

Caroline de Gruyter – It Won't Get Any Better



English Dossier

De Geus

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- Over 20,000 copies sold, top 10 bestseller
- German rights sold
- ‘De Gruyter is an erudite tour guide.’ \*\*\*\* *de Volkskrant*

### About the book

Europeans often complain that the EU is divided, slow and weak. Believe it or not, the Habsburg Empire was the same. Playing for time, avoiding conflict, working on never-ending reforms and finding ugly compromises were key characteristics of Habsburg governance. By kicking the can down the road – fortwursteln – successive emperors managed to keep many nations, language groups and cultures safe and sound under one roof for about six hundred years. What are the Habsburg lessons for today’s Europe? Could Europe’s weaknesses actually be its strength? And should we finally accept the EU as it is: a benign empire of sorts, in permanent change, unfinished per definition?

*Non-fiction | 248 pages | 67,000 words | First published: March 2021*

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### On *It Won’t Get Any Better*:

‘Wonderfully meandering between anecdotes, without much pretension, sometimes funny, often smart and always right.’ \*\*\*\* *NRC Handelsblad*

‘Vienna? Brussels? Caroline de Gruyter takes us on a fascinating journey through Europe. Full of Forgotten stories and still very timely. This is how you write history’ *Geert Mak, author of In Europe*

‘*It Won’t Get Any Better* offers many valuable insights and historical perspectives.’ *Trouw*

### About the author

Caroline de Gruyter is a Europe correspondent and columnist for the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad. She is currently based in Oslo.

Caroline has covered European politics for the past twenty years, from Brussels and elsewhere in Europe. She has won several awards. Her voice and expertise about Europe are well-known in The Netherlands.

She is a regular contributor to Carnegie Europe and Foreign Policy, and a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. She was previously based in the Gaza strip, Jerusalem, Brussels (twice), Geneva and Vienna. She has written four books. Book number five, published in March 2021, is a comparison between the Habsburg Empire and the European Union.

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## Introduction

### 1914 vs 2021

The Hungarian painter Béla Zombory-Moldován was 29 when his life changed forever. In 1914, war broke out while he was vacationing with friends on the Adriatic coast. Within a week the carefree, gentle artist from a wealthy family was on his way to the front, in uniform.

As he wrote in *The Burning of the World*, his memoirs of the first year of the war published in 2014 by his grandson, he had no idea what awaited him. "No one in my family since my grandfather had been in a war. Until it confronted us, everyone had regarded war as an absurdity. Now it was reality. If it was any consolation, the enemy must be having the same problem."

In a Europe that had been peaceful for over 70 years, these words involuntarily draw parallels. Nobody says war will break out in Europe in 2021. 1914 is certainly not 2021. But worldwide, tectonic plates are moving again. Armed conflict surrounds us – see Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. And just as in 1914 the imminent collapse of the multinational Habsburg Empire was the subject of much speculation in Zombory-Moldován's time, some now allude to the disintegration of the European Union. We've had several crises in the last decade. Every crisis, we keep hearing, is 'existential' for the EU.

Could one such crisis really prove fatal to the EU? Could it fall apart, like the Habsburg Empire? And, before we jump to conclusions: how did that exactly happen, back in 1918? These are some of the questions I explore in my book.

I lived in Vienna, once the capital of the Empire, from 2013-2017. To my surprise the Habsburg spirit is still strongly present – in politics, literature, architecture, and outlook on the world. As a western European, more focused on the transatlantic world than on continental Europe and its history, I immersed myself in it. What I learned during my Viennese years gradually changed the way I looked at the European Union.

What strikes me most is how our debates about Europe are often framed by unrealistic expectations. To federalists the EU always disappoints, because it doesn't have the power to act.

Nationalists find the EU too powerful, and are constantly disappointed, too. Europeans are so busy discussing these conflicting abstractions that they often forget to look at the reality.

How does the EU function? Could it be that the EU as it is - a halfway house both underperforming and powerful - is actually all we're going to get? Contrary to the EU, the Habsburg Empire was a state with an army and a foreign policy. But there are many similarities.

The Empire provided a 'roof' over the heads of several nations that were jealous of each other and seldom agreed on anything. Habsburg rulers provided security for all by keeping big nations in check and protecting the small ones. They were as eagerly looking for compromises as European leaders are nowadays when they meet in Brussels. And like the EU, the Empire was in permanent negotiation with itself and within itself, constantly reforming and changing arrangements with member states – pushed by popular demand, or because external events forced them to, or because in complex systems one reform tends to make others necessary.

The Empire was as obsessed with itself as the EU is, constantly navel-gazing and looking for signs of existential demise. The Empire had a single market and a common currency. Like the EU is today, it was surrounded by large, assertive rivals. Feeling militarily exposed, it tried to maintain buffer zones just outside its external borders and to form alliances with some mighty neighbours. The Empire perfected the art of avoiding conflict and gaining time. "Fortwursteln" [muddling through] was the cornerstone of Habsburg policy. Sounds familiar?

One last parallel perhaps: the Habsburg Empire permanently felt insecure and suffered from low self-esteem. Its intellectual elite was critical, often cynical. It is probably no coincidence that the works of Joseph Roth, Karl Kraus and Stefan Zweig feel so modern to us today.

We often criticise the EU for being weak, divided and slow. Multiple crises hit Europe during recent years, with summits in Brussels labelled 'make or break'. The EU, however, survived it all. Having lived in Brussels before moving to Vienna, I covered several crises. I remember the panic, the drama. But I also recall something else: each time European leaders looked at the precipice, they moved away and compromised. They clearly wanted the EU to survive. In this sense the euro crisis, the migration crisis and Brexit transformed the EU. National leaders realised they couldn't weather international storms all alone. They started to see that in a world dominated by messy rivalries the EU, with all its faults and flaws, actually provided sovereignty.

As Mario Draghi said: "There is no sovereignty in solitude".

Living a stone's throw from the Schönbrunn palace in Vienna, talking to members of the Habsburg family and many others, I realised that the Empire had a similar function. Nobody saw the arrangement as ideal. But each nation got more than enough out of it to justify investing in it. As a result it survived for some six hundred years. Surrounded by large, sometimes hostile powers the Empire gave small nations a roof over their head, providing peace, security and welfare. This was the deal. Not more, not less. It unraveled not because of nationalism, but because of the war.

After 1914 most resources were redirected to the front. Slowly the state stopped taking care of its people. Many lost their jobs and livelihoods. Meanwhile the death toll rose. Interestingly, it was only at that point that many turned to nationalist politicians whose 'solutions' they had never really trusted before.

In the first year of the war, Béla Zombory-Moldován, the young Hungarian painter, got injured and returned home. He never managed to resume normal life. The war raged on. Something was irreparably broken - a world, a way of life that would never return. Society was under the spell of slogans and big words - 'renewal', 'new vision', 'democracy' – and a whirlwind of -isms chasing one another ever faster, ever more confusing. Maybe, the painter said, "some revolutionary transformation may already be under way; maybe these are all just straws in the wind".

Our situation, again, is different. Still, these words don't sound out of place in 2021.

## Chapter 5

'A Great Power becomes a necessity only when it is in decline; the truly great do not need to justify their existence.'

A.J.P. TAYLOR, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918* (1990)

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On a scorching hot day in July I walk into Café Fischer's in London, kind of an old Viennese coffee house in the heart of Marylebone. The choice of place to meet is Richard Bassett's.

Bassett, the British author of a book about the Habsburg army, lived in Central Europe for many years. As a young man, he travelled to Trieste in 1979. Later he became a horn player at the opera in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana, then still part of Yugoslavia.

Slovenia once belonged to the Habsburg Empire. Later Bassett lived and wrote for *The Times* from Vienna, Warsaw and Prague, where he covered the fall of the Berlin wall. He well-connected and has several Habsburg contacts in his address book.

