

Simon Winder

DANUBIA

A Personal History of Habsburg Europe



PICADOR

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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 cheeldren 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-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.

Place names

The naming of towns has always been a key weapon for establishing dominance over a region. The name you use for a town can imply either that you have simply a specific ethnicity or that you are making an aggressive or nostalgic political point. A good modern example is the Transylvanian town of Cluj-Napoca. Cluj is the Romanian form; Cluj-Napoca was faked up in the 1970s as Napoca had been the name of a Roman town on the same site; Klausenburg is how Germans refer to it; Klazin in Yiddish; Kolozsvár in Hungarian. They all have related roots but with very different political weights. A Hungarian would say that to refer to Kolozsvár is simply to give the name in Magyar – but a Romanian would view this as an irredentist provocation, the rejection of rule by Romania and a sentimental wish to return to the good old days when it was a major Hungarian town. The Romanian is right to bristle, but not necessarily. A similar story applies to the ancient town of Pozsony, where the Hungarian kings used to be crowned, known as Preßburg in German. The Czechs and Slovaks grabbed Pozsony and in 1919 fabricated the name Bratislava, thereby making it no longer German or Hungarian. Perhaps the worst instance is the way that the Czech Republic is obliged to have such an unsatisfactory name for itself because the obvious alternative, Bohemia and Moravia, is impossibly besmirched by its Nazi usage during the ‘protectorate’.

There is no way out of this minefield: what is now Lviv can be Lemberg, Lemberik, Lwów, Lvov; what is now Ivano-Frankivsk can be Stanislaw, Stanisławów, Stanislavov – each of these variants provoke different forms of pain for different excluded groups. So I will use the modern official name in each case in as bland a fashion as possible and without implying either fondness or aversion.

There is a lot of very unfamiliar historical geography in this book. Units such as Carniola or Upper Lusatia existed for centuries and need to be thought of as having a quite startling tensile strength, with their own traditions, shields, aristocratic families

and duties towards their rulers. A famous example is the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria, viewed by Poles and many others as a terrible colonial disgrace and entirely illegitimate, and yet lasting nearly a hundred and fifty years – in other words for a longer period than a united German state has existed. The mental exercise needed to think of Galicia not as a doomed and nutty fly-by-night but as a durable reality for many generations of its inhabitants is a crucial precondition to thinking about Europe's history.

Many older political entities seem small now, but most of Central Europe was made up of such units until the nineteenth century. Indeed, until the unification of Germany and Italy, somewhere like Switzerland looked fairly chunky. If Europeans in 1900 could have had a sneak preview of the continent's appearance in 2000 they would have been astonished, not just by the re-emergence of formerly independent states such as Poland and Ireland (which would have then seemed safely under the heel of superpowers), but by such fantastical new creations as Slovakia and Macedonia. These last would have had simply no meaning in 1900, one being a mere highland area of northern Hungary, the other tucked into a few folds of the Ottoman Empire. But just as striking would be the disappearance of such medieval stalwarts as the County of Görz or the Duchy of Teschen, now almost unlocatable under fresh frontiers. It is not an exercise to everyone's taste, but this book is meant to urge its readers to think about Europe as a place with strange and various borders, multiple possible outcomes and with geography and ownership up for grabs. The maps should help, but for a truly dizzying vision of how twentieth-century Central Europe might have been refixed it is worth looking at pages 444–5.

The Habsburg family

Rather than defeat the reader with a family tree which would look like an illustration of the veins and arteries of the human body drawn by a poorly informed maniac, I thought it better to start with this summary of just the heads of the family, so the sequence is clear. I give the year each ruler became Emperor and the year the ruler died. It all looks very straightforward and natural, but of course the list hides away all kinds of back-stabbing, reckless subdivision, hatred, fake piety and general failure, which can readily be relegated to the main text.

To save everyone's brains I have simplified all titles. Some fuss in this area is inevitable but I will cling under almost all circumstances to a single title for each character. To give you a little glimpse of the chaos, the unattractive Philip 'the Handsome' was Philip I of Castile, Philip II of Luxemburg, Philip III of Brabant, Philip IV of Burgundy, Philip V of Namur, Philip VI of Artois as well as assorted Is, IIs, IIIs and so on for other places. So when I just refer to Philip 'the Handsome' you should feel grateful and briefly ponder the pedantic horror-show you are spared. Perhaps the most significant omission is the important one that in their critical roles as kings of Hungary and kings of Bohemia some rulers had different numbers – so Rudolf II was Rudolf I in Hungary, and Charles VI was Charles III (or III. Károly). The style given therefore is always as Emperor, whether as Holy Roman Emperor (until 1806) or Emperor of Austria (from 1804 to 1918).

