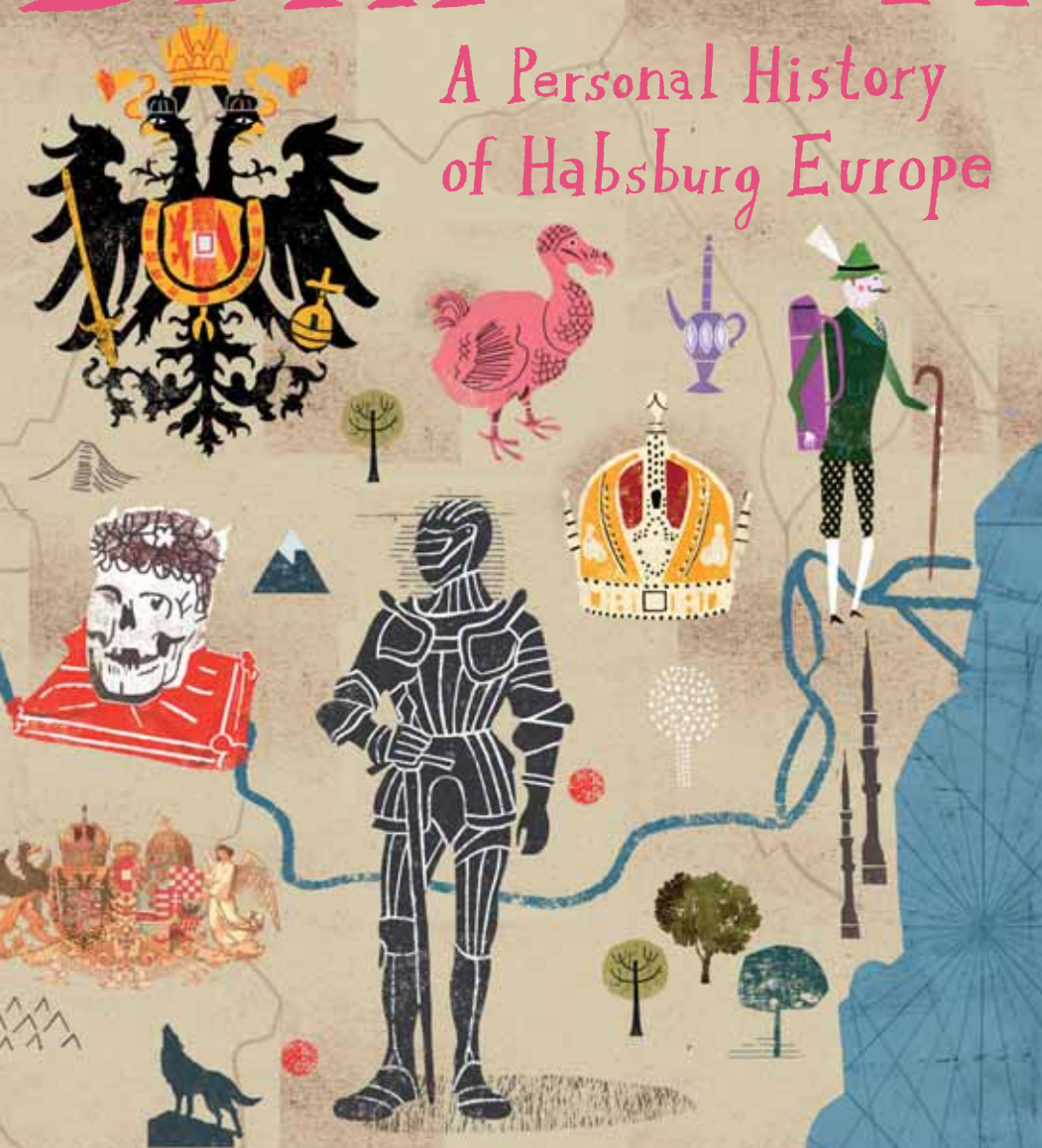


DANUBIA

A Personal History
of Habsburg Europe



SIMON WINDER

Author of the top ten bestseller *Germania*

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PICADOR

Introduction

Danubia is a history of the huge swathes of Europe which accumulated in the hands of the Habsburg family. The story runs from the end of the Middle Ages to the end of the First World War, when the Habsburgs' empire fell to pieces and they fled.

Through cunning, dimness, luck and brilliance the Habsburgs had an extraordinarily long run. All empires are in some measure accidental, but theirs was particularly so, as sexual failure, madness or death in battle tipped a great pile of kingdoms, dukedoms and assorted marches and counties into their laps. They found themselves ruling territories from the North Sea to the Adriatic, from the Carpathians to Peru. They had many bases scattered across Europe, but their heartland was always the Danube, the vast river that runs through modern Upper and Lower Austria, their principal capital at Vienna, then Bratislava, where they were crowned kings of Hungary, and on to Budapest, which became one of their other great capitals.

