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War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Austria-Hungary)

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In July 1914 the Habsburg monarchy went to war with Serbia declaring it sought no territorial gain from the struggle. Soon discussions of possible territorial acquisitions, along with economic and political aims, started among the governing elite and continued until the monarchy collapsed. This article explores the continual process of redefining Habsburg war aims as the struggle progressed and dependence on Germany increased. By late 1917 Vienna moved essentially from ally to satellite. By mid-1918 the monarchy's chief goal was simply to survive, whether or not under virtual German dominance. In November 1918 peace brought total disaster.

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Introduction

On 19 July 1914 the senior leaders of the Habsburg monarchy, apart from [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#), met furtively at the residence of Foreign Minister [Leopold Berchtold \(1863-1942\)](#) to discuss the dispatch of an ultimatum to [Serbia](#). At the meeting Hungarian premier

István Tisza (1861-1918) forced the group to agree that no Serbian territory would be taken after victory in the south. As they left the meeting General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf (1852-1925) famously remarked to War Minister Alexander Krobatin (1849-1933): “We will see. Before the Balkan Wars, the powers also talked of the status quo; after the war no one concerned himself with it.” Conrad was right; within days foreign ministry officials were discussing territorial gains and in a month the fate of Russian Poland. Territorial considerations would never be absent, Tisza notwithstanding.^[1]

On 28 July, nine days after the secret session, Vienna declared war on neighboring Serbia. After nearly fifty years without a war, Vienna sought to punish Serbia for the assassinations of Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este (1863-1914) and his wife Sophie, Archduchess of Austria (1868-1914) in Sarajevo exactly one month earlier. What war aims drove the Habsburg decision in the summer of 1914 other than the monarchy’s preservation? How did the changing fortunes of war shift the war aims, both in foreign policy terms and in terms of possible domestic changes? What impact did the monarchy’s growing dependence on German military and economic assistance have on war aims? And how, ironically, did the quest simply for peace and survival become war aims? Each of these factors, like a set of independent variables, interacted almost constantly from the moment the war began.

Peace and War Aims in Vienna in June-July 1914

The Habsburg decision in July 1914 climaxed nearly two years of constant tension with Serbia and on occasion Russia. Four times Vienna seemed on the verge of war. Each time, restraint or a Serbian or Montenegrin withdrawal had preserved the peace. But the Balkan wars dramatically altered the status of Austria-Hungary in the international system. Though the third largest state in Europe, the monarchy ranked at the bottom in terms of military expenditures and preparation. Nationality clashes inside the monarchy and external aggressive threats suggested future instability. An aged Emperor Francis Joseph could not live forever and his nephew and heir apparent, Franz Ferdinand, did not inspire hope, indeed in Hungary rather fear and loathing. Confidence about the monarchy’s long-term future waned. Even in Germany, its chief ally, there were open mutterings about Austria-Hungary’s future. In the spring of 1914 Austria-Hungary’s long-term status as a great power appeared doubtful, a view its policy-makers feared and some believed.^[2]

For three months, from March through mid-June, senior Habsburg officials worked to explore new policies for the future. They wanted to protect the dynasty’s existence and the Austro-Hungarian state as defined by the 1867 compromise, buttress ties with Germany, diminish the Serbian threat, forge a new alignment with Bulgaria, retain Romania in the secret alliance, protect Bosnia-Herzegovina from Serbian machinations, keep a wary eye on their erstwhile Italian ally, sustain the newly created Albanian state, and try to coax Russia into a more benevolent posture. The murders altered but did not totally overturn these foreign policy aims. Rather the decision to go to war would see them realigned and given new urgency.^[3]

Action against Serbia now took center stage. By 3 July all of the senior leaders including Francis Joseph, save Tisza, were prepared for a military confrontation with Belgrade. But the Emperor insisted that Vienna receive hard assurances of German support and have Tisza's agreement for action. German support came by 5-6 July when [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) and Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) pledged their assistance. Tisza proved more difficult, finally agreeing on 14 July and then only if his condition of territorial self-denial was met.

War aims *per se* were addressed in an ad hoc fashion during these critical days. Much of the war's rationale focused on defending Bosnia-Herzegovina from Serbia. The question of what to do with a defeated Serbia remained a stumbling block. Tisza demanded that his colleagues agree to add no significant Serbian territory. He also argued that a declaration of territorial disinterestedness might placate St. Petersburg and [Italy](#), the latter an ally that Vienna had chosen to ignore in the crisis. The Habsburg leaders wanted the monarchy to act as a great power, to use German support to protect the two provinces, and all in a war they hoped would only last months.