The list below shows that it is not possible to have a consistent treatment of actual names. To call Charles V Karl or Carlos would be self-defeating, as he is famous in English as Charles V. Maria Theresia is always Maria Theresa in English. For much of his reign Franz Joseph (the '-ph' rather than '-f' is in the German too) was known to English-speakers as an Anglicized Francis Joseph, but as an enemy ruler in the First World War he was Germanized back to Franz, simply because it sounded worse. The same applies to his successor, Charles I, who has always been Karl I. By using

criteria remote from rationality, Karl I was beatified by the Catholic Church in 2004 and is now called the Blessed Karl of Austria, the first and – it is a fair assumption – last member of his family to be en route to sainthood.

Until 1806 ‘the Empire’ means the vast Holy Roman Empire, of which the senior member of the Habsburg family was almost always elected Emperor. He ruled the ‘Habsburg lands’ or ‘Habsburg possessions’ personally and quite separately. Even these lands were far less coherent than they appear, with much of them in practice under the control of various aristocrats and religious enterprises and sometimes embarrassingly small bits actually ‘owned’ by the family. ‘Rule’ often meant navigating through a wilderness of privileges, favours, exemptions and ossified feudal niceties. Important parts of these personal lands were within the Holy Roman Empire, but others (such as Hungary) were not. ‘Imperial troops’ were therefore forces sanctioned by the vote of the Holy Roman Empire, and were not the same as the Habsburgs’ own armies. For anyone reading this under the age of fifty or so, ‘the Empire’ and ‘Imperial’ will immediately summon up visions of highly organized evil from *Star Wars*. Indeed, the recent revival of interest in the history of the Holy Roman Empire might be attributed to this subconscious link. But it is important to remember whenever these terms are used that the human Empire was a few notches down from its space-based rival in efficiency, motivation and wickedness, although the two could certainly swap notes about the irritating way they both seem so prone to needless defeat.

Frederick III (1452–1493) was succeeded, after a period of joint rule, by his son, **Maximilian I** (1493–1519). He was succeeded by his grandson **Charles V** (1519–1558). Charles V decided to split his unmanageable inheritance: the Spain-based branch of the family under the leadership of his son, Philip II, went its own way while the eastern lands fell to Charles’ brother, **Ferdinand I** (1558–1564). He was succeeded by his son **Maximilian II** (1564–1576), who was succeeded in turn by his son **Rudolf II** (1576–1612). After a coup Rudolf’s brother **Matthias** (1612–1619) briefly became

Emperor. Neither Rudolf nor Matthias had children so the head of the family then became their cousin **Ferdinand II** (1619–1637), who was succeeded in easy stages by a straight generational dynastic run of eldest surviving sons: **Ferdinand III** (1637–1657), **Leopold I** (1657–1705) and **Joseph I** (1705–1711). Following the sudden, premature death of Joseph, his brother took over as **Charles VI** (1711–1740). Charles had no surviving male children, meaning that in the face of immense quantities of faithlessness and bloodshed, his daughter **Maria Theresa** (ruler of the Habsburg lands 1740–1780) battled to inherit a number of titles while her husband **Franz I** (1745–1765), after an embarrassing gap, became Emperor. This re-founded the dynasty as the House of Habsburg-Lorraine. Their son inherited in the normal way as **Joseph II** (1765–1790) and was succeeded by his brother, **Leopold II** (1790–1792), who was in turn succeeded by his son **Franz II** (1792–1806), who switched from being Holy Roman Emperor to Emperor of Austria, reset the numbering and started calling himself **Franz I** (1804–1835). He was succeeded by his son **Ferdinand I** (1835–1848), who was set aside in 1848 in a coup that brought to power his nephew, **Franz Joseph I** (1848–1916). After complex and famous dynastic setbacks he was succeeded by his great-nephew **Karl I** (1916–1918). Although Hungary was run until 1944 as a kingdom which claimed to be a regency on behalf of the Habsburgs, it is fair to say that when Karl stepped down in 1918 the dynasty left the stage.

