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Geoffrey Wawro, *A Mad Catastrophe: The Outbreak of World War I and the Collapse of the Habsburg Empire*. New York: Basic Books, 2014. Pp. xxiv, 440. ISBN 978-0-465-02835-1.

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As must be expected in the centenary year of the seminal conflict of the twentieth century, there is a growing avalanche of histories of the origins and first year of World War I. *A Mad Catastrophe* stands out among them as a passionately written, highly readable, welcome, and important contribution to a shockingly understudied problem: the central role of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in starting the Great War and shaping the course of events on its baleful southern and eastern fronts. Based on impressive local and archival research, it documents and elucidates the final stage of “Austria-Hungary’s fatal degeneration and its impact on European civilization” (xxi).

Geoffrey Wawro (Univ. of North Texas) is a trenchant and astute military historian with a special interest in the impact of lost wars on Habsburg imperial decline. In his latest book, he seeks to close a serious gap in World War I historiography. In so doing, he decries historians who pass over Austro-Hungarian pre-war moves and concentrate too narrowly on decisions taken in St. Petersburg, Berlin, and London. He stresses that the Habsburg Empire was not just another contending Great Power in the last summer of peace in 1914, a comfortably old-fashioned roller of the iron dice of war, less morally culpable than its partner in hubris, Imperial Germany.

Many historians have plowed the familiar fields of 1914 “war guilt”; a growing consensus has, at least since the 1960s, identified the highly aggressive, gambling nature of German diplomacy as the principal driver of conflict. While controversy swirls over less credible recent claims of primary Russian responsibility, Wawro reconfirms the argument that German belligerence coupled with Vienna’s independent recklessness had the most fateful results.

The author’s main contribution is to clarify the catastrophic effects of Vienna’s rash war-planning and the deeply flawed structure of its empire. He portrays decrepit Habsburg holdings as rotting to their core with internal weakness and strife, under a government of second-rate, self-deluded, arrogant leaders who exhibited overwhelming incompetence in both war and peace. In his assessment, “Austria-Hungary’s anxieties and pretensions as a fading great power were a chief cause of the war, as these same qualities were also the source of its defeat” (xxiii).

The multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire had been fighting a losing rearguard action against local nationalisms ever since its initial defeat in the Wars of the French Revolution. Its core political and military weaknesses stemmed from an ethnic numbers game the German-speaking minority was steadily losing, with political consequences it would not accept. From the revolutions of 1848 and the *Ausgleich* of 1867, centripetal politics and constitutional intransigence had been most virulent in Hungary. Magyar nationalists were determined to block Vienna’s commitments to centralized taxation and military preparedness. Thus, even after its humiliating 1866 defeat in the Austro-Prussian War, the southern Kaiser’s army remained underfunded, undersized, and ethnically riven. In short, “Hungary was the virus that was killing the Habsburgs” (25).

After 1900, all this produced a widespread German cultural and political reaction of the *völkisch* sort. But efforts to reassert the Empire’s core Germanness were quickly vitiated by its ethnic diversity. The internal collapse of the Habsburg state accelerated as other, non-German-speaking minorities clamored for some form of autonomy or sought the support of outside sponsors like Serbia or Italy. By 1905, matters had become so pressing that the Imperial General Staff secretly planned an invasion and occupation of Hungary. The idea was to revoke the autonomy granted in the *Ausgleich* by means of a fundamental, but hugely unrealistic, reassertion of German internal dominance. Instead, ethnic crises escalated until the “emperor

was forced to quarter his most reliable troops—Bosnian Muslims—in the streets and squares of towns ... to stop attacks on German schools, theaters, and clubs” (33). The regime, unable to solve its worsening “ethnic problem” in the last years of peace, mirrored the character of its senescent, indecisive, and intermittently senile emperor.

In military terms, this state of affairs meant that, both before and during the war, the southern Kaiser’s Army was fragmented into ethnic and linguistic enclaves of greatly varying reliability. A mostly German officer corps could not even communicate properly with its increasingly resentful and half-hearted troops. Conscripts felt little loyalty to the imperial cause. In 1914, desperate over the empire’s relative regional decline and perceptions of Serbian gains in the First and Second Balkan Wars, the Habsburg authorities in Vienna imagined they could cut their Gordian knot of governance with the sword of war. The ensuing “punishment war” against Serbia led to utter humiliation for Habsburg arms by year’s end and, far worse, sparked a simultaneous, unwinnable war against Russia.