For more than four centuries there was hardly a twist in Europe's history to which they did not contribute. For millions of modern Europeans the language they speak, the religion they practise, the appearance of their city and the boundaries of their country are disturbingly reliant on the squabbles, vagaries and afterthoughts of Habsburgs whose names are now barely remembered. They defended Central Europe against wave upon wave of Ottoman attacks. They intervened decisively against Protestantism. They came to stand – against their will – as champions of tolerance in a nineteenth-century Europe driven mad by ethnic nationalism. They developed marital or military relations with pretty much every part of Europe they did not already own. From

most European states' perspective, the family bewilderingly swapped costumes so many times that they could appear as everything from rock-like ally to something approaching the Antichrist. Indeed, the Habsburgs' influence has been so multifarious and complex as to be almost beyond moral judgement, running through the entire gamut of human behaviours available.

In the first half of the sixteenth century the family seemed to come close – as the inheritances heaped up so crazily that designers of coats of arms could hardly keep up – to ruling the whole of Europe, suggesting a 'Chinese' future in which the continent would become a single unified state. As it was, the Emperor Charles V's supremacy collapsed, under assault from innumerable factors, his lands' accidental origins swamping him in contradictory needs and demands. In 1555, Charles was obliged much against his will to break up his enormous inheritance, with one half going to his son, Philip, based in his new capital of Madrid, and the other going to his brother, Ferdinand, based in Vienna. At this break-point I follow the story of Ferdinand's descendants, although the Madrid relatives continue to intrude now and then until their hideous implosion in 1700.

While writing my last book, *Germania*, I would sometimes find myself in a sort of trance of anxiety, knowing that it was based on a sleight of hand. With a few self-indulgent exceptions I kept its geographical focus inside the boundaries of the current Federal Republic of Germany. This was necessary for a coherent narrative, but historically ridiculous. Indeed, the structure humiliatingly mocked my main point: that 'Germany' was a very recent creation and only a hacked-out part of the chaos of small and medium feudal states which had covered much of Europe. These hundreds of squabbling jurisdictions existed under the protective framework of the Holy Roman Emperors, who ruled, with admittedly only sputtering success, for a millennium. For the last three hundred and fifty years of the Empire's existence, the Emperor was almost always the senior member of the Habsburg family. He had this role because he personally ruled immense tracts of land, indeed at dif-

ferent times owning parts or all of nineteen modern European countries.* This meant that he was unique in having a large enough personal financial and military base to be plausible as Emperor. But it also meant that he was often distracted: responsible for great blocks of territory inside the Holy Roman Empire (such as modern Austria and the Czech Republic) but also for unrelated places such as Croatia, say, and Mexico. This distraction, it can be argued, was the key motor for Europe's political history.

The Habsburg story, of Europe's most persistent and powerful dynastic family ruling the world of *Germania* from bases which were in fact well outside the modern state of Germany, was just too complex to be alluded to except in passing in the earlier book. The Habsburgs' influence across Europe was overwhelming, but often the 'great events' of the continent's history were generated as much by their uselessness or apparent prostration as by any actual family initiative. Indeed it is quite striking how baffled or inadequate many of the Emperors were, and yet an almost uncountable heap of would-be carnivorous rivals ended up in the dustbin while the Habsburgs just kept plodding along. Through unwarranted luck, short bursts of vigour and events often way outside their control they held on until their defeat by Napoleon. Moving fast, they then cunningly switched the title of Emperor so it referred to what could now be called 'the Habsburg Empire', meaning just the family's personal holdings, itself still the second largest European state after Russia. They kept going for a further, rather battered century, until final catastrophe as one of the defeated Central Powers in the First World War. The aftershocks from the in many ways accidental end of this accidental empire continue to the present. I allude to some of these in the text, but effectively the narrative ends in 1918 as the different parts of the Empire go their own ways.

* In alphabetical order: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, and Ukraine plus briefly the entire Spanish overseas empire. The family also came to own Portugal and its empire as well as, more permanently, Spain and its empire through Charles V's son, Philip.