CHAPTER ONE

Tombs, trees and a swamp » Wandering peoples »

The hawk's fortress » 'Look behind you!' »

Cultic sites » The elected Caesars

PAVLA SERTA GERIT SACRO IOVIS ALES INORE
 MAXMILIANEIS IAM CELEBRATA SCOLIS

AQVILA
 DIVINA FABRICA

DIVVS
 MAXIMI

IMPERIALIS
 H VANA INVE TA



BVRGKMAIR HANC AQVILAM DE PINXERAT ARTE IOHES
 ET CELTIS PVLHRAM TEXVIT HIS TORIAM
 ILLE NOVEM MVVIS SEPTENAS IVNXERAT ARTES
 QVAS STVDIO PARILI DOCTA VIENA COLIT

Tombs, trees and a swamp

The southern Hungarian town of Pécs is as good a place as any to start a history of Habsburg Europe. It is hard to believe that it has ever been anything other than a genial provincial town – the unfortunate butt of wider international events, but not a place to initiate anything much. It is the last place heading south before the landscape gets terminally dusty, glum and thinly settled, so it has an oasis or frontier atmosphere and a sense that the cappuccinos are a bit hard-won. The scattering of great, much-mutilated buildings dotted about Pécs have all been repeatedly patched up in the wake of various disasters and the main square's charisma is much enhanced by the gnarled bulk of an endlessly hacked-about mosque converted unconvincingly into a church when the Turkish rulers surrendered the town's smoking ruins in 1686.

There is one quite extraordinary survival: a necropolis from when Pécs was a wine colony called Sopianae, capital of the Roman province of Pannonia Valeria. The most famous of these tombs was only uncovered in the late eighteenth century and features a set of frescos of scenes from the Bible. These were painted with the colour and sensibility of a mildly gifted nine-year-old child but rescued from inanity by the pictures' age and mournful patchiness. There are Adam and Eve, Noah and his Ark, St Peter and St Paul all somehow clinging on – bits falling off here and there – through fourteen hundred years of life underground.

When the necropolis was built in the fourth century Sopianae must have been a fairly anxious place because of the nearness of the very restive Imperial frontier. It was not a strongpoint in any

sense and if one of the Danube forts had given way then the news would presumably have reached Sopianae via a terrified horseman galloping only a few yards ahead of large numbers of terrifying horsemen. The people living here were Latinized, Christian Germanic Imperial subjects and had been part of the empire for four centuries. The very term 'wine colony' obviously sounds cheerful. There were baths, an aqueduct, a basilica – the usual Roman fittings – and it perhaps had a jaunty *Asterix*-like atmosphere.

One element in the Pécs necropolis is gripping not because it features pictures or any curious decoration, but because of something it lacks. One tomb, reasonably dated to about AD 400, had been prepared for plastering, but never plastered: somebody had gone to considerable expense to build it for a wealthy relative, but then left it incomplete. This is just speculation, but more than plausibly the tomb was left in this state because this was the year when Sopianae ceased to exist. Everyone involved with commissioning or building that tomb either fled or was killed or enslaved by Hun raiders. The next reference to the town is in a document some half a millennium later and there is not even a single brick that can be dated to after 400. Centuries of rain and soil accumulation buried the tombs.

The annihilation of this part of Roman Europe is the founding background to everything that follows. What would become the southern zone of the Habsburg Empire was for centuries a world without writing, without towns, with only residual, short-distance trade, without Christianity. Some people probably always lived in the ruins of towns because walls provided some security and shelter, but the water-systems and markets that had allowed them to exist disappeared. There was nobody who could repair an aqueduct once it broke so there must have been some final day when the cisterns simply stopped filling. Ephemeral chieftains might use a surviving chunk of a grand building as a backdrop for a semi-realized palace, but nobody knew how to dress stone and therefore nothing new could be built. For centuries the only towns were wooden palisaded structures protected by a ditch. It was against this backdrop that the notional ancestors of Central Europe's

modern nations appeared, wandering in from the east in what must have been pretty ripe-smelling military caravans.

Some clues about the fate of Europe after the Romans left can be found in Bautzen, in south-east Saxony. The town sits in gloomy woods and hills – and indeed is itself so gloomy that the great chasm that dominates it soaks up all colour, making even as lurid a bird as a jay flying into it go oddly monochrome. The chasm is created by the River Spree, a long way yet from its more famous role in Berlin. Even on a map, Bautzen looks an unlucky place – with mountain passes to the south which would tend to channel armies passing west or east into its vicinity. And indeed, in a crowded field, Bautzen must have a fair claim to be the most frequently burnt down place in the region, both on purpose and through accident.