Bassett once had tea with the last empress. Empress Zita was only allowed back into Austria in 1982, at the age of ninety. Since the death of her husband in 1922 - Karl, the last Habsburg emperor, who reigned from 1916 to 1918 - she had always dressed in black. Bassett visited her with a colleague from the Austrian *Kleine Zeitung* newspaper, whom he had always considered a 'progressive socialist'. But with the empress, his colleague used the formal language of the old Double Monarchy without any trouble. Phrases like 'Kaiserliche Hoheit', 'Kaiserliche und Königliche Majestät' rolled off his tongue as if he had spent his life in court circles and not in the editing rooms of a thoroughly republican newspaper. Bassett's book about his Central European adventures, *Last Days in Old Europe* (2019), is full of anecdotes like these.

Café Fischer's is completely deserted today. Outside it is almost 40 degrees Celsius. In the tube, on the way here, it was even hotter. On the only day of the year that it matters, Fischer's air conditioning doesn't work. Staff members, dressed the 'Viennese way' in black stockings and white aprons, lean groggily against the pillars. Bassett is already waiting for me. He wears a beige linen suit and wipes his face with a well-ironed, snow-white handkerchief. They have apple strudel, Spätzle and Käsekrainerwurst on the menu here. But all we want is water. Lots of cold, bubbly water.

Does the EU resemble the Habsburg Empire, I ask Bassett?

'No,' he replies resolutely, 'what kind of comparison is that? The Habsburg Empire does not resemble the EU at all. You're working on the wrong book. You should compare the Habsburg Empire with the United Kingdom instead. That's where you have to focus.'

Oh dear.

For starters, he says, the British have had the same queen since 1952. For almost seventy years. She's been around longer than Emperor Franz Joseph, Europe's previous

record holder, who ruled from 1848 to 1916. Most Britons have never known another monarch, like many Austrians at the time. In time many citizens start to identify the state with one person. This person gives you an identity. In the Habsburg Empire people identified with a man with a *Weltanschauung* from seventy years earlier. The same thing, Bassett says, is now happening in the United Kingdom.

Actually, it's even worse, he continues, while little drops regularly roll down his face.

“Just like Emperor Franz Joseph, Queen Elizabeth came to the throne with the rules and protocols of her predecessor. She was young when her father died. She was inexperienced, so she stuck to her father's protocols. She held on to them. Franz Joseph, who was eighteen when he took office, had done exactly the same.”

I ask him: but that doesn't necessarily mean the monarchy itself is mouldy, does it? Oh yes it does, he replies, because it means everything is built on the status quo. And everything remains as it was for decades. “The Queen was incapable of stopping Nigel Farage, for example, and the nationalistic wave flooding our country - not because she isn't powerful enough, but because she can't counter this anymore with a story of her own. There is nothing.”

When his generals tried to persuade Emperor Franz Joseph to declare war on Serbia in 1914, he pleaded: “Please don't put me in charge of dismantling my country.” Many people fear that the UK, too, will explode after Brexit: Scotland could leave, Northern Ireland, too, even Wales. Bassett says: “I wonder if the Queen said something similar to Boris Johnson, when he told her he would go for a hard Brexit: ‘Don't let me preside over the dismantlement of my country.’”

There are more similarities, in Bassett's view. In its final days the Habsburg Empire, like the UK now, had gone through a long period without real wars. That meant that for decades, nothing much had changed. Wars are disrupters, since they often topple the social order. They break habits and structures, bringing a release of energy. Deep reforms usually follow. Some people can't even imagine there will ever be reforms without a war. “Last evening, I went to my club in London,” Bassett tells me. “I go there a few times a week. It's a men's club. Women are still not allowed in. This is what I mean: Habsburg was like that in the end. It is stagnant. Exactly like that.”

A.J.P. Taylor, the famous Habsburg historian whose biography of the last hundred years of the dual monarchy is a classic, has written that many men in Emperor Franz Joseph's entourage were pushing for war in 1914. Many had no idea why, except that it should be a revenge for the murder of Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand. There was no strategy at all, they had no goals. There were all kinds of plans, one wilder than the other: just to strike Serbia very briefly and then quickly sue for peace; occupy Serbia; carve Serbia into two parts and give one half to Bulgaria; and so on. What happened, Taylor writes, is that war became a goal in itself. The Emperor's entourage welcomed the war just as they had welcomed the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina a few years earlier. They assumed war would bring action and change, just because this is what wars usually do.

For Taylor, the first World War accelerated several developments that were already underway. Wars make dictatorship more dictatorial, democracy more democratic, and “a rotten state even more rotten”. As Count Ottokar von Czernin, the last Minister of Foreign

Affairs of the Empire, commented later: "We had to die. We had the freedom to choose the way we would die, and we chose the worst way".

"Our war," Basset concludes dryly, "is Brexit."

Many Brexiters, he says, use Brexit as a crowbar to achieve something else. As a way to set changes in motion.

This reminds me of the 'Grexit mood' that arose in Germany, the Netherlands and Finland during the euro crisis. With one big difference, however: the British voted on their own exit, while Germans, Dutch and Finns who wanted to push the Greeks out of the eurozone were dreaming of a revolution of which others would bear the consequences.

"I told you Europeans are not ready for a revolution," Bassett responds. "The British are." Brexit became an end in itself, he says, just like the First World War did for the Habsburgs. It became a goal, but there was no strategy. Vienna, he says, at least had a vibrant intellectual life in the last few years before the war. It was a centre for musicians, writers, philosophers and scientists. Officially there was censorship, but in practice even the sharpest criticism of the government and the ruling class was often tolerated. All those fantastic novels that we still read today - by Joseph Roth and Stefan Zweig and Arthur Schnitzler - are set in and inspired by that period. "And what do we have here in London? Almost nothing. London is an intellectual desert at the moment. The elite consists of anti-intellectual influencers and the new rich: bankers, entrepreneurs, and Russian oligarchs."

Every morning Bassett listens to the extensive news reports on the Austrian radio station A1. Compared to the snappy reports by other broadcasters in Europe, A1 is solid in an old-fashioned way. "There they still know what *Bildung* is. And that you have to treat it with care."

Social inequality is yet another similarity with the Habsburg days. Bassett urges me to read *Who Owns Britain*, written by Kevin Cahill, a researcher who spent more than twenty years to find out who his country actually belongs to. In France or the Netherlands, you easily obtain this information: it is public. In the UK, however, the land register is not public. For any information on ownership, you must pay per hectare - so the bigger the estate, the more costly it is to know who owns it. Mapping out the land this way costs several millions of pounds. Cahill discovered that one-fifth of the land is unregistered, apparently because aristocrats do not have to register land they put up for sale. The UK has never implemented land reform like Ireland. In *Who Owns Britain*, published in 2001, Cahill writes that 36,000 people own half the land. It has often been in the family for generations. This means that less than 1 percent of the population owns half the land - mainly aristocrats with vast estates. Government institutions such as the Ministry of Defence and the Forestry Commission own 17 percent, ordinary homeowners just 5 percent. Per district Cahill mapped out who owns the most. Page after page is filled with long lists of lords, earls and baronets.

This was twenty years ago, and the situation hasn't changed.

The World Economic Forum recently published a ranking on social mobility in countries all over the world. In the top-20 are seventeen European countries, led by Denmark, Norway and Finland. The UK finished 21st, after the Czech Republic and Singapore. "The

UK is a non-cohesive state,” says Bassett. “Worse than the Double Monarchy, which was more modern and transparent. At least the Habsburgs already had a land register at the end of the eighteenth century.”

On that note we ask for the bill. By now we have emptied four large bottles of bubbly water. But the waiter refuses any payment. This was on the house, he says, apologizing for the heat. We promise to come back in cooler days and see if the *Tafelspitz* is as good as in Vienna.

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In his book Bassett describes how he spent his first year in Mitteleuropa, in the late seventies, in the old Habsburg port city of Trieste – now part of Italy. There, he wrote his first newspaper articles and taught a few hours a week at the University of Udine. He rented a room in an old palazzo with a certain Countess Blanka de Korwin. She had exactly the kind of neo-classical furniture the old imperial aristocracy loved so much. All Blanka’s belongings seemed to be from before 1910, except the little gas oven in the corner of her living room.