This is a less sunny book than *Germania*. Visiting cities in the Rhineland, say, it is clear that however damaged they were in the twentieth century (both physically and morally) they remain great historical urban spaces filled with Germans. Their inhabitants can fully acknowledge complicity in the horrors of 1933–45 while also drawing a line connecting themselves and much older history. The great majority of Germans also escaped the impact of Soviet occupation, making their period of trauma very much shorter. The memory of the prosperity and solidity of the summer of 1914 was active for many West Germans in the late 1940s, who could go about their normal lives once more. For the inhabitants of much of the former Habsburg Empire there was no such reprieve, forced at irregular intervals during the century to endure massacres, migrations, invasions, terror and Babylonian exercises in state building and rebuilding.

Emerging from these burned-over zones in the 1990s, the descendants of the survivors had only the weakest links with the Empire whose architectural remnants still surrounded them. The narrowly thwarted plan in 2011 to demolish the last remnants of the ancient Golden Rose Synagogue in Lviv to make way for a hotel is only the most extreme instance of a numbness about the past that afflicts much of the former Empire. Scattered from the western Czech Republic to beyond the Carpathians there are towns where effectively the entire populations are post-1945 settlers. What would it take for Romanians to view abandoned German villages as part of their patrimony, or for Ukrainians to cherish former Polish churches? What a visitor can view as picturesque, a local can view with loathing or (a distinct improvement) indifference. Inevitably these tensions and discontinuities have an impact on the book's text.

The degree to which one can enjoy places that have suffered such fates is obviously a problem. But in four years of travelling around the territories of the old Empire I have never stopped feeling that I was on a mission to convey to readers why so many of these towns and cities – still in many cases hidden from English-speakers, even with the Cold War long gone – stand at the heart

of Europe and the continent's experience, both for good and ill, and how fascinating they remain. By understanding something of their history before 1918 we can actively reclaim what the later totalitarian regimes wished to erase for ever: the plural, anarchic, polyglot Europe once supervised in a dizzying blend of ineptitude, viciousness and occasional benignity by the Habsburg family.

In October 2008 there was a football match in the UEFA Champions League between Chelsea FC and CFR Cluj. Chelsea fans flying into Transylvania for the game thought it would be hilarious to dress up in capes and plastic fangs and duly got off the plane lurching around, flapping their arms and putting on funny accents ('*Ach*, the cheechildren of the night – I hear their call!' and so on). In an interview on a British radio station the next day, a memorably outraged Cluj disc jockey spluttered in perfect English (albeit – fair play – with a slightly funny accent) about how this was a national disgrace, an insult to his people, how Dracula had been the invention 'merely of some Irish novelist' and how vampirism was quite unknown in Transylvania.

All this was true enough, but the interview has hung in my mind ever since because of my own severe anxiety that I am myself merely a Chelsea fan with plastic fangs stumbling off the plane. The former Habsburg lands are places where a principal battlefield has been the interpretation of history. Indeed the very idea of the study of history has been fuelled by animosities and fantasies about ethnic, religious and class privileges. For me to enter this highly charged arena is, I am fully aware, foolish. It is very easy to be contemptuous of someone else's nationalism and unaware of one's own. The extraordinarily toxic legacy of the Empire's obsession with linguistics, archaeology, ethnography, sigillography, numismatics, cartography and so on makes me feel, in my darker moods, that the spread of these subjects and the use to which they were put was nothing but a disaster for Central Europe and that academics more than anyone else are (with help from priests) some of the greatest villains. Indeed, in comparison with academics, the politicians and military men were mere puppets, with even Hitler

simply a disgusting by-product of various poisonous Viennese nationalist and scientific teachings.

The stakes have been so high because each linguistic group has obsessively picked over its past not merely out of a wish to entertain itself with fancy—that facts about ancestors, but to use it as the key weapon in establishing its ascendancy over other groups. While the Hungarians poured resources into charting their grand ancestry to somewhere out on the Asian steppe and in 1896 celebrated the thousandth anniversary of their arrival in Europe, Romanian academics in parallel scoured excavations for evidence that they were themselves the true owners of the same region, the descendants of soldiers and settlers from the Roman army (even inventing their country's name to make this point). What should have been harmless, indeed loopy, antiquarianism became instead the motive force behind terrible events, the least harmful being the abuse shouted by Romanians during anti-Hungarian rallies in the last years of the Empire, 'Go back to Asia!' Of course, the end logic of this rhetoric was to highlight those groups – Jews, Gypsies – who had no 'home', and the break-up of the Habsburg Empire into bitter nationalist mini-states in 1918 immediately created a highly threatening situation for anyone caught in the overlaps.

