

November 15, 1992 (Vol. 8, no. 6)

Dear Colleague:

Let me say a good word about the imperial monarchy under Francis Joseph of Austria-Hungary in the period 1867 and 1918. First, the libertarian movements--the establishment of parliaments and diets in the principal units of the multinational state in 1867, followed by the introduction of unheard-of civil liberties, social equalization, dampening of virulent ethnic antagonisms, introduction of universal suffrage in 1907, prolonged peace, economic and cultural progress. Not bad. But these improvements disappeared following the death of Francis Joseph and the collapse of the monarchy at the end of the First World War. Thereafter, a patch-work of so-called nation-states emerged, almost all of which were as multi-ethnic as the old empire, but without the tolerance. In fact, the new states engaged in forced assimilation, deportation, and "ethnic cleansing."

Now, let me go from bad to worse by praising an imperial institution--the army--which made, directly and indirectly, much of the above social improvements possible. The Austro-Hungarian Joint Army, according to István Deák (Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1992), was unique in its total disregard of class distinction, ethnic background, and religious confession. (The Emperor-King himself, for instance, indiscriminately received blessings from a pope, a rabbi, and a Muslim cleric). Merit was the sole acceptable basis for promotion. A chief glory of the army was that it was not much good for fighting wars! It offered instead parades, noon-hour concerts, and grand ceremonies throughout the realm. One General insisted that all his officers and men sport a black moustache, causing thereby a run on black shoe polish. We have here the stuff of comic opera--and indeed, the often absurdly gallant military ethos was a source of its inspiration.

Liberalism, which attacked the army and the old aristocracy as corrupt and feudal, succeeded only in unleashing the passions of ethnicity, anti-Semitism, and the fanatical claims of socialism. To counter the prospect of disintegration and anarchy, the Austrian Government promoted modern art, for it, like the military, was believed to transcend local attachments. Vienna has given the world such celebrated modernist artists as the architects Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner, the painters Gustav Klimt and Oscar Kokoschka, and the composers Arnold Schoenberg and Gustav Mahler. But the Austro-Hungarian empire and its legacy collapsed anyway. Where liberal-cosmopolitan ideals and modernism fail to hold, "animal fumes and enigmatic passions" (Santayana) may well take over.

Best wishes,

