but actually used it. And like his father, Frederick even as commander gathered all administration of military affairs into his own hands, being his own war minister, Commander-in-chief and Chief of staff. However, he had contempt for his common soldiers and only appreciated his noble officers. The intense solidarity of this class was taken as a guarantee of both the spirit and the discipline of the army. He thought bourgeois officers lacked dash; if they had to resign in disgrace, they would find another profession; a noble, on the other hand would have to commit suicide. **He thought bourgeois officers corruptible and lacking in character.** He sent one officer, whose noble pedigree was in doubt, to serve in a garrison. The Junkers, on the other hand, would suffer no insult even from the king. When Frederick threatened to strike one with his swagger stick, the officer drew his sword—and suffered only two days' arrest. Officers, of course, were invited to court and to mix socially with the royals; they were allowed to mistreat their troops and to be as brutal as they pleased. Most of the troops, in any case, were foreign—two-thirds in 1740. By the end of the Seven Years' War this had been reduced to one third—but only because it was no longer possible to recruit abroad.

Recruiting abroad made Prussia hated in Germany. In Mecklenburg, for example, the able-bodied men of entire villages were carried off by Prussian press gangs. Flying squadrons of hussars would surround churches on Sunday mornings, select the men they wanted, and then make for the next church. The situation was so notorious that Voltaire sent it up in *Candide* where the poor hero is carted off in chains to join a regiment. In wartime, the situation was reached when prisoners of war were forced to fight for Prussia, and Frederick even conceived of the notion of incorporating the entire Saxon army into his own. He even raised conscript levies in the Austrian crown lands he occupied. Naturally, almost all of these people deserted at the first opportunity. **There was more desertion from the Prussian army than from any other in Europe, even though desertion was punishable by death.** Hence the army was forced to have a savage regime of drill, discipline and punishments to keep its men in line. In Frederick's own writings, it seems that even he believed that the main function of an officer was to prevent

desertion. In the view of one keen observer the task of the native troops in the army were to keep the non-native ones from deserting. In times of war, this problem affected tactics: long marches, night fights, skirmishes in villages or forests, were all risky. Men might too easily desert. Therefore they had officers on right and left and firing companies behind them. Even hand-to-hand fighting was disliked. Frederick's trick was to force his columns steadily towards the enemy in the hope that the moral effect would frighten his opponents. He did not expect a serious engagement when the two armies met.

Hence Prussia's tradition was of a state organized around an army which was drilled by noble officers who despised their men and in which authority was exercised by the king. This tradition continued, allowing the army to deteriorate after the death of Frederick and to become an anachronism in the age of the French Revolution with its mass armies and generals promoted from the ranks. **Napoleon then destroyed it at Jena and Auerstaedt in 1806.** Before then, the Prussians had been defeated at Valmy in 1792 and from then on had done remarkably little fighting, remaining neutral from 1795-1806.

Their army was reformed, of course, during the Napoleonic Wars by Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and others who brought in conscription and created the militia (*Landwehr*). Yet the idea that this army liberated Germany in 1813-1814 was largely a myth. Most of Blücher's troops—two-thirds, in fact—were Russians, and the operation plan which destroyed Napoleon was drawn up by Radetzky. **Additionally Gneisenau blew the chance of finally defeating Napoleon as he said he would, leaving the decisive battle—Arcis-sur-Aube—to be won by Schwarzenberg, the Austrian Commander-in-Chief of the allied armies.**

After 1815, the Prussian army had returned to being a small body officered by nobles with the *Landwehr* more or less withering on the vine. Its main significance was not military but as a reminder of the liberation myth and the symbol for the middle classes that they had already had and might still have some say in Germany's destiny. In 1858 the army's peacetime strength numbered only 40,000 despite Prussia's population growth from 11 million in 1820 to 18 million souls in 1858. Most people who should have been called up simply were not. If they were, they were often sent home after initial training and then recalled for the autumn manoeuvres. When the army was mobilised in 1859, therefore, most of the 150,000 men recalled were married, leaving their families as a burden on the state, while 100,000 young unmarried men were left undisturbed. **This**

was part of the background to the military reforms of 1859 which William I enacted (though he had been planning them since 1852). William now wanted to double the size of the army, to amalgamate the main army and the reserve and train it for three years, and to keep the whole body under his exclusive control. He was convinced that, had the three-year system been in effect before 1848 and the right attitudes instilled in society as a result, the 1848 revolution would never have occurred. Even most Liberals in Parliament acknowledged the need for reform, but they wanted to keep the *Landwehr* and to exercise financial control. Bismarck, infamously, was brought in before the King abdicated and by collecting taxes without parliamentary approval and winning wars against Denmark and Austria, got retrospective parliamentary approval for the reforms. **The Parliament would even vote for a seven-year army budget, effectively surrendering any control over military affairs.**

Under the Second Reich, the army was entirely kept out of parliamentary control. Under Article 63 of the Constitution, the Emperor decided its peace-time strength, structure and distribution. His Military Cabinet controlled personnel and the so-called *Immediat-System* gave military commanders direct access to the Emperor. (All officers, however, junior were of course *hoffähig* – “acceptable at court”) Between 1871 and 1883 the powers of the War Minister were reduced and those of the Military Cabinet and the Chief of the General Staff increased so that they became independent agencies responsible to the King-Emperor. Count Waldersee even tried to make the Chief of the General Staff the equal of the Chancellor, but attempts to use military attachés for an independent foreign policy failed. Bismarck always faced down the military when necessary (though he had in 1871 to agree to take Alsace-Lorraine including Metz). The Schlieffen Plan, of course, placed limitations on German foreign policy.