Parts of this book are devoted to picking over the truly horrible consequences of these nationalisms, but this does not mean I have some nostalgic wish to return to the time of the Empire. That would be meaningless. Intellectually it seems much better to acknowledge the substantial foul streak within modernity, without dreaming of a return to some aristocratic world lacking newspapers or mass literacy. After all, a vast number of these terrible ideas flowered *within* the Habsburg Empire, which can in that sense be blamed, but then so did the intellectual means to fight them (from Zionism, to anarchism, to the understanding of the unconscious).

A related purpose in writing this book was also to dramatize the sheer awfulness of living in Central Europe for some much-earlier periods, when extreme, savage violence to the point of near-total depopulation did damage of a kind not unrelated to that of the twentieth century. Such ferocity has been generally alien to

the 'home' experiences of western Europeans, although they have of course themselves blithely carried out actions of comparable ferocity on other continents. To see Europe itself as an arena for slavery, punishment raids, forcible resettlement, piracy and religiously sanctioned public mutilation and execution is, to say the least, interesting. I hope I have written about it with sufficient understanding not to be offensive, but also to make it clear that such fates are *central* to Europe's story and not rooted in some mere weird 'eastern' barbarism.

In the summer of 1463 the King of Bosnia, Stephen Tomašević, was besieged by the army of the Ottoman ruler Mehmet II in the fortress of Ključ. Eventually the King surrendered under agreement of safe conduct. But once in Mehmet's hands Stephen and his entourage were killed and the surviving Bosnian nobility made into galley-slaves. The Ottoman view was that the entire Bosnian ruling class had lost its function and should be liquidated – Bosnia's new role as a small *eyalet* (province) in the Ottoman Empire was permanent and final. The safe conduct had been offered to a king, but now he had become a mere subject and could be disposed of at will. Indeed Bosnia, a respectable medieval kingdom, lost its independence for over five centuries. Poland was another famous example. When, in a series of negotiations of breathtaking coldness at the end of the eighteenth century, the Habsburgs, Prussians and Russians decided to split Poland between them, the intention was that this would be for ever, with the very name of Poland disappearing beneath the administrative inventions of 'West Prussia', 'Western Russia' and 'Galicia and Lodomeria'. Poland's new owners cooperated in the killing, rendition or imprisonment of anyone who threatened the new arrangement.

An intermittent theme of Central European history is this very high level of violent uncertainty, an uncertainty that could lead to an entire elite being wiped out. This has rarely been the western European or English-speakers' story. France, for example, has avoided successful invasion for most of its existence and has almost always been ruled by French people. The political decisions of

most English-speaking countries have always been taken from positions of remarkable security. The Habsburg lands, however, were always vulnerable on almost every frontier, with dozens of easy and well-posted invasion routes. Allies became enemies and a long-somnolent border zone could go critical overnight. The Habsburgs' principal purpose was therefore military: from its origins to its collapse their empire was a machine to resist its tough neighbours and to control its often truculent inhabitants. When not fighting, it was preparing to fight. The idea, propagated particularly in the period just before 1914, that the Empire was somehow backward and ineffectual in a cake-and-waltzes way was untrue. The dynasty was never anything other than narrow-mindedly ruthless and harsh in its wish to hold itself together against all-comers. The seemingly genial, bewhiskered old Franz Joseph's obsession was with the Empire as a vast military organism: his life was a series of parades, war-games, medal ceremonies and arguments about the huge funds needed for his army. All of this would have been familiar to his predecessors two hundred or even four hundred years earlier. A further bout of absolute insecurity was always round the corner and the Habsburgs were endlessly monitoring their neighbours' military preparedness and mood-swings. There were plenty of examples of related states whose rulers had blundered and then been expunged. The Habsburgs indeed themselves frequently finessed the setbacks of others to their territorial advantage before themselves taking decisions which resulted in their own disappearance and partition in 1918.

It is important to remember just how vague much rule over Europe was until mass literacy, telegraphs and railways started to tie together regions and countries. The Habsburgs loved to look at maps, genealogies and heraldic shields, making sweeping hand gestures over these symbolic shorthands for their ownership, but there is little reason to believe such gestures had much substance. Apart from a few mountain and forest communities, nobody was left completely alone, but the sense of obligation to Vienna was often remote and convoluted, with innumerable local, noble and religious privileges making a mockery of modern dreams of uni-

tary efficiency. Many histories tend to present a narrative angled from the perspective of the ruler. Most dramatically this is expressed in the term 'rebellion', a word which presupposes failure (by definition: if it succeeds then it is a change of dynasty). It is too easy to see a narrative where any rebellion is an annoyance, a drain on resources, a desperate piece of backwardness, and so on. But this is to take a man wearing a crown in Vienna too seriously and I hope to make it clear just how many perfectly reasonable arguments against Habsburg rule there were. Indeed, at one point or another (and repeatedly in Hungary) virtually everybody took a turn at being 'disloyal' and this should be a valuable clue. Joseph II's war with the Turks went so badly wrong in 1788 because the Hungarian nobles would not supply him with food, because they hated him and thought he was a tiresome creep. As his vast army fell apart and he raged impotently, it is impossible from a world-historical point of view not to feel a bit sorry for him, but Europe is filled with groups of all kinds who are annoyingly insubordinate, and they should be celebrated a bit more.

