

The Habsburg Empire

Following the revolutions of 1848, Austria sought to create a modern, united state under Franz Joseph I. For the first time, the empire imposed uniform laws and taxes, and most internal customs barriers were abolished. The capital city of Vienna was modernized, and some industrialization took place as railways were built and foreign capital financed construction projects. Yet Franz Joseph still ruled as an absolute monarch, and liberals and many ethnic minorities saw him as a roadblock to change. Caught in the changing times, Franz Joseph announced a new federal constitution in 1860, one that gave considerable authority to regional assemblies. Yet the plan only provoked arguments among liberals, bureaucrats, and ethnic groups, and so the following year the emperor reversed his plan to establish a centralized bicameral parliament in Vienna. The arguments increased, and Hungary in particular objected, since a centralized parliament would be dominated by the German-speaking middle class.

The Dual Monarchy

By 1866 Franz Joseph was in a position of weakness after his defeat by Prussia, and yet the Hungarians were not strong enough to break the emperor's power. A compromise was reached, and the Hungarian elites forced the emperor to accept a Dual Monarchy, or one in which the Magyars had home rule over the Hungarian kingdom. Hungary became an autonomous state, joined to Austria only through the emperor, and Franz Joseph became king of Hungary. The emperor kept his authority in foreign policy, but the Hungarians mostly ruled themselves after 1867, and common policies – such as tariffs – were negotiated in Vienna. The unusual arrangement lasted for fifty years, and it served as an obstacle to strengthening the empire from the center.

Original Document: The Dual Monarchy Explained by the Austrian Prime Minister

In his memoirs, the Austrian Prime Minister, Friedrich Ferdinand Count von Beust, explained why the government recognized Hungary as a separate kingdom while other groups were not. His view of Hungary as a special case – based on the Magyar kingdom from ancient times – is reflected in the excerpt below.

Wood

“Now my object is . . . to show the various elements of this great empire that it is to the benefit of each of them to act in harmony with its neighbor. . . . But to this I have made one exception. Hungary is an ancient monarchy, more ancient as such than Austria proper. . . .I have endeavoured to give Hungary not a new position with regard to the Austrian empire, but to secure her in the one which she has occupied. The Emperor of Austria is King of Hungary; my idea was that he should revive in his person the Constitution of which he and his ancestors have been the headsIt is no plan of separation that I have carried out: on the contrary, it is one of close union, not by the creation of a new power, but by the recognition of an old one”

Pan-Slavism

Although the Dual Monarchy addressed Hungarian demands for self rule, it also strengthened the demands of other ethnic groups to have self determination, too. By giving authority to the Magyars in Hungary, the voices of Romanians, Croatians, and Serbs were suppressed. For dissatisfied ethnic groups all over Austria, a nationalistic movement called Pan-Slavism took hold that bound the loyalty of all ethnic Slavs together, linked through a common heritage across national boundaries. Since Russia was the largest Slavic country, Slavic people in Austria often felt nationalistic bonds with Russian Slavs, a situation that weakened their loyalties to the Habsburg dynasty.

Russia: the Reform Era

Alexander II, the tsar that followed the very conservative Nicholas I, reacted to Russia's disastrous defeat in the Crimean War by focusing on the economy, particularly the need to industrialize. He saw the serf labor system as the biggest obstacle to crafting an industrial economy, and as a result, serfs were emancipated in 1861, just a few years before slaves were freed in the United States. Serfdom had been abolished in western Europe after 1789 and in Prussia and Hungary after they had experienced revolutions in 1848. Alexander did not wish to turn away from Russian traditions completely; he was trying to keep the balance between westernization and preservation of Slavic traditions. The decision to eliminate serfdom was a practical one that he hoped would pave the way for a more productive economy that would restore Russia's place in a world where balance of power among nations was increasingly important. Although serfs received a great deal of land (in

contrast to slaves in the U.S.), they gained no new political rights, and they were still tied to their villages until they could pay for the land they were given. Since these payments were difficult for most peasants to make, they came to resent the nobles who collected their money. As a result, in many ways discontent worsened rather than improved after emancipation.

Another reform implemented by Alexander II was the creation of local political councils, called *zemstvos*, to replace the nobility's traditional authority over the serfs. The *zemstvos* set local policies, such as road building and educating children, and they gave a voice to some middle-class professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, in the political process. However, they did not limit the tsar's power, nor did they restrict national policies set by the tsar's extensive bureaucracy. Alexander II also strengthened the army by extending recruitment and providing education for soldiers. Improved education meant that literacy rates climbed considerably during the late 19th century, but the tsar made no moves to increase political rights for commoners.