“You cannot get *personal* [servants] in Trieste these days,” were her first words to Bassett, and he found this is typically Austrian, too. Blanka’s father was the Habsburg naval attaché in Istanbul. Her grandfather had been a lieutenant in the Imperial Army. Later he became the city commander of Zagreb. Blanka had been married to an Italian prince, after which she had had liaisons with an Albanian Minister of Finance under King Zog and the British ambassador to Nazi Germany, Sir Neville Henderson. Now she was old, and alone. Bassett looked after the old lady a bit. She and her extensive social network largely lived in the past. His social life in Trieste was mainly taken up by people old enough to be his grandparents.

This Trieste still exists. We regularly went there for a few days, from Vienna. It’s just a four hours’ drive. In the Habsburg days there was a direct train to Trieste. Nowadays you have to change trains two or three times, and the trip takes forever.

Trieste was the main port of the Habsburg Empire. The imperial navy was there. For some, this was almost a joke. After all, Austria was a continental power, not a maritime power. What is the added value of a naval fleet located at the dead end of a long inlet - the Adriatic Sea - far from the Mediterranean? Moreover, the emperor didn’t have a substantial budget for the navy. Maintaining the regular army, which was far more important, was already complicated enough – Hungary regularly vetoed the military budget. Despite all this, in 1900 the Habsburg navy was still the eighth in the world. As a commercial port Trieste was probably more significant. By the turn of the century, the city had two thousand steamships for freight and passenger transport. After the collapse of the Empire these days of glory were soon over. Being assigned to Italy in 1920, Trieste became a provincial port, never to return to its former glory. During the Cold War, the city - located on Italy’s border with Slovenia - was right on the smuggling route to and from Yugoslavia. Thus it remained, in a way, a meeting place for people from many nations. After 1989 this function was also lost: nothing needed to be smuggled via

Trieste anymore. East and West could now meet everywhere. Like Italy, Slovenia became a member of NATO, the European Union and the Schengen zone. Economically, the end of the Cold War was a blow for Trieste.

Nowadays the city is full of decay. Houses are boarded up, factories stand empty. The asphalt is crumbling. Still, traces remain of the crossroads of influences and cultures that Trieste was during one of the previous great waves of globalization. But traces of old glory are still everywhere, too. Take, for instance, the imposing former headquarters of the Lloyd, the largest merchant fleet insurer in the Habsburg Empire, right at the waterfront. Nowadays it is a hotel. The architecture is as Central European as it is Italian. There are Viennese coffee houses everywhere. The most famous of them (Caffe degli Specchi - a tourist trap where prices are outrageous) still serves a decent apple strudel. The bars at the old port, decorated with faded fish nets, old pictures and ship bells, have clearly known better times.

Just outside the city there is Miramare, the pseudo-medieval castle built in 1856 where the Emperor Franz Joseph's younger brother, Maximilian, lived for several years with his wife Carlotta. Maximilian moved to Mexico in 1864 to become Emperor. Three years later, during an uprising, he was executed. His widow went mad. Today Miramare is museum. Unlike many Habsburg palaces in Austria, it is a bit shabby and sad. The sea view, however, is still magnificent.

The Habsburgs themselves seem to have forgotten Trieste, a city that is so reminiscent of them. One day I am invited to a press meeting with the wife of Karl Habsburg, the grandson of the last emperor Karl. In full, her name is Francesca Anne Dolores Freiin Thyssen-Bornemisza de Kászon et Impérfalva. In an old Habsburg *palais* in Vienna - where else - she sits in a large hall on a pile of cushions under a kind of knotted net full of lamps. It most resembles a Bedouin tent. The palace is used for art exhibitions. Because Francesca is a Thyssen - from the legendary German steel family - she has money. According to Karl Habsburg, the husband from whom she has separated a long time ago, their house in Salzburg was bought with Thyssen money.

Francesca's foundation, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, collects art and acts as a patron for artists. Sitting under those knotted lamps, legs crossed on a cushion, she discusses her new project with some journalists. She is completely gripped by it. It has to do with the oceans and marine life. Part of the project involves 'burying' art in the Pacific Ocean, in a secret spot. They may never be found, she says. Or maybe only after a hundred years. She seems very excited by the idea. When we watch a long video of Francesca on a boat somewhere in the South Pacific, she suddenly says: "Now I'm looking for a port to exhibit part of my project."

I was half dozing off under the Bedouin net. But hearing this, I'm fully awake again. I say: "Trieste! Trieste is a perfect place for you and your project."

I'm sitting in the back, on my pillow. There are perhaps fifteen people in the room, all in front of me. Suddenly they're all looking at me, over their shoulder. I realize that for a long time no one else has been speaking but Francesca Habsburg. I'm disrupting a kind of trance.

"Why Trieste?" she says. "It's such a gloomy city. Surely no one ever goes there."

“Think of the Habsburg connection,” I say. “In Trieste you’ll find plenty of empty factories and crumbling palaces. It could be a charming and meaningful place for you. Maybe this is what Trieste has been waiting for: a Habsburg who brings it back to life.”

She doesn’t seem to appreciate the idea, and continues to talk about her ocean project. So instead, it may be the Chinese who bring Trieste back to life. Like the Habsburgs in the nineteenth century, they see the economic and geostrategic potential of this city. One morning I hear the mayor of Trieste on a French radio broadcast. He says that people vilify him, because he is ‘selling’ part of the port to a Chinese company. But he is overjoyed: someone is finally investing in his city. The Chinese will start building one container terminal, like they did in Piraeus, near Athens. Maybe, like in Athens, more will follow.

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Trieste, decayed or not, has always remained a multicultural city. Most inhabitants still have ancestors from all parts of the Habsburg Empire. They never left this place, giving it a distinct identity. Many are multilingual – you hear Italian, German, Slovenian, French and English in Trieste - and they refuse to adopt a single identity. Most citizens here prefer ambiguity to a clear-cut identity. Maybe that’s why this city produces such great literature - still.

James Joyce lived in Trieste for years. He wrote *Dubliners* there. The magnificent but almost forgotten poet Umberto Saba ran a bookstore in Trieste until he fled to Paris in 1938, no longer feeling safe as a Jew in Italy. Italo Svevo and Claudio Magris are both from Trieste, as is Boris Pahor. After surviving several Nazi camps, Pahor eventually settled in Slovenia. But he found it suffocating. In Trieste, he wrote, he felt much freer. Last but not least, British travel writer Jan Morris wrote a wonderful little book called *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*.

But one of the books that impressed me most about this city is *Come cavalli che dormono in piedi* by Paolo Rumiz, a reporter for the newspaper *La Repubblica*, who lives in Trieste. This book, which appeared in 2007, is mainly about his grandfather, who fought for the Habsburg Empire during the First World War. Trieste was a Habsburg city then. With other Triestine recruits Rumiz’ grandfather was sent to the eastern front, to fight against the Slavs and the Russians. He died there, like thousands of others from Habsburg Italy who were called up for the imperial army. But for Rumiz’ grandfather and his comrades there are no graves in Trieste, nothing. Italy still considers them traitors: they fought for Habsburg, not for Italy. In Trieste, to this day, you only find graves of people who fought on the Italian side. *Against* the Habsburgs.

In this book Rumiz goes in search of his grandfather, travelling to Poland and Galicia, now part of Ukraine. There are anonymous mass graves everywhere for soldiers who, like his grandfather, suddenly had the wrong citizenship. Rumiz writes: “The winners of modern wars are short on memory or got stuck in just one version of the story. (...) They have their triumphal arches, flags, trumpets, drums and commemorations. The losers of history, however, have often been condemned to commemorate their dead in fearful

silence. Or to ruminate on a feeling of guilt. Their memory remains both oppressive and intimate.”

Such stories can be heard all over the former Habsburg Empire. For work or through marriage, people ended up in all corners of the Empire. Back then, this was as normal as it is now for a Slovenian to live and work in Germany or for a Frenchman to live in Brussels. When suddenly the Empire fell apart, they found themselves on the wrong side of a border that had never been there before. In 1918 hundreds of thousands of people were trapped that way. British citizens in the EU and Europeans in the UK are experiencing something similar now.

In Central Europe at the time physical, political and psychological borders were suddenly erected everywhere. Minorities became rulers in new countries, and created new minorities. Most were badly treated. Millions were expelled or massacred.