Most of these arrangements had been accepted by the Reichstag before 1890 and the old liberal demands for annual military budgets and full accountability were abandoned. Criticism focussed instead on issues like separate military courts, duelling, brutality, anti-Semitism and discrimination in the officer corps. The key issues were now the efficiency and professionalism of the army, and implicit in this debate was the need to modernize rather than to liberalize it. In an age of growing international tensions its job was seen to be its ability to win wars; hence the old criticisms disappeared. By the end of the 1890s the Centre Party was supporting military expenditure and even the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) tended to focus its criticisms on the social role of the army (“Junkers in uniform” etc.), although by 1914 it was boasting that one third of the

troops were Social Democrats and it did approve war credits in 1914.

To a certain extent, the army had also changed socially. In 1911 it consisted of 800,000 men and could only function thanks to the bureaucratic organisation pioneered by Moltke's General Staff. **It was this plus, railways, explosives, rifled arms, telegraphs and heavy artillery which gave Germany her power, not any feudal military tradition.** And in this respect, the German army was no different from any other European one. By 1914, moreover, the officer corps was no longer exclusively aristocratic. In 1867 it was already evenly split with the bourgeoisie. By 1913, bourgeois officers made up 70% of the officer corps. Only the guards regiments were exclusively noble. By 1913, 50% of the general staff were bourgeois and between 1890 and 1912, the percentage of officers with the Abitur rose from 35% to 65%. Finally, in the period 1888-1913, only 10% of War Academy entrants were sons of landowners; 35% came from civil service families; and 15% from a background in industry or trade. Another sign of change, was reforms in court-martial proceedings, reforms which were resisted in both Austria-Hungary and France. **Nor was the rise in German military expenditure before 1914 a peculiarly German phenomenon.** In Great Britain, spending on the navy quadrupled while that on the army doubled. France and Russia were also engaged in the arms race before 1914. Thus although Germany in absolute terms was spending more than any other great power in 1914 (something that was not true in 1900 or even 1910) proportionately she was devoting only 4,6% of her national income to this cause in 1914, compared to 3,4%, 6,3%, 4,8%, and 6% for Britain, Russia, France, and Austria-Hungary respectively.

Finally, it might be pointed out that the army helped integrate the new Germany socially by bringing so many young men together from all over the country and forcing them to live together for years in garrisons in different parts of the Empire.

On the other hand, having said all that it should be remembered that in the words of a distinguished social historian of Germany, "the rising proportion of non-noble officers did not alter the aristocratic dominance of the corps. The attitudes of a bygone age hardly disappeared. In fact, regimental or battalion commanders corresponded with the fathers of prospective officers to enquire what allowances they would give their sons and to ensure they were the right sort of person. And even if these candidates passed their exams they still had to pass the test of being accepted by their fellow officers in the casino (mess) who would enquire into their social attitudes over drinks. Hence an article in one

prominent military weekly journal in 1899 could report: “Both the bourgeois and the aristocratic officer stand for the same principle, the aristocratic outlook, as against the democratic....The attitudes rooted in the very depths of the officer’s estate are: devotion to the dynasty, absolute loyalty to the person of the monarch, high patriotism, preservation of the status quo, defence of the rights of his king, who has entrusted himself to him, and hostility towards anti-patriotic, and anti-monarchic attitudes...”

So the bourgeois officer became the imitator of the aristocratic one.

In Germany, moreover, everyone wore some kind of uniform if he could. All foreigners noticed this. Civil and municipal servants had uniforms. So, too, did cab drivers. Even the Reich Chancellor wore a uniform. Bismarck favoured one from the cuirassiers with whom he had served; Bethmann-Holweg made his first appearance in the Reichstag in a major’s uniform and his name was mentioned in the promotions list in 1914 as *general à la suite*. Uniforms signified superiority, people wearing them were supposed to be given priority and deferred to in the street.