For many good reasons, Archduke Franz Ferdinand is seldom praised by historians. Yet, Wawro convincingly shows that he was among the more rational and moderate voices in prewar Vienna. When Gavrilo Princip’s surprise bullet silenced that voice in Sarajevo, Chief of Staff General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf emerged as the villain of the Habsburg collapse. Wawro excoriates Conrad for his senseless crisis diplomacy, inept generalship, and complete failure to grasp the logistical demands of modern mass armies. It is a wonder of the Great War that he survived in office to its very end, vacillating between absurd personal hubris and abject pessimism. This fact goes far to explain the “mad catastrophe” the Habsburgs suffered in 1914 and the mass casualties inflicted on their disaffected and woefully commanded armies for the next four years.

As is well known, Austria-Hungary could fight Russia only with unqualified assurances of military and diplomatic support from Berlin—the infamous “blank cheque.” This encouraged the worst tendencies in Habsburg decision-making. During the July Crisis, the emperor’s underfunded, poorly equipped, and ill-trained armies were sent into what became a vicious two-front war by grossly incompetent ministers and generals. Their deplorable early performance and brutal losses in the field shocked both allies and enemies.

The German Army planned to devote the lion’s share of its divisions to the initial fight in the west against France. General Conrad did not. Nor did he inform his German counterpart, Helmuth von Moltke, of the foolhardy changes he had made in the first half of 1914 to his own mobilization and attack plans; or his late shift to bring greater initial weight against Serbia and weaken his critical Galician thrust; or his ad hoc rearward deployment in Galicia, followed by a needless, exhausting hundred-mile march to the original line.

The tragicomedy of Habsburg errors ranks among the most disastrous stories in the annals of war. It included, for example, the fortunate capture of the very able Serbian commander Gen. Radomir Putnik at a train station in Budapest on 25 July as he hastened from an Austrian spa to join his mobilizing army on the eve of battle. He was simply released and then proceeded to defeat invading Austrians not once but three times by the end of 1914, helping to inflict over 400,000 casualties.

Wawro’s depiction of operations on the Serbian and Galician fronts will surprise and inform many readers more familiar with the battles of the Frontiers and First Marne, or Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. He places the blame for initial Austrian failures squarely on the feckless generalship of Conrad in Galicia and Oskar Potiorik in Serbia, which he thrice invaded only to be defeated each time with enormous loss of lives and matériel. But Wawro also cites the effects of prewar penury that limited live-fire practice and other modernizations, as well as outdated tactics: “The Austro-Hungarians had failed to adapt to modern firepower. Whereas German infantry companies were already employing open-order tactics, ... Austro-Hungarian companies were simply rushing forward in an easily targeted huddle of men” (155–56). Such appalling tactics together with an ill-conceived offensive plan led to a fruitless war of attrition with Russia. Only German support and intervention saved Austria from complete collapse in 1915.

In a lively narrative style, Wawro details a series of campaigns in Galicia, Poland, and the Carpathians in 1914: the mobile battles of Krásnik, Komarów, Lemberg, Rawa-Ruska; failed back-and-forth operations in

Serbia along the Drina; German intervention on the northern half of the eastern front and direct aid to Conrad's retreating and shrunken armies; and better known, terribly draining fights with the Russian Army over the fortress of Przemysl and around Warsaw. A chapter on the third Austrian defeat in the mountain snows of Serbia is full of pathos and pitiless killing. The book closes with German intercession to support the broken Habsburg Army.

Wawro observes that, "by the beginning of 1915 Austria-Hungary had been reduced to German vassalage by the defeats of 1914" (342). Conrad and Gen. Erik von Falkenhayn (Moltke's successor) fell out over deployment of fresh German corps in early 1915. But only German aid, along with Russian weakness, propped up the mortally wounded Habsburg giant: "For the remainder of the war, every time the Austrians were hard-pressed, the Germans would ride to the rescue." But it was already too late, for Germany as well: "The Germans were capable only of prolonging the war, not of winning it" (369). All efforts to rectify offensive tactics after a failed initial strategy merely protracted the agony.

We must reconsider the origins of the First World War and carve out a new place for the Austrians. Austria-Hungary wasn't the essentially decent but charmingly slipshod power that muddled into and through the war. It was a desperately conflicted power that thought nothing of throwing all Europe into the flames to preserve its ancient rights to lands like Bohemia and Hungary—lands that had lost all interest in the Habsburg connection and were trying to break away. Austria's Great War was built on the reckless gamble that the monarchy's internal problems could be fixed by war. They couldn't The Habsburgs had no business going to war in 1914, yet they did, killing off their own people in poorly prepared offensives before settling into a war of attrition that ensured the already weak monarchy's collapse. (383-85)

Geoffrey Wawro is to be congratulated for presenting in *Mad Catastrophe* such a persuasive brief for this incisive historical verdict.