In the twenty-first century, we tell ourselves we are doing better – being civilized and enlightened, we think we have learned from the past. Have we? Let's hope it is true. With far-right politicians out to destroy the European Union, we're finally facing an occasion to prove this. Can European nations manage to live without a roof over their heads?

Personally I am not too sure.

iv

For centuries, the Habsburg Empire had no internal borders. It didn't have real external borders, either. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century there were no border posts, let alone border guards. Then, the Habsburgs suddenly began to build external border posts, first in the Balkans. An exquisite system of border surveillance was set up - a kind of Frontex avant la lettre. This was a major state-building exercise, directed from Vienna, whereby thousands of border guards and other officials were moved around. Border control, however, could only function with the cooperation of the other side – in this case the Ottoman Empire. And so parallel to building border posts the Habsburgs, just as the EU did after the 2015 refugee crisis, negotiated several agreements with Turkey.

In Café Diglas, one of my favourite Viennese cafes ('since 1875'), I meet Josef Ehmer and Jovan Pesalj to discuss this. They are academics doing research on how the Habsburg Empire set up and organized its border management in the Balkans three hundred years ago. They are themselves surprised by the many parallels with the current Balkan migration story, in which Turkey and Austria once again play a central role. The more documents and reports they study about that first large and stable external border of the Habsburg Empire, the more they discover there are apparently patterns in history. What happened then, seems to repeat itself now.

Ehmer is an historian at the University of Vienna. “You really see waves in history,” he says. During the eighteenth century, borders were erected all over Europe, only to be dismantled again in the nineteenth century. Then, a new phase of globalization began. At the start of the twentieth century, during and after the First World War, borders were put up again. We seem to be back at that point now, Ehmer says: “Once again people begin to build borders and fences, to put a stop to openness and globalization.”

For their research project Ehmer, who is Austrian, and his Serbian colleague Pesalj comb through piles of Habsburg documents, including correspondence from border guards, receipts for military equipment and reports of negotiations with the Turks. The Habsburg Empire had one army and a centralized foreign policy. Everything was documented. There were procedures for everything. Habsburg archives are impressive. Most are well-preserved, even containing letters that lone customs officers in far outposts wrote home. Using all these sources, Ehmer and Pesalj try to patch together an insight into the Habsburg border management.

It wasn't just the Habsburg Empire that up until the early eighteenth century hardly had any border controls. No one in Europe had them. Most borders were not fixed but more or less fluid. There were always some soldiers in the vicinity who could be called up in the event of hostile manoeuvres from the other side. In the Balkans, travellers, animals and goods moved fairly freely back and fro between the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire. The only friction was caused by local landowners and bandits who tried to make travellers pay. Moreover, the Habsburg-Ottoman border shifted regularly. Twice, in vain, the Turks had tried to conquer Vienna. In 1699 the Treaty of Karlowitz put an end to this Turkish expansionism. After that, for many reasons, a stable, well-managed external border was in both parties' interest – just as it is today for the EU and Turkey.

The EU first closed its external borders during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the days of the Empire, something similar happened, in response to infectious diseases like the plague. The Habsburg Empire sought a way to protect their subjects and livestock against pandemics. Soon the emperor in Vienna, who had never really gotten into border management before, reached an agreement with the sultan in Istanbul. For the first time, both demarcated a clear border line to stem diseases and to manage migration and trade flows.

The Habsburgs built Europe's first sanitary border posts. One of them was housed in the recently renovated building near the harbour in Dubrovnik, where our tour guide talked so proudly of her parents who still cherished this symbol of 'civilizing' Habsburg power. The Ottomans promptly built sanitary posts on their side, too. Watchtowers were erected every few hundred meters, all across the Balkans. Most were manned by soldiers who came from far away. They were on duty for two months (many were so bored they told each other stories) and would then be allowed to go home on leave. During this period both empires began to issue passports for travellers. This, too, was a first.

Borders were not used as a deterrent, however - as they are now. In principle, Ehmer says, the Habsburg Empire welcomed travellers. It did, however, keep them in quarantine for a full three weeks. In 1777 there were eighteen special sanitary posts for quarantines in the Balkans where clothes were smoked and washed, merchandise checked, and animals disinfected. Around these posts an entire industry developed to provide travellers stuck in quarantine with tobacco, food and drink.

In Marseilles, Venice and other ports, border controls were introduced around the same time. It was a trend throughout Europe, as it is now. For the Empire this had political ramifications: it led to more centralization. "Border management, which used to be carried out by provincial authorities on an ad-hoc basis, was now taken over by Vienna,"

says Pesalj. Today we see a similar development, with European countries handing over part of the management of their external borders to Brussels.

The Habsburgs worked closely with Turkey to control people and goods crossing the border, as the EU does nowadays with third countries like Ukraine or Moldova.

Sometimes Vienna and Istanbul acted together against 'bandits', especially smugglers who usually came from border regions. Knowing the terrain, local habits and procedures, having befriended border guards, it was relatively easy for them to discover and exploits gaps at the border. Being aware of this, Vienna issued special regulations to improve the loyalty of border residents. Catholics, for example, were allowed to settle close to external borders – but protestants, Muslims or Jews, who were regarded as less reliable, weren't. Non-Catholics were allowed to cross the border (for a temporary stay in the empire), but after their quarantine was over, they had to leave the border region. Vienna also made sure to provide border residents with good public services such as schools, post offices and hospitals. As a result of this more civil servants and inspectors arrived in border regions. From their reports and letters Ehmer and Pesalj distilled crucial information.

The main difference between then and now, the researchers say, is the way immigration is dealt with. Modern Europe is drawing borders in order to keep immigrants out, doing everything it can to discourage immigration and keep migrants in their own regions. The Habsburgs clearly saw immigrants as 'inferior', but by contrast welcomed them with open arms. They regarded them as a useful workforce, benefitting the Habsburg economy. Many migrants were trained and even lent money for housing. Refugees were also welcomed (for instance during the Turkish-Russian wars from 1768-1774), and housed in tents by the thousands. In fact, the Habsburgs were more concerned about emigration than immigration - just like the Soviet Union two centuries later, fearing a brain drain.

At the end of the eighteenth century Habsburg border controls were gradually relaxed again. With the plague more or less eradicated, quarantine was no longer necessary. Then-emperor Joseph II was certainly no social liberal, far from it - but despite his conservatism, some new 'enlightened' ideas coming from France about economic progress and free trade appealed to him. And so, after a century full of borders and demarcation, openness and the relatively free flow of persons and goods were gradually restored.

"This paved the way for the previous wave of globalization," Ehmer says. The wave that lasted almost a hundred years, coming to a crescendo around the turn of the century, only to crash down in 1914 at the start of the First World War - the Great War that proved fatal for the Habsburg Empire.

## Chapter 6

“Europe is like the Habsburg world before 1914. Everything works reasonably well. But we don't see it.”

KAREL SCHWARZENBERG, former Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs

i

In the autumn of 2016 I meet Karl Habsburg for the first time. He's the son of Otto Habsburg and the grandson of the last Habsburg emperor, Karl. If the Empire still existed, Karl would probably be emperor now.

At the end of October 2016, Karl, born in 1961 and now the head of the Habsburg family, held a lecture in the Stallburg - the stables of the Hofburg imperial palace housing the Lipizzaner horses of the *Spanische Hofreitschule*. The stables, which always seem freshly painted and well-maintained, are on the ground floor. Upstairs there are offices. In one of them Karl Habsburg holds his lecture, organized by the Austro-British society. According to the invitation, he will discuss Brexit and Europe. I have never heard of this particular society, but I decide to go.

It will be a strange but memorable evening.

I arrive early. The room isn't very large and I want a seat close to the stage. Around me, the room quickly fills up with mostly elderly people, many wearing tweeds and carrying walking sticks. I recognise some retired diplomats, regular guests on the Viennese lecture circuit. There are at least 150 people in the hall when Habsburg - announced as 'Von Habsburg' - comes in, wearing a blue blazer with gold buttons.

He starts by making a few remarks about Brexit and how it will weaken Europe - Europe, which has practically no foreign policy but is increasingly surrounded by wars and conflicts. After a few minutes, however, he suddenly starts exploring the similarities and differences between the Habsburg Empire and the European Union. I remember thinking: how nice. It wasn't announced, but this is of course exactly my subject. Just a few weeks ago I wrote a long article about the subject for the think tank Carnegie Europe, online and in English. Someone at Carnegie told me it had generated clicks from around the world.