The militarization of German society was obvious in a number of ways. First there was the proliferation of nationalist political organisations. Some of these grew out of the wars of unification. For example the *Preussischer Landeskriegerverband* had 27,000 members in 1873 but 1 million in 1910, by which time it had become a political pressure group. Its president, Count Westphal, was also on the board of the *Deutscher Kriegerbund*. In 1886 he had announced its intention to turn its branches into *Kämpfstätten gegen die Sozial-Demokratie* or centres of hostility to social democracy. William II agreed to become patron of the Prussian association. Other bodies included the Defence League, the Pan-German League, the Naval League, the Reich League against Social Democracy and they were all filled with serving and former officers. The head of the local garrison would almost always be honorary chairman and he would make a speech to members on Sedan Day. These leagues all counted their membership in the millions by 1914 and were the forerunners of Fascist leagues under Weimar. The most effective means, however, of Prussianizing German society was the institution of the lieutenant of the reserve. Those with the necessary educational qualifications and parents who could afford it, served only one year in the army as unpaid volunteers. If a man proved himself he became an NCO (non-commissioned officer) after nine months and, shortly before leaving, an officer of the reserve. In subsequent years he could be called up for manoeuvres. There were 120,000 of these people by 1914. They carried great respect socially and their position would further their careers. Before 1914 they were expected to mobilised society behind conservative principles and against the Left. If they

were heard expressing support for the SPD they would be summoned to honour courts by their peers and stripped of their rank.

The others from whom social support was expected were the former NCOs. By 1900 they were being given special privileges inside the army (separate messes, extra leave etc.) There were almost 10,000 of these people by 1914. They were given special bonuses when they retired after about twelve years, when the government attempted to get them civil service posts or municipal posts, often as primary school teachers.

That all this militarization was effective was shown in 1906 when the episode of the Captain of Köpenick took place. Amazingly, an ex-shoemaker and crook called Wilhelm Voigt, dressed himself up in a captain's uniform, commandeered two squads of the Berlin garrison and took the train to the nearby settlement of Köpenick, entered the town hall, arrested the mayor, his deputy and the head of administration, took all 4,000 marks of the town's spare cash and returned to Berlin with his prisoners. While the troops escorted them to jail, he disappeared into a café and got rid of the uniform. Everyone in Europe made fun of the Germans' uncritical obedience at the sight of a uniform, and Socialists and *Simplicissimus* had a field day. Berliners laughed themselves silly. 1906, of course, was the centenary year of the battle of Jena. The Prussian army seemed to have been defeated once again. Then, in 1913, a Lieutenant von Forstner imposed a state of siege on the little Alsatian town of Saverne (Zabern in German) when his orders were disobeyed. He again had to arrest a lot of people and lock them up in cellars—mainly apparently for laughing at him. **All in all then German militarism was alive and well in 1914—the army was run by the Emperor and his military cabinet who met twice a week (the Chancellor might get to see the Emperor once a fortnight); the military budget was beyond the control of parliament, despite the fact that, in 1913, 75% of all Reich expenditure went on defence. The ethos of the army was still aristocratic and anti-democratic and society was permeated by all sorts of organisations, reserve lieutenants and former NCOs who kept the spirit of Prussian militarism alive.** The Socialists now supported national defence although they, like all foreigners, found episodes when they could still laugh at the ridiculous consequences of Germans in uniform.

The apex of German militarism came during the First World War, although it revived during the Weimar Republic. During the war itself, the moral authority of Hindenburg and Ludendorff achieved legendary proportions and allowed them not merely to supersede the powers of civilian government to invade the royal prerogative itself. They

were able to do so since not only the officer corps, but also the majority of the population, saw them as the only people able to win the war. Knowing themselves to be indispensable, they then forced the Kaiser to dismiss one Chancellor, two Secretaries of State for Foreign Affairs and even the Chief of his own Civil Cabinet. In place of Bethmann-Holweg they got the Kaiser to appoint a man (Georg Michaelis) whom he personally had never even met. The Supreme Command even reserved to itself the right of conducting diplomatic and peace negotiations and of defining Germany's war aims; it demanded such far-reaching annexations that it crushed any hope of a compromise peace. In fact, a military dictatorship was established that reduced the Kaiser to a shadow and destroyed the constitutional foundations of Bismarck's Reich. In no other country did the powers of the generals become so unlimited. In the end, the Hohenzollern dynasty failed to survive the war, but the Prussian officer corps survived. But that is another story.

Secret Enemies? Austria-Hungary and Germany in World War I

It is now time to look at World War One. The causes have been explored previously. Suffice it to say that Habsburg need for prestige, German fears of encirclement and Serbian terrorism saw the balance of power manoeuvre the alliance systems towards war. But the alliance systems themselves did not cause the war.

Once the war started a few facts need to be kept in mind. The key one is that due to lack of agreement between Austria-Hungary and Germany, **Austria did not get the expected support in the North she expected in 1914** and having expected to move against Serbia found she also had to send troops North against Russia. (Germany's first priority being to defeat France). **The result of this confused mobilisation, was that she lost half her army in the winter of 1914-1915 and thereafter became militarily dependent on Germany on all fronts, even the Italian one after 1915.** She also became dependent on Germany for food and hard currency. Still, thanks to German victories, her main enemies were defeated—Serbia, Romania and Russia. **And until the summer of 1918, it seemed as if the Central Powers would indeed win the war.** In the meantime, the questions arose of what would become of Poland, Serbia and Romania. The Hungarians did not want to annex Serbia and have Slavs dominate the Monarchy; the Germans saw no reason why the Habsburgs should get Poland; the Poles themselves who were probably quite favourably disposed to

