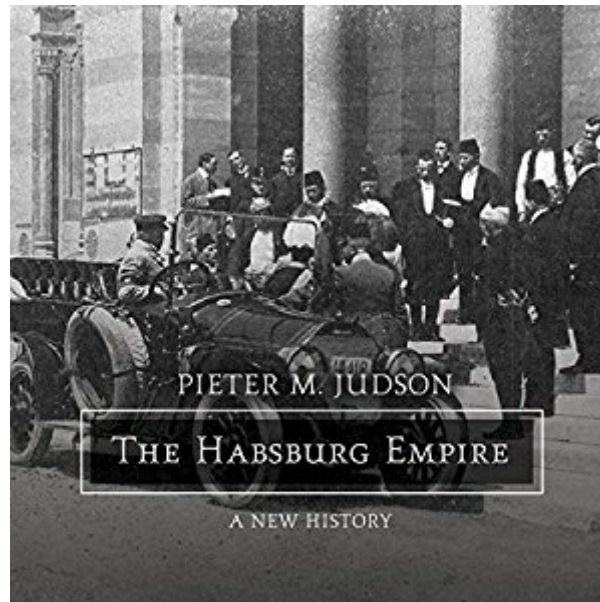




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The Habsburg Empire: A New History



Synopsis

In a panoramic and pioneering reappraisal, Pieter M. Judson shows why the Habsburg Empire mattered so much, for so long, to millions of Central Europeans. Rejecting fragmented histories of nations in the making, this bold revision surveys the shared institutions that bridged difference and distance to bring stability and meaning to the far-flung empire. By supporting new schools, law courts, and railroads along with scientific and artistic advances, the Habsburg monarchs sought to anchor their authority in the cultures and economies of Central Europe. A rising standard of living throughout the empire deepened the legitimacy of Habsburg rule, as citizens learned to use the empire's administrative machinery to their local advantage. Nationalists developed distinctive ideas about cultural difference in the context of imperial institutions, yet all of them claimed the Habsburg state as their empire. The empire's creative solutions to governing its many lands and peoples - as well as the intractable problems it could not solve - left an enduring imprint on its successor states in Central Europe. Its lessons remain no less important today.

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Customer Reviews

The Habsburg Empire, also known as the Austrian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or Austria-Hungary, often seems to conjure up a comic-opera image of strutting officials in lavish uniforms, overdressed ladies consuming vast quantities of sweets, and a general air of pomposity, inefficiency, and incompetence. Nearly one hundred years after the Empire's collapse in 1918, however, Pieter M. Judson's new history makes the case that the Habsburgs and the bureaucracies they created to help them rule their vast territories were more capable and better organized than is

generally perceived. This is a lengthy book of some 450 pages, plus another 100 pages of extensive Notes. Divided into eight chapters and an epilogue, it covers the period from Maria Theresa's reign in the eighteenth century through the 1918 collapse and its aftermath. It's a lengthy book with a lot of detail, but it is also well written, with new material and conclusions that challenge long accepted interpretations and hold the reader's interest. The Habsburg Dynasty was one of the world's great success stories. Emerging from a single castle in what is now Switzerland during the Middle Ages, the family managed through an adroit policy of making advantageous marriages and managing inheritances to gain control of much of Central Europe and become Holy Roman Emperors. Judson's history begins with Maria Theresa, only child of Emperor Charles VI. When she succeeded her father in 1740 her territories almost immediately came under attack from rapacious neighbors like Frederick the Great's Prussia. Maria Theresa was intelligent and charismatic, and she was able to rally her subjects and defeat or at least fight to a stalemate most of her enemies. The Empress was responsible for developing a new way of treating the people she ruled: as individual citizens with rights and privileges that were to be guaranteed and protected by the central state. She and her two sons Emperors Joseph II and Leopold II laid the groundwork for a bureaucracy that helped them govern from the center and weaken the power of local landlords and nobles. This process continued under Emperor Francis I, who became Emperor of Austria when the Holy Roman Empire was dissolved by Napoleon in 1806. During the nineteenth century the policy of centralization and bureaucratic rule continued. Emperor Francis Joseph I, who ruled from 1848 to 1916, had to deal with the growth of nationalist impulses that threatened the unity of his multi-ethnic empire. These nationalisms could be based on language, ethnicity, or a combination of both. The Emperor proved to be fairly adroit in playing off competing sides against each other and in balancing demands so that he and the central government kept the upper hand most of the time. When he was forced into allowing the Hungarian section of his territories to become independent, thus creating the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary in 1867, he continued to manage to keep things rumbling along successfully most of the time. At the back of Francis Joseph and his predecessors' plan all along was the commitment to keep the Empire's subjects loyal to the Empire rather than to their specific language or national group. For the most part, during the prosperous late nineteenth century, Francis Joseph succeeded. Railroads, telephones, telegraphs and other technological developments helped tie distant provinces firmly to the capitals of Vienna and Budapest, and most of his subjects saw Francis Joseph as the final guarantor of their rights and freedoms. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 is commonly held to have doomed Austria-Hungary right way. Judson makes the point that the Empire was fairly successful in holding together for the first year or so of the war,