Karl Habsburg says the present time reminds him of the last years of the Habsburg Empire. The British just voted for Brexit; in the United States Donald Trump seems close to the presidency; Austria, the Netherlands and France will all have elections soon. Nationalists seem to be getting stronger and stronger, just like over a hundred years ago. So, Habsburg says, 'the question is: can Europe learn from the Habsburg experience?' What a coincidence: my article was called 'Habsburg Lessons for an Embattled EU'.

Habsburg begins to answer this question by citing an episode from *The Radetzky March*, Joseph Roth's famous novel about the decline of the Habsburg Empire. The cynical Count Chojnicki and a Habsburg army officer discuss politics on an army base somewhere in Galicia. Unrest has broken out in several parts of the Empire. The Slavs, in the Balkans, are rebelling against Vienna. Czech and German speakers argue about language laws again. Rival powers surrounding the Empire, such as Russia, France, Germany and Turkey, are arming themselves at a alarming pace. Noticing this, Emperor Franz Joseph wants to increase his defence budget, too. In case of war, he argues, the Empire will be crushed. But then Hungary, the other part of the Dual Monarchy, vetoes the budget increase.

'The Empire is doomed,' Count Chojnicki says in Roth's book. 'The moment the Emperor closes his eyes, we fall apart into a hundred pieces. (...) All the peoples will set up their own little dirty states.'

This is the quote I started my Carnegie article with, a few weeks ago. Karl Habsburg uses the same quote from the same novel, leaving the same few sentences out that I had left out, too. What a coincidence.

Habsburg goes on saying that we Europeans now seem to feel exactly like those two characters in Roth's novel who felt things were falling apart. But does the comparison hold? Is the EU really falling apart? For that, Habsburg suggests, we must first examine the broader parallels and differences between the Habsburg Empire and the European Union.

First, he tackles the similarities. Both the Habsburg Empire and the EU are characterised by a deep aversion to war and conflict; both are multicultural, providing a 'roof'-like structure for many nations and language groups; both protect small nations against the domination of larger ones, keeping the large nations in check; both are strongly guided by the principle of non-discrimination, ensuring everyone is more or less equal before the law; both have complex administrative structures, bureaucracies which are constantly being adapted to a changing environment, to new challenges from outside, and to popular demand; both have an internal market and a single currency as means to create prosperity and growth and, ultimately, to prevent war; both are regulatory powers, establishing and enforcing common rules all must adhere to. Bureaucrats are needed to monitor and manage all this. Therefore, the EU, like the Habsburg Empire, is to a large extent a bureaucracy, although the Empire had a lot more people on the payroll (here, Karl Habsburg mentions the example of the inspector of 'weights and measures' from another Roth novel) than the EU, which has even less than the city of Paris.

All similarities, and all examples Habsburg cites, come from my article, in the same order. I also compared the European bureaucracy to the city of Paris. I mentioned from Roth's novel *Weights and Measures*, too.

Then Karl Habsburg sums up the differences. The Habsburg Empire was a state, while the EU is not; the Empire had one centralized foreign policy, which the EU doesn't have; despite the pomp and imperial ceremony the Habsburg family was close to their subjects, directly employing them, paying them salaries and engaging with many of them - teachers, policemen, infantrymen. In the EU, of course, these civil servants are employed by national or regional governments. Hence for many citizens, 'Brussels' feels far away. Their identification with the EU is often problematic.

At this point Karl Habsburg criticises the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post* and other media for treating every European crisis as an existential threat - as if the EU could collapse at any moment. Every crisis is potentially 'lethal' for them, he says, and every European summit in Brussels is presented as a 'make or break' summit. Here, Habsburg draws a parallel between the cynical intelligentsia in the Dual Monarchy before 1914 (Joseph Roth among them, and the fiery Karl Kraus with his magazine *Die Fackel*), and our modern prophets of doom, who spot evidence everywhere of the EU falling apart. In my Carnegie article I quoted an anonymous EU official who told me over lunch that summer in Brussels that member states fighting over the euro and migration policy reminded him of 'musical chairs: while member states are still dancing, they wait for the music to stop'. Even that quote finds a place in Habsburg's lecture tonight.

Habsburg does not mention my article even once. He just pretends it is his own speech. Not very chic.

When he is finally done, it is time for Q & A. I stand up, mention my name and pose a question. I want him to know that I am here.

Afterwards, I walk up to him. He sees me coming and, smiling warmly, he says: 'How nice to meet you! Your article is really fantastic. I've read it with so much pleasure.'

'Yes, I got that impression,' I reply.

He does not apologise. On the contrary, he says: 'Yesterday I used your article too, in another lecture.'

I tell him I am planning to write a book about the Habsburg Empire and the EU and that I would appreciate his help. After tonight, he cannot possibly say no. He gestures to his assistant, dressed in a traditional Austrian jacket with horn buttons, asking him to set up an appointment.

ii

Afterwards, an Austrian friend asks me how the lecture went. I tell her the story. 'Well,' she says, laughing, 'I'm not surprised. He's the grandson of an Emperor. Those people never apologise.'

Two days later, when I'm still wondering whether this strange episode was just a dream, I receive an e-mail from an unknown British man. It turns out he attended the lecture. He found it interesting and wanted to find out more about the subject afterwards. He googled a bit, he writes, and found my Carnegie article. He was struck by the similarities to Karl Habsburg's lecture. Do I work with Karl Habsburg, he wants to know? And the Dutch journalist who asked a question afterwards and whose name he forgot - was that me?

Indeed, I reply, it was me.

He replies: 'I admit that I had wondered if you might be a "wicked" journalist who had heard Mr Habsburg speech somewhere else, and then published the article under your name. I apologise!!!'

iii

A few weeks later I have my audience with Karl Habsburg. Living in Salzburg, he is not often in Vienna. He is the chairman of Blue Shield (his term runs out in February 2021), an international organisation for the protection of cultural heritage against armed conflict and natural disasters. He just returned from the Middle East.

We meet in the office of the Paneuropean Movement, which he presides. His father Otto was chairman of Paneuropa for thirty years. His sister Walburga, who lives in Sweden, was active, too. The movement was founded in 1923 by Count Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi, a Habsburg diplomat's son who was one of the main players in the European (peace) movement in the interwar period. Later, Albert Einstein, Léon Blum, Konrad Adenauer and Georges Pompidou became members. In his famous speech in Zurich in 1946 even Churchill mentioned it. Paneuropa has always been christian, conservative and fiercely anti-communist. After the Second World War the more progressive members split off to continue as the European Movement.

During the Cold War, Paneuropa's main focus was on the reunification of Eastern and Western Europe. Under Otto Habsburg's leadership, Paneuropa organised a famous picnic at the Hungarian-Austrian border in 1989, whereby the gate was opened and people were free to travel to the West for the first time.

Nowadays, Paneuropa is not as prominent as it used to be. The Vienna office is housed in an old building in an unprestigious part of town, in a flat where everything is brown or looks brownish: walls, ceilings, furniture, even the curtains. It reminds me of a male student flat in the 1980s. There are flags, withered plants, and ashtrays with logos. Karl Habsburg, in jumper and jeans, welcomes me in as jovial a manner as last time. He is not formal and stiff, as I had feared. We sit on a large leather sofa, also brown.

Being a Habsburg must be strange. Karl's ancestors were all politicians - not by choice

but because that was how it was. Karl Habsburg himself, however, consciously chose it and failed. Like his father Otto, Karl has been a member of the European Parliament - his father for the German CSU, Karl for the conservative ÖVP in Austria. But pretty soon, apparently, there was some trouble with party funding. After that, the ÖVP refused to put Karl back on the party list. He tried to found a new party, but was unsuccessful. Otto was an MEP for 20 years, being more or less part of the furniture in Brussels and Strasbourg. Everyone knew him. Karl was there for a few years only. Few remember him. I was quite surprised when I read recently that Radim Špaček, chairman of the Bohemian Crown Monarchist Party - founded in 1991 – requested the Czech Prime Minister to nominate Karl Habsburg as the new President of the European Commission in July 2019.