the Habsburgs were then alienated when the Monarchy recognised the independent Ukraine created at Brest-Litovsk in January 1918; while after the failure of the German offensive in the West in the spring of 1918 everything began to unravel. In the meantime, the Sixtus Affair (1917) which saw the new Habsburg Emperor Karl I appear to promise France the return of Alsace-Lorraine in return for peace, brought down upon him the wrath of the Germans who had never been consulted; it also put an end to any hope of an independent stance of Austria towards Germany, which was now able to secure Austria's acceptance of a scheme for *Mittleuropa* or a Central European Customs Union. Then at the start of 1918 Germany crushed Bolshevik Russia diplomatically at the Peace of Brest-Litovsk, although her triumph proved exceedingly temporary. Her defeat in the West in the spring and summer of 1918, the defeat of Turkey and Bulgaria in the East, and even the last-minute resurgence of Italy, then brought the collapse of the Habsburg Empire as the nationalities began to declare their independence. The allies tried to preserve the Monarchy but in the end they had to accept her disappearance.

Before 1914, Germany's attitude towards Austria-Hungary was a rather weary one of supporting the German and Magyar elements against the Slavs inside it in case Slav progress might turn it pro-Russian. The Monarchy was also the recipient of large German investments and was seen economically and politically as a land bridge for German penetration of the Balkans and Asia Minor. **Austria-Hungary might be weak but Germany had no other dependable ally.** Had she not been an ally, then the German ambassador in 1914 believed that Germany would have to carve her up. From the Austrian viewpoint there were also pluses and minuses. **Germany was strong and anti-Slav and anti-Russian. She also shared the inheritance of the old Reich and the alliance allowed Austrians to feel proper Germans. Indeed, during the war some Austrian leaders may have felt greater loyalty to the alliance than to the dynasty. Yet from a narrower viewpoint, the alliance brought disadvantages—opposition from Britain and France, with whom Austria had few differences and exclusion from the French and British money markets.** Austria was also too dependent on Germany for foreign trade while Germany was overtaking her economically in the Balkans. Again, Germany had done nothing to help Austria during the Balkan Wars; indeed, she even seemed afterwards to be working against her. Berlin was pro-Romanian, anti-Bulgarian and favoured a union of Serbia and Montenegro; nor did she care about the durability of the recently created Albania; Austro-Hungarian policy was the exact opposite. Yet which other power could protect Austria if war broke out with Russia?

When Berlin offered its support after Sarajevo, no one in Vienna was about to pass it up.

The assassination of the Archduke not only killed the leader of the peace party in Vienna but won over Berchtold to war and to an ultimatum deliberately designed to start one. Given Berlin's unconditional support, only Tisza the Hungarian Prime Minister held out. But once Berlin assured him of its support and that Romania would not enter the war against Austria-Hungary, and once it was agreed that Serbia would not be incorporated into the Monarchy, he too agreed to war. But things were always dicey. Just before Vienna declared war on Serbia on 28 July, Berlin asked her to concede the Trentino to Italy. Just afterwards Bethmann suggested she accept British mediation. Then Moltke told Conrad to mobilise against Russia. Conrad famously asked: who rules in Berlin? **There was another problem. Germany wanted mobilisation against Russia—indicating a world war. Conrad had been planning a Balkan one.** Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August. Vienna followed only on 6 August. Then Britain and France a week later declared war on Austria. **Austria was in the wrong war from the start and from the start it was clear that Germany's aims would predominate. On the other hand, Franz Joseph had been quite aware of the risks involved: Russia, he said, would never accept the ultimatum to Serbia.**

Once war broke out, note that there were no stockpiles of war materials or food supplies. Only a short war had ever been envisaged by the Central Powers. Then both mobilization plans went wrong. However, Austria was in the weaker position since she had to fight on two fronts from the start and Hungary cut off food supplies to Austria. There was no coordination of the war effort. Franz Joseph delegated his authority in practice to Conrad. The Army Command then took over control of large parts of Cisleithania and several war industries. It tried to exclude prime ministers and foreign ministers from taking part in decisions. Military reverses forced Conrad to be more accommodating in 1916. Relations between Germany and Austria-Hungary were conducted through their respective ambassadors and on the military side by the German military liaison officer to Conrad, von Cramon. Conrad was rarely on speaking terms with von Falkenhayn, his German opposite number after the battle of the Marne.

Disputes arose right from the start. No one knew what to do with Serbia if it was conquered. Then came arguments over Poland. It was desired by both powers and they fought to control it throughout the war and right from the start. Galicia's Poles wanted

an independent Poland. Their loyalty could only be secured if it was a Habsburg kingdom. One solution was to unite West Galicia with Congress Poland, give autonomy to Ruthenian East Galicia and Bohemia and leave the Germans dominant in the Reichsrat. But this meant federalizing the Monarchy, something that Tisza would not accept. Poland would just have to be absorbed into Cisleithania in his view, in order to keep the *Ausgleich*. He even demanded more territory for Hungary – Bosnia-Herzegovina or Dalmatia perhaps but not Serbia. In any case, Hungary should not become a mere province within the Monarchy.