Bautzen is interesting in all kinds of ways. It is part of the area known as Upper Lusatia, once ruled by the Habsburg Emperor (there is still a fetching image of Rudolf II decorating a watch-tower) but given to the ruler of Saxony as a thank-you during the Thirty Years War in 1635. At a jumbled linguistic crook in Central Europe's geography, Upper Lusatia was a partly Germanic, partly Slavic territory which would find itself inside the borders of modern Germany. Because of this most of Upper Lusatia's inhabitants were sheltered from the massive ethnic cleansing that turned neighbouring Czechoslovakia and Poland monoglot in 1945. This accidentally preserved the old pattern, once common across the entire region, of German-speaking town-dwellers and Slav-speaking country-dwellers, in Upper Lusatia's case a small group known as the Sorbs. So Bautzen is also Budyšin and the Spree the Sprjewja.

The town's great value is in its origins – and what it says about the origins of the whole of Central Europe. This is an issue where the stakes could not be higher. Each nationality in Central Europe defines itself by being more *echt* than any other: as having a unique claim to ownership of the land through some superior martial talent or more powerful culture or, most importantly, from having arrived in a particular valley *first*. Objectively, the carbon-dating of

your language-group's European debut would seem of interest only to a handful of mouldering antiquaries. But through the labours of these fusty figures, it has become everybody's concern – and a concern that has led to countless violent deaths.

This hunt for origins became obsessive in the nineteenth century as a literate and aggressive language-nationalism came to dominate Central Europe. Town squares filled up with statues of heroic, shaggy forebears and town halls became oppressively decorated with murals of the same forebears engaged in i) frowningly breasting a hill and looking down on the promised land; ii) engaging in some ceremony with a flag or sword to found a town; and iii) successfully killing everybody who was there already. Schools rang to the sound of children reciting heroic epics. This was at the same time a great efflorescence of European culture and a disaster as the twentieth century played out these early medieval fantasies using modern weapons.

The Bautzen region is so curious because it shows what was at stake in the Dark Ages in which all these nationalities could find their roots. Archaeological studies of Lusatia show that Germanic tribes lived here, comfortably outside the reach of the Roman Empire, from about 400 BC to AD 200, but that for some six centuries after that *no humans seem to have lived there at all*. It could of course be that these were humans who lived so simply that they no longer left burials, swords, pots, fort outlines or anything – but this seems implausible. For whatever reason there seem to have been very few or no people and the default forest cover which blanketed Europe grew back over earlier settlements, leaving nothing but wolves, bison and giant oxen to roam through the picturesque fog. The situation in Lusatia was extreme, but more broadly the population of much of inland Europe does seem to have collapsed. Barbarian raiders, Huns and others, who terminated Roman towns like Pécs seem to have also killed or driven off those living in the always quite small settlements north of the frontier.

In much of Central Europe trees are now merely a pretty adjunct to human habitation, although some thick cover remains in Bohemia and Slovakia. But the ancient tree cover used to be almost

total except on very high, bleak land. If humans failed to cut the trees back then they would quickly return: a small settlement that failed through a bad harvest or through a massacre would vanish, its cleared land picked apart by millions of roots. The need to clear space and fight back the trees remained a major concern well into the Middle Ages, with lords offering land to peasants at a bargain rent if mattocks were needed (to clear tree roots), with the rent shooting up once the land could at last be ploughed. Even such famously grim and empty areas as the Hungarian Great Plain were smothered in trees.

The Germanic tribes which lived in a massive swathe from the North Sea to the Balkans seem to have seized up, retreated, diminished or moved to Britain, both because of attacks by Asian nomads and as a side-effect of the failure of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, as economic links frayed and vanished. A final major horror was the arrival in the mid-sixth century of plague. We have records of its devastating impact on the major towns of the eastern Mediterranean, but it clearly must have swept through trading routes deep into areas with none of the tradition of literacy that would have allowed the victims to record their own demise. There is a parallel with North America, where many tribal groups died of European diseases years before they were even in direct contact with Europeans. I remember a tiny, mournful display in a western Canadian museum, of moccasins and beads from inland Athabascans who all seem to have died, scattered unnoticed throughout the interior valleys. It is easy to imagine something very similar in the European interior, with plague following the thin trade routes up through the Balkans and settlements being destroyed and then their very existence smudged out by the relentless trees. The ease therefore with which small groups of Slavs, Magyars and Vlachs and others infiltrated Central Europe came from its sheer emptiness.