Before Blue Shield, Karl Habsburg was an army officer and presented a quiz on Austrian television. At present he is a major shareholder in RadioCorp, a company that owns two Dutch radio stations: 100% NL and Slam! He seems to enjoy the fact that his current occupation requires lots of faraway travelling. In Austria, he's on permanent display.

His ancestors had titles. Karl cannot use them, at least not in Austria: the aristocracy was abolished in 1919, along with their titles. He is therefore 'Habsburg', not 'von Habsburg'. He doesn't care, he says. Somehow that rings true: everyone in Austria knows who he is anyway.

Before meeting him, I read some old interviews with him in Austrian, Swiss and German newspapers. Most start with the same question: how should we address you, as Highness, or simply as Karl? German speakers are obsessed with titles, there is no escaping it.

Another standard question Habsburg gets, often posed with the slightly sarcastic tone that seems to suit journalists: doesn't he feel guilty about the First World War? After all, Emperor Franz Joseph declared war on Serbia after the murder of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914. Franz Joseph wanted to keep it short: his idea was to do a few strikes, then quickly sue for peace. Instead, all great powers in Europe – and most of all the power-hungry German emperor Wilhelm II - intervened in the conflict, forcing the Habsburg Empire to prolong its battles, causing terrible and long-lasting carnage. If Franz Joseph had not signed the declaration of war, perhaps war could have been avoided altogether. It could have saved Europe millions of deaths.

Karl Habsburg is so used to these questions that he has standard replies. Yes, you can call me whatever you like. No, I don't feel guilty, since war was in the air then. Just read Christopher Clark's *Sleepwalkers*: any incident could have triggered a war at the time, it just happened to be the murder of Franz Ferdinand. Etc.

Being the head of the Habsburg family isn't a purely Austrian affair. Several Habsburgs left the country in 1918. Currently they are spread over all continents – five, six hundred people in total, he says. Many live in Austria, too. Karl's task is to keep the family together. He approves wedding plans, attends funerals, settles quarrels and organises reunions. In 2014, on the centenary of the First World War, when he was interrogated repeatedly about the guilt issue again, he wrote down a few do's and don'ts for the rest of the family. At least they could all give similar answers.

Today, in this brownish office, he is most animated when talking about the family. His eldest son, Ferdinand Zvonimir, is a tweeting motor racing driver who will be head of the family someday. His daughter is a fashion model. Karl also talks about his grandmother, Empress Zita, who died in 1989. Just after 1918 Emperor Karl, her husband, tried a few times to make a comeback, from Switzerland. He refused to give up any claims on the throne. Until long after his death Zita was considered persona non grata in Austria - until 1982. She was buried in Vienna's Capuchin Church, the final resting place for members of the House of Habsburg – exactly the place where her grandson, who is sitting opposite

me now, later proposed to his fiancée Francesca Thyssen.

The story about Zita is intriguing. How does one bury an empress in a republic that has abolished the entire nobility? There was no protocol, Karl tells me. There was no script. There was no staff who knew how to do these things anymore. So, they improvised a bit. What he liked best was the moment when the funeral procession arrived at the imperial crypt in Vienna. A herald knocked on the door and requested access for 'Zita, Her Majesty the Empress and Queen'. As if nothing ever happened.

On the subject of the EU and the Habsburg Empire, Karl Habsburg doesn't make me any wiser. Since his lecture this doesn't come as a surprise. 'Habsburg had an emperor, an army and a bureaucracy. The EU only has a bureaucracy,' he says. I decide to leave it there.

After we said goodbye, I walk to my car and realize that Karl Habsburg still hasn't said sorry. But my irritation is gone. This man is trapped in a role that does not suit him at all. I do not envy him.

iv

In the Habsburg army, all nationalities and languages were considered equal. Speaking just one language would disadvantage other language groups. Consequently, everyone had the right to be trained in their own language - the Czechs in Czech, the Croats in Croatian, and so on.

But by doing that, of course, one ends up with separate national groups not speaking each other's language - a recipe for disaster for any serious army.

The Habsburgs squared that circle by compromising. They taught second and third languages to officers and soldiers on a voluntary basis. Then at least they could mix battalions, and be sure all soldiers understood their commanding officer, and vice versa. This was a workable solution, but still the army command felt bad about it: in the Empire rules were rules, and now they broke them. Many thought that in a diverse and multi-ethnic Empire where everything was already a mishmash, the rules were the 'glue' holding everything together. They thought it was crucial to apply those rules strictly and to the letter. So even when practical solutions were found, the dilemma remained.

This is just one example of the Habsburg Empire's eternal struggle with perfection. It strived for perfection, achieving it to a large extent - but it never became a hundred percent perfect. Typically, the few percent that were imperfect got a lot of attention in the Habsburg Empire.

Tamara Scheer, a historian and Habsburg expert at the University of Vienna, has studied the Habsburg army for years. She wrote several articles and books about it, based on old army reports written by officers and soldiers, and on their letters home. In official reporting, Scheer says, deviation from the official language rules was a big issue. But in the letters, by contrast, the tone was entirely different: many soldiers wrote they were happy to learn a new language. They were often extremely bored. Language courses at least gave them something useful to do. They also made new friends in class and improved their chances of finding a good job later.

This obsession with perfection is fascinating, because it is so recognizable: we see it in the European Union every day, too. Many things are heterogeneous in Europe, with so many countries, languages, cultures and peculiarities, that all accept the need for common rules for everyone. This is what binds Europeans together, to a certain extent. Equal rights for everyone are what the system is based on. But by applying and enforcing the rules too rigorously, we sometimes ignore or violate the diversity on which everything is also based, and the flexibility we need to ensure that everyone continues to feel at

home in it. This is as true for eurozone budget rules as for strict state aid rules on the internal market - sometimes we need to cut corners, if only just a little.

Tamara Scheer calls herself an “absolute Habsburg idiot”. One crisp winter morning I have coffee with her in a café in Oslo. I have just moved here from Vienna. Scheer is a lively person, with colourful clothes and alert eyes. She came here for a project with the University of Oslo. This afternoon she will hold a lecture at the Austrian Embassy about typical Habsburg words that have disappeared after 1918. She has just published a book about this. With conspiracy theories circulating in Europe again, Tamara Scheer posts video clips on Twitter to show that these existed in the Habsburg days, too. ‘Don’t believe the story that Crown Prince Rudolf committed suicide’ is one. ‘Franz Ferdinand was killed in Sarajevo by his own staff’, another.

Scheer sees parallels between the Habsburg Empire and today’s Europe everywhere. She thinks there is a Habsburg nostalgia going on, even in Eastern Europe, where people (except for the Romanians perhaps) have always been somewhat more critical of the Empire. We live in turbulent times, she says, and people feel insecure. They are looking for stability and for politicians they can trust. And as a result, they long for the conviviality of a time when everything could go wrong and still citizens refused to blame the emperor. Let’s write Franz Joseph a letter, they would say.

Franz Joseph received piles of these letters. Scheer has read many of them. She finds them in the well-stocked Habsburg archives throughout the old Empire, and in bric-à-brac shops - buried under candlesticks, mugs, statuettes and dusty medals.

‘This conviviality and closeness,’ she says ‘is exactly what is missing in today’s Europe. We are too rigidly applying rules. We should embrace imperfection more, giving each other the chance to make mistakes sometimes. We should compromise more, or even turn a blind eye once in a while. That is what the EU is about in the end: instead of fighting each other we must all make room so there’s place for everyone.’

v

What exactly caused the collapse of the Habsburg Empire? How did that come about? If we want to know if the EU will end up the way Habsburg did, we must examine this question first.

The standard story has long been that the nations of the Empire no longer wanted to live under the Habsburg thumb. The early 20th century was a turbulent time. Globalisation rapidly changed people’s lives. Better educated than their parents and grandparents, citizens demanded more control over their lives and the right to vote. Under such pressure, or so the story went, absolute monarchies could not possibly survive. This would explain why the Habsburg, Ottoman, German and Russian Empires all collapsed around the same time, in the early 20th century. For decades school books presented this as if it were pure logic. And after the Great War, the reasoning went, US President Wilson came up with a new doctrine, the Fourteen Point Plan, laying the foundations for a new world order. At the heart of the Wilson Plan was the right of self-determination for all peoples, which later became enshrined in international law.