Then the Germans said they would install their own governor in Warsaw and take over Poland. After all, they, too, had Polish lands in Poznań (Posen) and Silesia. There were also rumours that they wanted Austria to take the Ukraine rather than Poland. Meanwhile Tisza proclaimed that the Germans should not be upset.

Then disaster struck. With no German support in 1914, despite Moltke's earlier promises, the Austrians were cleared out of Galicia with losses of 350,000 men dead and wounded in 1914-15. The loss of officers was irretrievable. Meanwhile, the Germans were invading Belgium and winning at Tannenberg. But the Marne turned into a German retreat and there was again no help for Austria.

Austria, however, had launched an offensive against Serbia at the same time as she had attacked Russia. This did not exactly fit in with her complaints about lack of German support in the East. Meanwhile, the currency began to decline until by the end of the war it sank to one sixteenth of its value. Austria was now dependent on German credits to finance its imports of raw materials from Germany. The latter then persuaded Turkey in 1914 and Bulgaria in 1915 to enter the war. But to stop Romania and Italy from entering on the Allied side, Berlin suggested that Austria surrender Transylvania and the Bukovina to Romania, which should also get the Dobruja from Russia. This time, Tisza backed Vienna. Hungary would give no territory to Romania! He even went to Berlin himself to tell that to the Germans. He also refused concessions to Italy which wanted compensation under the Triple Alliance treaty even though it refused to fight. Germany backed Italy. Tisza had Berchtold removed as foreign minister for showing weakness. If concessions were made to Italy, they would be made to Romania next. **By the end of 1914 then the Monarchy was fighting the Allies militarily and the Germans diplomatically. Some people in Vienna were even talking of making peace—why fight on just because the Germans wanted to annex Belgium and beat England?** But neither the Germans nor the allies nor Tisza or even Conrad were ready for peace.

In 1915 and 1916 Tisza's friend Count Istvan Burián ran foreign affairs, Tisza himself refusing the job. These two men now took a hard line against any change. Burián was long-winded and stubborn and heartily disliked but he, Tisza and the Austrian premier Stürgkh, another hardliner, now ran the Monarchy. The Magyars were very pro-German, and continued Austrian defeats in Serbia and the eastern Front made them wish for German leadership. Curiously, the Magyar leaders thought of themselves as equals of the Germans (perhaps because they lorded it over Slavs and Romanians) although they were prepared to defend the Monarchy's own interests (e.g. over *Mitteleuropa*, which Berchtold accepted just to keep the Germans as permanent allies.). They thought Germany needed Austria-Hungary more than vice-versa but would in the end be disabused.

Despite Falkenhayn's assurances that Germany had no troops with which to defend Austria-Hungary from Italy or Romania, Burián simply talked German opponents into exhausted silence and refused to listen. He offered no concessions, even though Austria had no troops to spare either. Berlin was infuriated. He was risking the collapse of his state for the sake of a small province. The Germans even offered territory in Russian Poland or German Silesia as compensation. Burián only moved though after the Austrian position in Galicia entirely collapsed in 1915 and the war looked like moving to Hungary. In March 1915 the cession of the Trentino was agreed. Then Italy demanded Trieste and the Isonzo and immediate occupation before the war ended. By this time the Germans heard rumours of a separate peace between Austria and Russia and a of full war against Italy. This was Conrad's idea. Russia could get Eastern Galicia; Austria-Hungary a free hand in the Western Balkans and a free hand against Italy. But it would need German consent—otherwise the Monarchy's Germans and Magyars would support Berlin, not Vienna. Given the threat to Hungary and the risk of catastrophe if both Italy and Romania entered the war, Germany was now asked to give up Belgium and make peace with England. But she would not. **Meanwhile, Rome signed the Treaty of London and entered the war on the Allied side on 23 may 1915.**

Fortunately, the worst did not happen: the Italians were not ready to attack right away and a successful Austro-German offensive in Galicia deterred the Romanians from entering the war. By the time the Italians started to fight the eastern Front was out of danger so that an Austrian army could be scraped together along the Italian border to resist them. Yet Germany refused to declare war on Italy which eventually declared war on it in 1916.

Now the Germans put the pressure on Austria-Hungary to appease Romania. Turkey needed supplies and these could only be delivered through Romania. Could not Austria-Hungary surrender at least the Bukovina and grant autonomy to Transylvania? Burián refused. The argument was resolved when the Dardanelles campaign failed and Romania still remained neutral. **But Austria needed German help more than ever with a three-front war.**

Yet 1915 brought the fall of Russian Poland and Warsaw and the start of a successful offensive against Serbia. German troops were now being mixed into Austrian units to keep up their strength on both fronts, however humiliating this was to Conrad. Yet this practice merely increased German self-confidence. And it spilled over to the diplomatic field.

Poland was back on the agenda. Tisza demanded it should join Austria and that Hungary should get Bosnia and Dalmatia as compensation. Nobody though seemed enthusiastic, least of all the Germans, who could not see how swamping Austria with an extra 12 million Poles would support its role as a German power. The Germans, however, had an answer to this riddle. Austria could get Poland, if and only if, the whole Monarchy agreed to be part of *Mitteleuropa*. Then its Germanness would be secured.

