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# Czernin, Ottokar Graf

By [Robert Rill](#)

Czernin von und zu Chudenitz, *Ottokar* Graf  
Austro-Hungarian politician, diplomat, and Foreign Minister  
Born 26 September 1872 in Dimokur, Bohemia, Austria-Hungary (now Dymikury, Czech Republic)  
Died 04 April 1932 in Vienna, Austria

**Ottokar Graf Czernin was an Austrian politician and the minister of foreign affairs for Austria-Hungary from 1916 to 1918.**

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## 1. Origins and Early Political Career

Ottokar Graf Czernin von und zu Chudenitz (1872-1932) was born to one of the oldest Bohemian families, its nobility originating in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and rising to the status of count in 1627. His father, [Theobald Graf Czernin \(1836–1893\)](#), was a war hero of the 1866 Battle of Königgrätz. Theobald Graf Czernin left his son the property of Winar.

Ottokar Graf Czernin attended secondary school in Komotau (now Chomutov, Czech Republic) and went on to study law for eight months in the German University (Karl-Ferdinand-Universität) of Prague. In 1897 Czernin married Gräfin [Marie Klothilde Kinsky von Wchinitz und Tettau \(1878–1945\)](#).

Upon joining the diplomatic service, Czernin was sent as an attaché to Paris in 1897 and as secretary of the embassy to The Hague in 1899. However, poor health and personal problems forced him to interrupt his diplomatic career and withdraw to Bohemia in 1902. In October 1903, after serious hesitation, he ultimately accepted a mandate to represent the Constitutionalist Landlordism (*Verfassungstreuer Großgrundbesitz*) party in the Bohemian provincial government. Soon he earned remuneration for being a defender of “monarchical principles” and assuming leadership among the younger generation of conservative aristocracy. He publicly opposed universal suffrage in 1905 and suggested a kind of parliamentarism based on a corporation state.

Czernin's struggles against the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary and his defense of a centralized monarchy made it easy for him to become associated with [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863–1914\)](#). With the help of the Archduke's influence, Czernin became a member of the Austrian Upper House (*Herrenhaus*). Czernin composed many expert reports by order of the Archduke, mainly concerning proposals to solve [ethnic problems](#) by strengthening central authorities and emphasizing supranational traditions of Austrian aristocracy.

In foreign affairs, Czernin supported the reinforced consolidation of an alliance with Germany, which was considered to be a (new) “Holy Alliance.” It seems likely that Franz Ferdinand planned to choose Czernin as his President of Ministers when he became emperor. However, in October 1916 Czernin followed the Archduke's request and re-entered the diplomatic corps. He was sent to Bucharest as the Austro-Hungarian Minister. Although [Romania](#) was officially considered an ally of Austria-Hungary, the question of Romanian minorities in (Hungarian) Transylvania proved to be an insurmountable point of contention between Bucharest and Vienna. Nevertheless, Czernin succeeded in keeping Romania [neutral](#) after the outbreak of World War I, until the country joined the Entente in August 1916.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 2. Struggles for Peace

Upon returning to Vienna, Czernin joined the Upper House parties who were engaged in efforts to reinstate the Austrian Parliament (*Reichsrat*) as a first step towards discussing the possibilities of a peace treaty. Consequently, Czernin authored a new essay dealing with the necessity of ending war and returning to *status quo ante*. This attitude brought him attention from the new Emperor, [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887–1922\)](#), who appointed him minister of foreign affairs on 23 December 1916.

During the following sixteen months, Czernin's main aim consisted of ending the First World War with a peace compromise without breaking from Germany and its more aggressive foreign policy. In spring and summer 1917 Czernin thought the key to these goals was removing German troops from [occupied Belgian territory](#), while at the same time leaving parts of [Alsace-Lorraine](#) to [France](#). Although Austria offered Germany the former Russian [Poland](#) and Galicia in return, Berlin never accepted giving up her “*Reichsland*”; it was valued as an object of prestige by both parties involved.

On 2 October 1917, in an eagerly-absorbed, worldwide speech, Czernin restated his support of common disarmament under the supervision of a [League of Nations](#), following the ideas of the American President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856– 1924\)](#). However, military successes of the Central Powers in [Italy](#) and [Russia](#) encouraged the people of Germany and Austria to still believe in the possibility of victory. Furthermore, during negotiations with the Ukrainian People's Republic and Russia in February and March 1918, Czernin could not avoid German maximal demands. This meant that the so-called “bread peace,” which could lead to the economic survival of Austria, never came into being.

Czernin's last great activity was signing a peace treaty with Romania on 14 April 1918, so that the [Eastern Front](#) ceased to exist. The same day, however, he was forced to retire after struggles with the emperor over the publication of secret peace treaties the Emperor had negotiated (see: [Sixtus Affair](#)).

### 3. Last Political Experiments

After the war, the Czechoslovakian nationalist agrarian reforms deprived Czernin of his lands, so he moved in Austria. He tried a political comeback founding a so-called “*Bürgerverein 1848*,” which favored a Danube-confederation of the successor states. This association was merged with the *Demokratische Partei* (Democratic Party), which never played an important role. Czernin was the party's deputy in the Austrian Parliament from 1920 to 1923.

Robert Rill, Austrian State Archives/War Archive

Section Editor: [Tamara Scheer](#)

#### Notes

1. ↑ Singer, Ladislaus: Ottokar Graf Czernin. Staatsmann einer Zeitenwende, Graz – Wien - Köln 1965.

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