A striking glimpse into this untamed Europe can still be found in the Gemenc Forest in southern Hungary. When most of the Danube was reshaped and made navigable and predictable in the nineteenth century, the oxbows of the Gemenc region were left,

both because they are so totally intractable and so they could be used as an archducal hunting ground. Arriving there on a hot summer day, it seemed placid enough. A helpful map on a board outside the forest marked out coloured trails and was neatly decorated with drawings of the forest's massive deer plus some imperious eagles and an oddly frisking wild boar up on its hind legs like a circus poodle. This schematic and rational exposition was already under threat though because the board was itself covered in dozens of twitching, buzzing beetles – fetchingly, half ultramarine and half copper – which skittered about all over the lettering. The sunlight flaring off the beetles already made things seem a bit peculiar and threatening, but this was nothing compared to the reality of the forest. Within moments the neatly marked paths became almost overwhelmed: human order giving way to nature run mad, a foetid dementia of plant life, with hoots, squeaks and grunts filling the air and everything cloaked in stifling semi-darkness by the old trees. Within minutes I had already come across an immense, completely out-of-control pond, its surface choked in millions of seeds and with frogs mucking about on floating debris. A further pond flooded the path and only a few hundred yards in I had to turn back. This was a riotous deciduous jungle of a kind that seemed more Brazilian than Hungarian. I could suddenly see why centuries of drainage courses, weirs, mattock-wielders, grazing animals, the ceaseless, boring, human patrol-work needed to create our societies, were much more important than mere fleeting political events. In the end I walked for several miles on top of an earth dam next to the forest (the dam itself a colossal response to the oxbows' periodic convulsive floods) and was rewarded with eagles, a brass-coloured doe of alarming size, a fox skeleton and a cowherd with his cattle and cowdog – but no boars. The lack of these noble animals could not detract from the extraordinary nature of the Gemenc Forest. Here was a small indication of what most river valleys must have been like in an era of very few humans. Just as the Ganges valley, now a burnt-brown treeless plain, used to be a tiger-filled mayhem of flooded, impassable forest, so much of lowland Europe was threatening

to people and unusable. Most big European animals evolved for this habitat and would disappear along with it. But it was into a very swampy, tree-clogged and unrenovated world that small bands of warriors and their families began to infiltrate in the eighth century AD.

There is a particularly hysteria-edged frieze in the Western Bohemia Museum in Plzeň by V. Saff, carved in 1900, imagining the arrival of the ancient Czechs in a forest, torturing and killing their enemies, tying them to trees, strangling them. In the usual proto-Art-Nouveau style, the sculptor follows through on an ethnographic hunch that surprising numbers of the tribal womenfolk would be in their late teens and free of clothing. The sadism of the carving is oddly reckless and preserves the nationalist mania of its period: urging the Czechs to stop sitting around reading newspapers and sipping herbal liqueurs and instead to embrace the burly virtues of their forebears. In practice we do not of course have any sense at all of what these ancient Czechs were like and Saff may not be entirely wrong about their savagery: although occasions on which women with amazing breasts swung around a severed human head by its top-knot were probably infrequent.

Romanian nationalists cleverly trumped everybody by claiming descent from the Romans, inhabitants of the old province of Dacia. This messed up all the Slav groups and the Hungarians, who had between them established a fairly clear AD 600–900 arrival date. A feature of several Romanian towns is a copy of the Roman statue of Romulus and Remus being suckled by their adopted wolf mother. This bizarre gift was handed out by Mussolini in the early 1920s to suggest none too subtly that his own new empire had a racial ally, a fellow Child of Rome. There will be plenty more of this sort of stuff as the book progresses, but I hope it is already clear to every reader just how freakish and peculiar history's uses have been in the region.

But as was the case for everybody else, it seems in fact the Romanians arrived from elsewhere – probably from the more Latinized areas south of the Danube, modern Serbia or Croatia, which would explain why so rough and marginal an area of the

old Roman Empire as Dacia should have kept its Latin flavour in an otherwise drastically changed region: it didn't. This unwelcome result should make all the rival nationalist historians throw up their hands in jockey horror, call it quits and have a non-ethnically specific drink together. If the Romanians have a mystic heartland that turns out actually to belong to another country then we may as well all just go home.