***Mitteleuropa* was a bit like Schwarzenberg's Reich of Seventy Millions, but run by the Germans. It, too, was to operate on a political, military and economic level and various schemes for one had been proposed even before 1914. There had been great discussion of the topic and at the end of 1915 Friedrich Naumann had published his famous book with that title. It was to become the central issue of the alliance.**

Austrian and Hungarian industrialists were against it, just as they had opposed the *Zollverein*. German competition would destroy them. Yet Austrian-Germans, especially nationalists, were enthusiastic about the idea. They wanted to protect themselves for all time against the Slavs by a German alliance. They also wanted to split Galicia and Dalmatia from Cisleithania and feared the government might make future concessions to the Slavs as a reward for their loyalty during the war. The Slavs were hostile and the Magyars also. Berchtold and some of his former colleagues were favourable but more pertinently but Stürgkh, Burián and Tisza were against it. The latter described it as "short-sighted, unpatriotic and harmful". Yet Germany forced the pace linking it with Poland. And ever since the September programme which called for a European Customs Union, Germany thought this the best solution for Austrian interests. And with its victory over Russia, *Mitteleuropa* seemed the way to reverse 1866, give Poland to Austria but

let Germany exploit it economically. But Burián played for time and merely offered to look at some details, although the Germans made it clear they wanted to take control of the “Germanic Eastern March” economically and politically in order to subjugate the Slavs. They talked of “the progressive Slavicization of Austria” if they failed. Burián simply rejected such outside interference, maintaining that the whole issue would in any case have to wait till the latest economic *Ausgleich* between Vienna and Budapest had been completed. In his view the whole issue could be ignored. However, negotiations over preferential tariffs began in April 1916 and were dragged out for the rest of the year. **The Germans in turn, disappointed at the Austrian response, and fearful that Austria expected too much from the war—Poland, Serbia and Montenegro in some form or other—then suddenly rejected an Austro-Polish solution altogether. Instead, Congress Poland would remain autonomous under German control—the German-Polish solution. This would eventually endanger Austria’s hold over Galicia.**

Meanwhile Austria was becoming desperate for food supplies. Hungary had cut off supplies and there was an allied blockade. Only Germany could fill the gap. It was the same with financial aid. **Peace was another way out. But neither the Russians or the Western Powers would make one and Germany still resisted Austrian pressure to guarantee the sovereignty of Belgium. Austria, for its own part, would make no concessions to gain a peace with Serbia or Montenegro.** Then, with the occupation of both these countries, nothing needed to be done, although their future status was still in doubt. In 1916 disaster struck. Russia’s Brusilov offensive destroyed the Austrian army which lost 614,000 men. German reinforcements were necessary to save the Monarchy whose best troops had been transferred to the Italian front. By the end of 1916, resistance to German demands was no longer possible.

First came a unified army high command on the Eastern Front; Conrad was now so discredited that all Austrians from Franz Joseph down now welcomed the move. Hindenburg and the Kaiser took command. Romania now entered the war on the allied side, but it was immediately defeated by German troops in a lightning war. Bucharest was occupied but Falkenhayn was now replaced as overall German commander for not foreseeing the Romanian move. **Hindenburg took supreme command of all Germany’s forces with Ludendorff as his Chief of staff. And Ludendorff saw Germany’s main war prize as Austria-Hungary which he intended**

to subjugate to the German Reich. By the end of July 1916 even Burián had given up on the Austro-Polish solution. Hindenburg wanted a sham independent Poland under German control which would raise a conscript army to fight Russia and he got one.

Burián in October 1916 now proposed a peace deal with the Entente. The Brusilov offensive had been defeated; Romania was occupied and the Entente's offensives had failed in France. It would not look like weakness. But peace was unlikely: Germany wanted to annex Belgium and Northern France; Austria wanted Montenegro, and parts of Russia, Romania and Serbia. Austria also wanted Germany to guarantee the Monarchy territorially to the extent it had been in 1914. If that was so, the Germans, however, wanted all their colonies guaranteed as well. A peace was indeed offered to the Entente in December 1916, but without conditions. It was duly rejected. Then came vital changes. Stürgkh was assassinated at the end of October. A month later Franz Joseph died and his successor, Karl I then dismissed Burian.

By now the Monarchy was on the point of collapse. The economy was slowly winding down and the population was starving. If Germany wanted an ally she would have to rescue her economically. **Moreover, in both halves of the Monarchy political opposition to the war was increasing.** Moreover Masaryk had set up a Czech National Committee in London. How would the allies then respond? They had two choices—let the Monarchy die by amputations to Italy and other countries or make a separate peace. The latter policy became more fashionable after the abdication of the Tsar.