Through this prism we have peered at the Habsburg Empire since then - as an anachronism. As something that was just passé, after many centuries. End of story.

This interpretation of events, however, has come under increasing criticism in recent years. Historians have shown, for instance, that in most parts of the Habsburg Empire nationalist politicians never managed to get much of a foothold before 1914. Political separatism was a no-brainer, let alone an “exit” from the Empire.

Certainly, the Habsburg peoples wanted more rights. They jealously watched each other

to make sure others didn't get special favours. What they were also interested in, was more freedom to express themselves in their own language. 'National' music and novels were a real hype at the turn of the century. At the same time, however, there was very little enthusiasm for political independence. Nationalism was something they wanted to enjoy *within* the framework of the Empire.

Even the Hungarians, many of whom still talk about the Empire as a foreign occupation, had very little appetite to leave the Dual Monarchy. This is easy to explain: they had a better deal than anybody else. They had a veto on important issues like the budget, and used this right to the utmost. After 1867, they organised things in their half of the Dual Monarchy completely to their own liking. As a result, this half rapidly became 'hungarianised'. Although real Magyars were a minority, Hungarian was made the official language. The Magyars dominated politics and the administration. Emperor Franz Joseph resented this deeply. He himself had done the opposite: the other half of the Empire - his own Austrian half - was multilingual, and gradually gave its nations and language groups more political power over the years. The Emperor, however, could do very little about it. In the Habsburg Empire the Hungarians had a splendid deal.

There is another reason why diehard nationalists didn't really nurture separatist ideas before 1914: the Habsburg Empire was less rigid and absolutist than was often portrayed afterwards. Franz Joseph, who was Emperor for almost 70 years, may not have been a convinced democrat but he did carry out many reforms. He created a parliament where all nations were represented. This parliament was given more and more powers. Over the years, the right to vote was gradually extended to more citizens. Moreover, the Emperor constantly adapted the arrangements of the nations within the Empire. Like in the EU today, none of those nations were ever completely satisfied. They knew they would never get all they wanted: decision-making depended to a large extent on consensus and compromise. Of course, the Emperor and his governments played clever games, pushing national politicians around. Nevertheless, he did try to make sure all nations had at least some prospect of improvement - always.

The Emperor could have moved faster, much faster. He could also have done things differently. But the idea that the people asked for reforms and were rebuffed, is incorrect. Compared to other absolute monarchs of his time - the Russian Tsar, the German Emperor, the Turkish Sultan - he was a relatively mild ruler.

This was also the conclusion reached by a small group of academics and intellectuals at a workshop held at the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM), a Viennese think tank. One of the participants was former British diplomat Robert Cooper, who worked for Javier Solana, the first foreign policy representative the EU ever had. Cooper, now retired, often speaks at seminars all over Europe. One day I discuss the Habsburg-EU comparison with him. 'The idea that the Empire was overthrown by oppressed peoples,' he says, 'is simply untrue.'

To him, the old Empire is rather similar to today's EU in many respects. Member states, for instance, often try to reduce their contribution to the common budget and to receive more out of it in the form of subsidies. They always try bending legislation in favour of farmers or factories in their own country. They always seek better deals for themselves, while trying to make others pay. The Habsburg Hofburg palace was a place for political wheeling and dealing, much as the Council building in Brussels is today. The often emotional, hyper assertive Hungarians in the Empire remind Cooper of the role the recalcitrant British often played in the EU for decades, right up to Brexit. It also reminds him of Hungarian behaviour today, in Brussels - playing the victim, resisting authorities in Brussels like it used to resist them in Vienna. And again, Hungary has no plans whatsoever to leave the EU.

In his groundbreaking book *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (2016), historian Pieter Judson writes there is only one real reason for the rapid decline of the Empire: war. Until 1914, he says, most citizens were reasonably content. Globalisation advanced, the economy boomed throughout the Empire. Citizens continuously asked for more services from the state, and often got them. As a large, reliable employer, the government paid on time and tried to take care of its people. Many complained but very few, Judson points out, had an interest in overthrowing the system. They would be shooting themselves in the foot.

This situation changed when war broke out, for two reasons.

First, most of the state's budget and resources were suddenly directed to the front. Right from the start, it was a disastrous war. The front was far away, but soon citizens started losing relatives and loved ones. Meanwhile the state cut down heavily on salaries, services and welfare allowances to finance the war effort. As a result, state employees were often paid late, or not at all. Others lost their jobs altogether. This profoundly altered their relationship with the state. Long seen as a care-giver, often mocked but not derided, the state was suddenly seen as oppressive, unfair and exploitative. The longer the war lasted, the more citizens became dissatisfied, slowly opening up to alternative political arrangements and ideas. Steadily, the war drove many into the arms of the nationalists who – like populists in today's Europe – may not have offered workable solutions but certainly helped them to voice their anger.

The second reason the state lost its added value for many citizens was that the war triggered a kind of *coup d'état* within the Empire. Military operations were suddenly given priority, with conservative generals taking over parts of the affairs of state from the Emperor. They had never been fans of Franz Joseph's democratic reforms – which, however late and slow, by that time included the right for trade unions and workers to demonstrate, and an incremental extension of the right to vote to ever larger parts of society. The army chiefs managed to convince Franz Joseph that the reforms harmed the war effort and had to be halted. What was needed now, they argued, was national unity and clear lines of command – not endless dialogues and 'fortwursteln'. They closed down Parliament and restricted the civil rights the Emperor had recently signed up to. This infuriated many already frustrated by a costly, devastating war. It was this dissatisfaction the nationalists consequently, and gratefully, took advantage of.

Moreover, people really suffered from hunger during the war, especially in the big cities. Already in 1915, many goods disappeared from shops, becoming available only on the black market at astronomical prices. The authorities tried to intervene by setting up a distribution system. But this system didn't work properly. Interestingly, as long as Emperor Franz Joseph was in power – until the end of 1916 – most citizens didn't blame him for food scarcity. Instead, they accused the military of manipulating the war economy, including food distribution, favouring their own ethnic friends. And so it happened that in a truly multicultural city like Vienna, ethnic groups started to point fingers at each other. Of all parts of the Empire, Hungary had most of the agricultural land. Soon it was rumoured in Vienna that Hungary restricted food supplies to the other parts on purpose, so prices would rise and Hungary would make steep profits. Hungarians were also accused of giving their own group extra food coupons in Vienna.

Hungarians, in turn, accused the Czechs. Czechs accused the Croats, and so on. In a city where, in 1914, men of all ethnic and linguistic backgrounds had enthusiastically queued up together for the draft, hungry citizens soon turned against each other. In *Vienna and*

*the Fall of the Habsburg Empire*, a book that deals entirely with the wartime famine and its social and political consequences in Vienna, American historian Maureen Healy writes: 'When it came to food, the Dual Monarchy was at war with itself.'

While Italians, Slovaks, Czechs, Austrians and others at the eastern and southern front were desperately trying to defend their Empire, the home front rapidly disintegrated. According to some scholars, these internal problems were the real driving force behind this disintegration. At the front, many were unaware of this. Those soldiers who survived the war and made their way home afterwards, were often surprised to find the old world had vanished completely.

Emperor Franz Joseph died in 1916. He had been in power for almost seventy years, since 1848. Despite the mess the Empire was in as a result of him declaring war on Serbia many ordinary citizens still respected him. Despite their criticism many saw him as a *Mensch*. Everyone knew the story of Franz Joseph in the Schönbrunn Palace during the war, shivering at his desk under layers of coats and blankets: with heating heavily rationed in the city the Emperor wanted to show solidarity with his people. The death of this father figure probably hastened the demise of the Habsburg Empire. This came at a time when most citizens made huge sacrifices because of the war, and many were beginning to have serious doubts about the state. The old Emperor was the glue holding it all together. Without him, people saw little reason to support it anymore. With all his mistakes, Franz Joseph had been a symbol of Habsburg solidity and continuity. Speaking all languages of the Empire, he did his best to please everyone a little. Several national and language groups considered him their patron. Many people had never known another Emperor.