To take too strong an interest in this subject is to set out on the high road to madness. The extreme mobility of all these tribes is bewildering and the almost total lack of written records for centuries does not help. The overall picture seems to be a retreat by Germanic tribes into the west and the arrival of Slavic tribes, seemingly from a start-point in what is now eastern Poland, mixed in with further post-Hun invaders from various steppe tribes, from the Avars to the Magyars. Indeed, in a despairing variant, the elites of the original Croats and Serbs may have been speaking an Iranian language, which is the point where I think anybody sensible just gives up. Arrows drawn on maps build up into an astonishing spaghetti of population movement, charted through pot-fragments, house-post remnants and casual, perhaps frivolously made-up comments written down by poorly informed monks living centuries later and far away. The net result of these migrations can clearly be seen today. The ancestors of the Czechs settled in a region protected by a crescent of mountains (the Iron Mountains and the Bohemian Forest Mountains) that happened to shield them from German and Frankish predation. Their fellow Slavs in the north and south, the Saxons and the Carantians, were destroyed by invading Germans and the survivors converted into German-speaking Christians, bequeathing only the names Saxony and Carinthia. Further east and south the early Moravians, Slovaks, Russians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Bulgars, Poles, Ruthenes, Croats and Serbs spread out (and in themselves had numerous further subdivisions which have since been erased), generally under Avar overlordship.

The Avars were fast-moving Asian nomads of a kind wearily familiar to anyone trying to settle down and earn an honest living in Central Europe. We know almost nothing about them at all.

They hit a high point when they besieged Constantinople in 626, but they were driven off by the Byzantines and settled in a broad swath from Bohemia to Bulgaria. The Avar khaganate in many ways exemplifies why the Dark Ages are so irritating – the Avars can be seen in tiny glimpses in chronicles or in a handful of surviving, utterly context-free decorative objects and yet for two centuries they were the main overlords directing Slav settlement in Central Europe. An Avar ambassador met Charlemagne at his court on the Rhine in 790 and agreed the border between the Frankish Empire and the Avar Empire, but this was clearly just a truce and the Franks defeated the Avars in a cataclysmic battle notable for the heaps of treasure handed out to Charlemagne’s friends, a substantial shift of gold from the east to the long-denuded west. There is a final reference to the Avars in a chronicle in 822 but then the name simply disappears from the record. I would love to have some sense of what that Avar ambassador speaking with Charlemagne actually looked like – we don’t even know what language he would have used or how he dressed. The Avars could have as readily been from Mars – and ultimately they vanished, dissolving into the Slavic population.

By the ninth century key elements in Central Europe were now in place. The evanescent Great Moravia was a Slavic confederation which managed to be both profoundly important and frustratingly vague – it is not even clear what lands it ruled, although it is fairly certain it did include modern Moravia and Slovakia and probably a circle of lands around that core. Czech nationalists have endlessly argued over this. It lasted only a few decades, but was culturally crucial as the home first of the beautiful and strange Glagolitic script which would render SIMON, for example, as something like



(the M seems particularly lovely in its general unsustainability) and then, thanks to the tireless Byzantine missionaries Cyril and Methodius, as the home of the first Slavic script – an alphabetic decision which has ever since decisively carved out a different zone, both in itself and as a signifier for allegiance to Orthodoxy.

Indeed the missionary work of this period in shifting a large block of Europe towards Constantinople and out of Rome's reach created a fault line with implications into the present.

Each attempt to settle down and create a lasting dynastic state and even a little economic growth was thwarted by the sheer motility of these Eurasian bands. There may not have been a large European population yet (the nearest approach to a town being simply a large armed camp or a cluster of buildings around a fortress) but those that were there remained willing to travel great distances and take great risks. Two threats prevented Central European coalescence, one from the west and one from the east.