One much-loved figure in so many anecdotes and novels is the Hungarian minor nobleman who lives only to drink and hunt, and refuses to open any letters or telegrams he receives, on the grounds that they are mere insolent intrusions into the life of a gentleman. The Habsburgs were always dealing with variants on such characters: defenders of feudal rights, stubborn communes, bizarre religious groups and obstreperous guildsmen. Even great aristocrats might plump for the high-risk pleasures of treason with the Turks. Generations of Viennese officials would bang their heads on their cherry-wood desktops with fury: *why* won't these people just *do* as they're *told*? But theirs was just a sickness generated by too many maps, charts and budget projections. A possible novelty of this book is that it attempts to avoid seeing Vienna as the clearing-house for all right-minded political, religious, social or strategic thinking. A Styrian farmer, Transylvanian serf or Adriatic pirate each saw Vienna in a different way, and that view was not necessarily wrong.

Danubia is designed to be read quite separately from *Germania*. Naturally it has to cover some of the same ground, and I deal with the overlap by using different angles and examples, but there are a number of basic definitions about how Europe functioned via the Holy Roman Empire which will need to be repeated.

There are three assurances I need to give. This is *not* a dynastic family history. You will not be obliged to read through endless marriage treaties, dusty gossip about what an archduke said to another archduke or how so-and-so never got on with her sister-in-law. This is a book about some interesting things that specific rulers did, and sometimes these undoubtedly involve marriage treaties (too often involving people called either Maria or Charles), but I try to avoid the sort of hearsay and harpsichordy, *Quality Street* royal chit-chat which has sometimes blighted consideration of the Habsburgs. I have dumped all the hand-kissing, beauty spots, heel-clicking and discreet glances over fluttered fans ('Oh, you are too forward, Count'), and I hope this will win me some gratitude.

This is also *not* a book which attempts to define specific ethnic groups by some clutch of imagined characteristics. You will not find sentences opening with assertions such as 'Like that fiery yet noble spice they tend so lovingly, known the world over as "paprika", the Hungarian people are . . .'. No specific nationality will give you the very clothes off their backs; none has natural melancholy; none is instinctively musical; no linguistic groups are implacable enemies yet also sure friends; and absolutely nobody gives herself with a self-immolating urgency rooted in her people's fatalism. This sort of rubbish has been going on for centuries – Franz Ferdinand even had a helpful list of national attributes over his desk to remind him – and it has to stop. An immediate improvement can be made to Europe's existence if we restrict qualities such as being laughter-filled, moody, built for love, quick to find fault and so on to individuals rather than entire populations, avoiding the associated ludicrous ethnic implication that whole cities must be packed with the musically gifted or valleys swift-to-anger. I started to feel vehemently about this while writing *Germania*. I listened to so many British and American friends

stating as axiomatic that Germans have no sense of humour, when I had myself just come from yet another *Bierkeller* where most of the occupants were laughing so much they had turned mauve and their limbs were about to fall off; which does not, of course, mean that all Germans do in fact have a sense of humour.

And, finally, this is *not* an attempt at an exhaustive guide to Central Europe. I have restricted myself simply to writing about some of the things I personally find fascinating. There is a reasonably clear narrative, but inevitably there are huge numbers of subjects I hardly touch. There is a fair amount on music, for example, but the text reflects my love of Haydn and Wolf rather than my merely remote, ignorant admiration for Beethoven or Bruckner. This will annoy some readers and I apologize, but there seems no point in dutifully faking up topics to take up scarce space that would then threaten more interesting material with excision. Similarly, some emperors are simply more alluring than others and I have preferred to spend time on a fascinating handful rather than colour in all the duds too.

I feel quite dazed by my good fortune in being able to write this book. I have been obsessed with the cultures of Central Europe for most of my adult life, but to have a legitimate excuse to wander everywhere from Bohemia to Ukraine and read, think, talk and write about so many subjects for so long has been an absurd privilege. I very much hope that I can convey something of what I felt when at regular intervals I found myself in the magnificently restored buffet of Budapest's Eastern Station, chewing on a McChickwich and wondering what adventure would befall me next.