The new Emperor of Austria, Karl I, was rather intelligent, pleasant, idealistic, religious but naïve. He had no political experience at all but meant to do his best. He sensed that change was needed but what change exactly? A Catholic pacifist, he mostly wanted peace. Moreover, he distrusted the Germans whose aim he said was to make the Monarchy another Bavaria. Germany had become a military dictatorship and its success would be Austria's ruin. If he secured peace, he wanted an alliance with France. He also hated the *Ausgleich* and wanted another solution for the monarchy's internal problems (though he was not the pure federalist he supporters still claim). So surely things had to change.

And they did to some extent. A new prime minister, Clam Martinic, was appointed for Austria (though his strong anti-Czech sentiment did not help, even though his ancestors had been noble Bohemian federalists). **Vienna's parliament was restored. Karl**

himself took over command of the army, renegotiated the joint command agreement with Berlin and brought the army HQ to Baden outside Vienna. Conrad, finally, went as Chief of staff. Burián was replaced by Ottokar von Czernin as foreign minister. This new man was impulsive – often neurotic and arrogant – but willing to try new expedients. **But most of all he wanted a moderate peace: in his view the very survival of the Monarchy would be a victory.** Karl believed much the same, although there were differences between the two men. In particular, Czernin believed in Dualism as the only way to order the Monarchy during the War and wanted to create a solid German bloc to rule Cisleithania by decree (or octroi, as it was known), which would give the Germans control there, most notably in Bohemia. Like Clam, Czernin was a Bohemian aristocrat with very little consideration for Czech desiderata. Karl accepted this scheme, though his closest adviser repeatedly urged him to engage in a federal reorganization of the monarchy. Again, Czernin was devoted to the German alliance saying there could only be peace alongside Germany. Karl had other ideas (at least in theory).

So Karl went his own way: with peace feelers, notably the Sixtus Affair (of which Czernin was mostly aware) in foreign affairs and **the July 1917 Amnesty in domestic affairs** (incorrectly known as the Czech amnesty by Austrian Germans).

Yet peace was not at hand. **In February Germany began unrestricted submarine warfare and got Austria's very reluctant approval.** Victory over England was promised in four months. But Czernin accepted Wilson's offer a peace without annexations or indemnities, which the Germans had rejected. Indeed, the Germans had offered US territory to Mexico if Mexico attacked the USA. **This on top of unrestricted submarine warfare brought American intervention in favour of the Entente in April 1917. But the USA did not declare war on the Monarchy or vice-versa.**

Meanwhile Poland remained a subject of dispute. When the Germans insisted the new Polish army swear an oath of allegiance to William II, Vienna protested. It did not matter anyway, as so few Poles volunteered to fight in it. Czernin, however, now toyed with the Austro-Polish plan again. Perhaps a personal union between Poland and the Monarchy with Karl or a Habsburg Archduke as King of Poland?

The fall of Tsarist Russia now changed matters. It gave the Central Powers a smell of victory but also a warning that the lower orders would not endure war for ever.

Moreover, with US entry into the war and the failure of the submarine menace to knock out England, time was on the side of the Entente. This realization and the fact that Austria no longer needed the protection from Germany, with whom she disagreed over everything, from Russia, also meant that Austria could now sue for peace. The Entente Powers saw this too. So, 1917 was filled with secret peace feelers and Karl was at the centre of them. Czernin also wanted peace but a general one, not a separate one (though Karl never actually offer a separate peace, though he doubtless wished for one). He felt that to betray Germany would lead to the end of the dynasty. **The trouble was that neither the Entente nor Germany was willing to make a compromise peace.** Nor was Czernin willing to make peace without gains—if not Poland then predominance in the Balkans and Romania. Berlin should give up Alsace-Lorraine and Belgium but gain Poland and guarantee the Monarchy's integrity.

In any case all the peace feelers failed but even before then Hindenburg and Ludendorff, emboldened by events in Russia, insisted on massive annexations. Austria-Hungary was to be excluded from the spoils. Berlin was to get Poland, Lithuania and Courland as well as economic control of Romania and the Balkans. It would also get Belgium and Luxembourg. The idea of *Mitteleuropa* was also revived.

1917 brought more changes. Tisza was forced out but this only led to a power vacuum there. In Vienna, Clam resigned finding that he could get the nationalities in the Reichsrat to agree on nothing. Food shortages and hunger remained the order of the day in both halves of the Monarchy, making it dependent on grain imports from German occupied Romania.

Meanwhile Karl issued an Amnesty Decree against Czernin's policy to try to appease Cisleithania's nationalities. Czech and other political prisoners were released. But this only brought more demands from Czechs while the Germans and Czernin were outraged. Czernin turned to the Germans for greater support, but a majority in the Monarchy now seemed anti- German and wanted peace. This was certainly true of the head of Karl's own staff Polzer-Hoditz (his closest adviser) and the so-called Meinl Group around him. **Czernin warned Karl that the Germans would invade Bohemia and Galicia if he made peace and that the Austrian Germans would revolt.** Karl therefore kept to the German alliance but the divisions between Czernin and the peace party around Karl were plain for all to see. The Germans, in any case, were also in trouble. **Bethmann was forced to resign and replaced by Michaelis, who accepted a Reichstag peace motion**

on the basis of the status quo ante, but only as he himself understood it—and that was as Hindenburg understood it.