Wandering peoples

Passau, on the Bavarian–Austrian border, is a town of such absurd scenic grandeur and geophysical significance that it seems a shame to find its streets lined only with little shops selling devotional trinkets and bird-whistles – the inhabitants should be cut from some more heroic cloth. Passau's fame stems from its location on a spit of land which at its tapered point joins together two monstrous rivers, the Danube and the Inn, the former all the way from a squashy meadow in Swabia, the latter from the Alps. There is also a third river, the extremely less impressive Ilz, which dribbles down from the north – making Passau 'the city of three rivers'. The great significance of the Ilz is that it comes down from the watershed of the forests on the edge of the Bohemian Forest Mountains to the north, just as the Inn comes down from the Swiss Alps, with the Danube itself heading straight west–east along the northern side of the Alps. This combination of converging waters shows there is a gap in the mountains, and it was from here that German-speaking Europe extruded into the Slavic lands to the east.

Bavaria, of which Passau is now the easternmost point, is one of those strange semi-kingdoms that has throughout its history come close to being a real and independent state but has always been subsumed or subverted. It has some of the same advantages of

countries such as England or France in having a number of thorny borders. England's sea coasts and France's sea coasts and mountains have given their rulers a militarily happy situation and it has not been an accident that both these countries have been so hard to invade. This is entirely unlike most Central European states, which have been obliged militarily to turn round and round like a dizzy dog trying to defend its drinking bowl. Bavaria had coherence because of its impenetrable southern mountains and reasonably chunky eastern ones. It emerged from the Dark Ages as a well-run, Germanic, naturally wealthy place under the rule of the Agilolfing family. In the eighth century Bavaria stretched much further east than Passau and German-speaking colonists debouched into Tirol and Salzburg.

As so often in Bavaria's history, the country's wealth and security attracted envious eyes. On the face of it a safe distance away, Charlemagne on the Lower Rhine, a Frankish chieftain, had re-established through a sheer act of the imagination a direct link between himself and the Roman Empire that had collapsed in the west over three centuries before. His ambition, his court's pomp, wealth and learning, and his military success proclaimed the end of the Dark Ages and a new direction for Europe. Instead of being a shattered jigsaw of petty chieftainships and dubious Asiatic overlords, Europe would revive as a new Roman Empire re-founded with Charlemagne as emperor. The Bavarians and the Franks had fought each other a number of times, but in an astounding decade from 785 Charlemagne completed the conquest of the Saxons in the north, deposed the long-serving ruler of Bavaria, Tassilo, in the south and then destroyed the Avar Khaganate.

The snuffing-out of the Agilolfing family in Bavaria and the absorption of the whole region into Charlemagne's empire created a fresh eastward dynamic. Massacring, Germanizing and Christianizing their way east, the Franks created new marches and duchies, pushing back the Slavs so that by the mid-ninth century something not dissimilar to the modern language map existed, with much of Austria in Germanic hands. But before the linguistic patchwork settled into place there was one more, thoroughly startling intrusion.

The Magyars were not the last of the new arrivals in an already crowded and chaotic neighbourhood, but they were certainly one of the most spectacular. Chased out of their home in the Khazar khaganate the Magyars shifted ever further west until they hurtled into Europe with their innovative cavalry skills and entirely unrelated language. They caused mayhem, defeating the Bavarian and East Frank armies sent against them and raiding deep into France and Italy before finally and decisively being stopped in their tracks by the Emperor Otto I at the Battle of the Lech in 955.

The final Magyar raids have a somewhat nostalgic air to them – as though the older warriors could not resist calls to put the old band back together again. After being chased away by Otto I they abandoned raiding western Europe but continued to carve out an ever-larger territory for themselves, reinforced by fresh arrivals from Central Asia including many of their former enemies, the enjoyably named Pechenegs.

As usual with these groups it is impossible now to unpick the true circumstances of their arrival. Everyone has an automatic picture of streams of wagons filled with seer elders, opulent wives, lisping daughters and young sons practising with wooden swords on their own tiny ponies. This is at odds with the patently rather male-only, rugby-match atmosphere of the Magyar raids themselves. We will never know, for example, what balance of the settled population managed to escape: were those unable to move fast enough killed or just enslaved? Did the Magyar men massacre the Slav and Avar men they found and take over their surviving families? Identity shifts very rapidly. In the late nineteenth century many Germans, Jews, Slovaks and others became Hungarians, changing language and religion across two generations with the same ease that other members of the same groups emigrated and became Americans. Clearly a much more local and wholly illiterate society could be blended in different combinations (particularly when imposed by terrible violence) with great speed. The chances of anybody today being a 'pure' example of any specific medieval 'race' must be close to zero, quite aside from the category being patently meaningless.