but food and supply shortages and high casualty rates placed too much stress on its governing structure. Francis Joseph's death in 1916 and the succession of his great-nephew Emperor Charles seemed to provide a brief burst of new energy and hope, but by the fall of 1918 the end was inevitable. In a several weeks long collapse the different segments of the Empire broke free, and the last Emperor and his family were forced to flee. In the post war period the new nation-states that arose from the ruins of Austria-Hungary tore down imperial emblems and statues but retained many of the Empire's laws and even some of its officials. The new nations were often weak and their governments frequently turned to a fervent new form of nationalism that emphasized specific peoples and languages, rather than continuing the Imperial policy that focused on the unity of disparate peoples under one government. That is probably one of the most important of Judson's insights, especially at a time when new fears of immigration appear to be encouraging new and more strident forms of nationalism in the West.

Good and well written analysis of the Habsburg empire - how the empire grew, changed and ultimately fell apart with an emphasis on how people with various ethnicities, languages and religions lived together in one state. I would have liked a bit more narrative to put the analysis in context. Judson is writing for a reader who is already familiar with the major events of European and Habsburg history. He discusses the effect of major events on the Habsburg domains often without setting out sufficient (for me) details on the events themselves. Of course, a detailed narrative of the events discussed would be well beyond the scope of a single volume treatment, so it is balancing act.

An excellently compelling history of a bankrupt Empire covering the centuries of its history in Central and Eastern Europe. The book to purchase if you are interested. Full of intrigue, political machination and revolving social change. The many countries that make up this disparate Empire naturally all have aspirations of their own. How these gel or disrupt the ruling of this widely spread Empire makes a fascinating informative knowledgeable reading.

One of the other reviewers said that this reads like a Ph.D. dissertation, and regrettably that was my experience. I cannot knock the author's scholarship, but somewhat guiltily have to say that this is not a readable narrative. It is too dense, and the presentation is such that one really has to work through it and backtrack from time to time to assimilate its--as far as I can see--indisputable scholarship. While I had intended to add it to my library, and started reading on the day I received it

I have to reject it out of a strong belief that in this day and age, when not writing textbooks, historians have an obligation to make their work readable. Someone will sometime write a winning history of the Habsburg Empire, but this isn't it.

It is a nice book to understand what the Habsburg Empire was, what current countries and regions formed part of it and how daily and political life was at the time. It is also a good book to see the different economic and political perspectives of the elites of the different regions that integrated the Empire that very often differed markedly from the Habsburg themselves. A very proper book for someone who knows nothing about the empire, but wants to have a reasonably broad and profound knowledge of it.

For a book of historical analysis, it is an easy and enjoyable read. Judson's analysis is favorable to the Habsburg dynasty, and he makes a compelling case.

Bought this as a way to more deeply understand the history of the Austria Hungarian Empire. The Habsburg's was very helpful in obtaining a deeper contextual knowledge of the Empire. Not a pleasure read as much as an academic resource. Well researched and effectively presented.

I made it through about the first 100 pages and gave up. I have more than a passing acquaintance with the Habsburgs, and enjoyed the initial pages about the nascent identification as nations. But then I got to the 1848 revolts, and was disappointed in how dry it was. I am probably not the target audience as a casual student of history; this may work better for academicians. Well researched.

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