In August 1917 the Russians were finally driven out of East Galicia and the Bukovina yet secret peace talks in Switzerland stalled. The Germans would never agree to allied demands. Austria, for her own part, of course, would make no territorial concessions to Italy, especially after her victory at Caporetto. The Germans in fact were now thinking about annexing the Russian Ukraine.

By late 1917, however, things looked superficially better for Austria- Hungary. She was free of foreign troops and had units in occupied Serbia, Montenegro, northern Albania and southern Poland. In Italy the Italians looked defeated. Russia and Romania had been defeated. All its war aims had been achieved. The Germans also felt elated. But the situation was ambiguous. **Only the utter defeat of the allies in the West would bring peace.** Nonetheless Czernin now publicly backed Germany in a speech in Budapest on 6 December, which led the USA to declare war on the Monarchy. **After Brest-Litovsk, the possibility of peace faded and the Allies became less favourable to the Monarchy's survival.** In any case they would only accept a federated state and Austria's leaders still feared that federation would bring about dissolution. Czernin believed that domestic reform could only come after the war. Others believed that the Germans should step in already to save them from the Slavs.

At the end of 1917 Poland and *Mitteleuropa* returned as issues and an attempt was made to solve them once and for all. The Germans now made it clear that *Mitteleuropa* meant for them something akin to the USA or the British Empire. Austria would lose its independence. This led nowhere. Then Austria revived the Austro-Polish solution for Poland. Germany was now inclined to agree so long as it got control of Romania and Austria joined *Mitteleuropa*. Czernin agreed. A military alliance would also be agreed for twenty years and something worked out over Belgium. But then Hindenburg and Ludendorff vetoed everything. Germany was a to make annexations in Poland and to control its economy and railroads. She also wanted part of Austrian Silesia to acquire direct communication with Hungary. Austria refused and it was during this stalemate that she entered negotiations at Brest-Litovsk.

Czernin hoped for a German victory that would be followed by a moderate offer of peace to the Entente. Karl wanted peace with no annexations or the status quo ante. The Germans were of a different mind. They wanted the Baltic territories, Poland

and the Ukraine. Czernin wanted Poland for Austria. In the event food riots in Vienna forced him to beg the Germans for grain supplies that Hindenburg turned down because they were needed for the German army and victory. Under these circumstances Austria recognised an independent Ukraine and in return for its granaries agreed to give it Kholm in Congress Poland and to allow the Ruthenes (Ukrainians) control of East Galicia within the Monarchy itself. The Poles revolted everywhere and condemned Austria's betrayal. Meanwhile the Ukrainian government was ousted by the Soviets and the treaty came to naught. **Then the Germans renewed the war with Russia and grabbed Poland, the Baltic and the Ukraine, but no grain was found there that could be transported to Vienna. When peace was now made with Romania no grain was found there either.** Moreover the Germans took economic control of the country and offered the Monarchy no support in Poland. Austria-Hungary was gaining nothing from the war.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff were in control They now concentrated on smashing the Entente on the Western front before the economic blockade and the Americans shifted the balance of power permanently against them. Czernin now seemed ready for final victory too along with his German allies. Yet his position was weak since victory in the East was still bringing no bread and the nationalities, now including the Poles were losing their faith in the Monarchy and Germany. Karl meanwhile lost faith in Czernin and the Germans whose annexations he repudiated and longed for a separate peace. More peace feelers and secret meetings did take place but led nowhere. Nor did Wilson's Fourteen Points of January 1918. Karl was desperate for peace but Czernin wanted to await the outcome of the German offensive in France.

Czernin's determination to stick with Germany had an unforeseen outcome however. In one of his speeches he put the failure of secret talks on Clemenceau who he said wanted to annex Alsace-Lorraine and was thus responsible for the German offensive. He also attacked the Masaryks inside and outside the Monarchy. In riposte, Clemenceau then published Karl's letter to Sixtus recognising France's "just claims" to Alsace-Lorraine. **Thereafter, Vienna's denials destroyed the credibility of Karl and Czernin. The latter tried to force Karl to abdicate and when that failed he resigned. From now on Austria was no longer a player in European affairs.** The powers ignored her while her peoples looked to Berlin, London or Washington. Karl eventually tried to federate the Monarchy (though only the Austrian side, tellingly) but it was too late. The army plus the Germans of Austria and the Magyars now looked to Berlin. Burián returned as foreign minister and he took the same line. **Karl went to German headquarters at Spa on 12**

May and agreed to *Mitteleuropa*, albeit only in principle and only once the Polish problem was solved. But the world took it as the final end of Austrian independence. Her Slavs now began to look to independence outside the Monarchy. Given the hunger and inflation even German Austrians and Magyars began to feel the same. Burián meanwhile still negotiated on the Polish Question but it was by now irrelevant. With the failure of the German offensives, the defeat of Turkey and Bulgaria, the Monarchy soon melted away. Karl left Vienna and the Habsburgs never returned. Their German alliance had failed them. But that was not to say that Germany and Austria would not once again be reunited—and this time under an Austrian.