The new Emperor, Karl, Franz Joseph's grand-nephew, was relatively unknown. He was young and unexperienced. He desperately tried to end the war, but was rebuffed both by his own army chiefs and – crucially – by his main ally, the German emperor. Kaiser Wilhelm II wanted to carry on and hardly paid attention to Karl. He was so maniacal, emotional and unpredictable that in recent years Donald Trump was often compared to him. With Wilhelm refusing to cave in Karl had to carry on, too, until 1918.

The end of the Habsburg Empire cannot be assigned to a specific day or date. What happened was that the war fatally eroded the state until it ceased to be a state. The rule of law evaporated and the Empire could no longer take care of its people. Citizens turned against each other, ethnic group against ethnic group, language group against language group. 'The war sapped all mutual solidarity between citizen and state,' writes Pieter Judson, 'and slowly undermined the *raison d'être* of the Empire.'

This process took place in every corner of the Empire. Everywhere the screws slowly came loose. A little here, a little there. It was a crash in slow motion. For a long time, nobody could answer the question of what would come next, what would replace the Empire, where the borders would lie. Not even the nationalists.

vii

The story has long been that in 1918 nations freed themselves from the 'prison of the peoples'. But what actually happened was that the Empire, a multi-ethnic state, collapsed into several small states which were, in turn, completely mixed. Because everyone had more or less enjoyed equal rights, people had settled freely all over the Empire. As a result, the new small states were themselves multicultural, but failed to recognize this. And so, at the end of 1918, when the Empire expired, millions of people became second-class citizens overnight in towns and villages where they had sometimes lived for decades or their whole lives. In subsequent years, many were treated as inferior

citizens, losing rights they had enjoyed before. Others were expelled, or killed. And so, in 1918, a fight began that the Habsburgs had so successfully managed to avoid for centuries: the internal fight over the Habsburg heritage, and who would get the best pieces.

## What Europe can learn from the Habsburgs (a Summary of the Conclusion)

In his play *Bruderzwist* (1872), Austrian playwright Franz Grillparzer depicts the notoriously indecisive and passive Habsburg Emperor Rudolf II being challenged by his energetic, activist brother Matthias. Rudolf is a gentle man. He wants to be a '*Mensch*', liked by everybody. But he is totally unable to cope with the many internal and external threats to the Empire - *Bruderzwist* is set in the seventeenth century, just before the Thirty Years' War. Matthias cannot stand Rudolf's procrastination and, with the help of some family members, launches a kind of coup against him.

In this play, Grillparzer delivers one of the best descriptions of the Habsburg Empire ever, depicting the 'half-trodden path, the half-finished act, delaying with halfway means' as the curse of the House of Habsburg. This explains, to a large extent, why the Empire has survived for some six hundred years.

As a Europe watcher, having lived and worked in Brussels and in Vienna in recent years, I am struck by the parallels between the Habsburg Empire and the European Union. The most important similarity between the two is precisely this curse of always doing things half, of being 'half-baked' - a curse that in some ways is a blessing, too.

The Habsburg Empire was a state, with an army and a foreign policy. The EU is not a state, but it has competences and procedures that make it look like a federation. Both are multi-ethnic entities, functioning in a similar way - by procrastinating and muddling through, because they always unflinchingly go for compromise. The result is per definition imperfect, always. When you try to please everyone, you will never get it completely right. All those criticizing the EU for always being late and kicking the can down the road have a point - but they should realize: this is the nature of the beast. And it is probably all we're going to get.

A multinational state or supranational structure with a weak army (the Empire) or no army at all (the EU) wishing to keep several nations safe and peaceful under one roof have something else in common: they must constantly prove their added value. If these nations become dissatisfied, they will rebel and leave eventually - as the British did with the EU. The Habsburg Empire was by no means a modern democracy. But compared to the surrounding regimes at the time its rule was remarkably benign. Most Emperors genuinely did their best to ensure peace, prosperity and justice based on equality. As a result, they focused entirely on domestic issues. Habsburgs were navel-gazers, just like we modern Europeans are: obsessed with ourselves, and with keeping the peace within. "Better a mediocre peace than a successful war," Empress Maria Theresa used to say. This could be the motto of the European Council.

Maria Theresa (1717-1780) went to great lengths to achieve this. She established the first real bureaucracy in Europe, introducing independent courts, health care, and primary education for all. She realized that taking good care of people with such different backgrounds, traditions and needs was a must if she wanted to keep them loyal. She also married off some of her daughters and nieces to avoid wars, famines and chaos -

Marie Antoinette, the last Queen of France before the Revolution, was her daughter. Maria Theresa constantly bought off neighbours and rivals, trying to appease them so conflicts would not escalate. Her correspondence is peppered with expressions such as 'delaying', 'buying time' and 'stalling'. For her, kicking the can down the road was a survival strategy.

Habsburg soldiers were loyal, but the army was not big or strong enough to protect all corners of the Empire. As the seventeenth-century general Raimondo Montecuccoli always advised the Emperor: "Never put your entire army at risk." And there was another problem. If the French army was crushed, France would lose territory and perhaps its king - but the country itself would continue to exist. France's existence was something permanent. The Habsburgs did not have that. They ruled over many peoples who, without the Empire, would probably not stay together. That made the Empire vulnerable. The superstructure needed to be permanently reinforced.

This deep vulnerability, which the EU shares, made governing an incredible balancing act for all Habsburg Emperors. Like in today's Europe, different nations and language groups rarely agreed on anything. All had their own histories, sensitivities, taboos and traditions. Each had different interests to defend.

For the rulers in Vienna, it was impossible to please everyone at the same time. They were forever modifying and adapting internal political arrangements to keep the show on the road, just like the EU does nowadays by often revising and changing European Treaties. It was a constant, time-consuming process, often complicated by challenges and threats from outside the Empire. For this reason, solutions were almost always, as Grillparzer wrote, half-baked and half-finished. Habsburg decrees and regulations rarely deserved praise for perfection. People often bitterly complained about this – this is partly what makes Joseph Roth, Stefan Zweig or Robert Musil novels so recognizable, a century later. But many people at the time also realized: this 'half-bakedness' was probably the best that could be achieved.

In this constellation Hungary's position was particularly interesting. The headstrong Hungarians constantly resisted 'Viennese rule', which they considered a 'foreign occupation' - but most did not wish to leave the Empire and become prey to Russia or the Ottoman Empire. They preferred a better deal inside. In fact, the arrangement they got after 1867 was so much better than anyone else's in the Empire that they were the last to leave when it imploded in 1918. That today Hungary behaves no less capriciously in the EU today perhaps tells us something about the Hungarians. But it tells us even more about the similarity between Vienna then and Brussels now: the *Zeitgeist* is different, but the nature of the political games is not.

In his 2017 book *Visions of Empire*, British sociologist Krishan Kumar describes five European powers that have left a mark on the world: the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, the Russian and Soviet Empires, the British Empire and the French Empire. Of those five, he finds the Habsburg Empire by far 'the most tortuous, treacherous, and protean'. There were even disputes about its name: was it 'Austro-Hungarian Empire', 'Habsburg Empire', or 'Dual Monarchy'? The other four empires had a stronger profile and were easier to describe. And yet, Kumar writes, of all the five empires, the Habsburg

Empire is 'also – if such a thing is permitted of empires – the most *lovable*'.

If there is one thing Europeans can learn from the Habsburg Empire, it is probably that they should accept the EU more as it is. Too often, European debate is hijacked by federalists and nationalists. Federalists are constantly disappointed that the EU is not powerful enough. Nationalists, by contrast, portray it as a superstate that is too powerful. Both camps are permanently disappointed and impossible to please. Instead of dreaming of an EU they will never get, Europeans should learn to accept that *fortwursteln* ('muddling through') is in the European DNA. It has helped them to become peaceful and prosperous. The fact that the EU is a half-way house is probably part of the reason it is still there – not threatening powerful European states but complementing them, protecting the small states against the big ones, not just taking sovereignty but also giving it back to them. All the nations under the big roof give their input, never getting all they want, but enough to stay inside. The British were the one exception. I, for one, hope that it will stay that way.