War Constantly Reshapes Habsburg War Aims, 1914-1916

During the next two years Habsburg war aims shifted. First, the [Ottoman Empire](#) joined the struggle in October. More dangerously, Italy's entry into the war in May 1915 confronted the monarchy with an enemy whose territorial ambitions threatened Austria. A new Bulgarian ally later in 1915 altered little. Finally Romania intervened in mid-1916, an ill-fated decision by the former ally that soon led to its military destruction and provided Berlin and Vienna with another territorial morsel to dispute.^[4]

From August 1914 to the end of 1915 Habsburg military fortunes usually waned. Only in mid-1915, thanks largely to German help, did battlefield results change while new fighting started against [Italy](#). By December 1915 Habsburg forces, greatly assisted by the German army, had driven the Serbian army into exile. Moreover, the monarchy's pre-war boundaries in the east were more or less completely restored. Not surprisingly, these successes brought the first serious discussion of war aims since July 1914.

On 7 January 1916 the senior ministers met as the Common Ministerial Council in a session chaired by new Foreign Minister [István Burián \(1851-1922\)](#), a Hungarian and close associate of Tisza. Burián began by reminding his colleagues that the decision for war had centered on preserving the integrity the monarchy. As they now considered possible territorial gains, he continued, they had to think of the entire monarchy, not just Austria or Hungary.^[5]

Serbia occupied first place in their discussions. Burián posed two choices: its full incorporation into the monarchy or a much-reduced Serbia under Habsburg control. Neither option, he conceded, would end South Slavic agitation and both would complicate possible peace negotiations with Russia.

Tisza, departing from his 1914 strictures, suggested a different approach. He proposed using the Croats to check Serbian agitation while incorporating northern Serbia into Hungary with Belgrade becoming a "Hungarian provincial city." The remaining "rump" Serbia would be economically dependent on the monarchy. But the Magyar totally excluded one option: any union between a rump Serbia with Croatia and Bosnia. Tisza's plans met opposition from Common Finance Minister, [Ernest von Koerber \(1850-1919\)](#) who also argued that Serbia's complete disappearance might create other problems. For his part Conrad wanted the total incorporation of Serbia.

[Montenegro](#) and [Albania](#) also drew the ministers' attention. The tiny mountain kingdom would be left intact but the strategically important [Mount Lovćen](#) transferred to the monarchy. Some wanted a slice of northern Albania and at a minimum protectorate status.

If Serbia and the western Balkans dominated most of the discussion, the future of Russian Poland was a close second. Already, in August 1914, then Foreign Minister Berchtold had placed Poland on the territorial agenda. In fact, in late 1914 one Habsburg scheme anticipated an enlarged Poland and a new Ruthenian-Galician entity, both linked to Vienna. By mid-1915 German and Habsburg forces having retaken the lands of Congress Poland, divided them into two parts: the Germans administered the northwest sector from Warsaw with a civilian administrator, while the Austrians administered the southeast part from Lublin under army administration. To link the two governments, Vienna sent a Foreign Office official, [Leopold von Andrian zu Werburg \(1875-1951\)](#), to Warsaw to represent Habsburg interests. For the remainder of the war the two allies feuded over Poland's ultimate status.^[6]

In the January 1916 talks in Vienna, Austrian premier [Karl Stürgkh \(1859-1916\)](#) focused on the Polish issue against the emerging backdrop of competition with Berlin. Unlike Serbia where the monarchy now had the upper hand, the Polish issue always involved Germany. Still, Stürgkh pressed for Russian Poland to come to Austria and for the resolution of the Ruthenian issue. Predictably, the January 1916 meeting ended in acrimony. Burián resisted the incorporation of northern Serbia into Hungary. Tisza opposed a wholesale annexation of Serbia. At length, they compromised. Any territorial gains by Austria would be offset by territorial gains for Hungary. Two essential war aims - Serbia and [Poland](#) - had been clarified in typical Habsburg fashion: postponed. Meanwhile, in succeeding months, with northern Serbia firmly under Habsburg military control, Conrad and his colleagues soon established a draconian military administration: absolutist, centralized, and with military and security considerations paramount. This arrangement lasted until 1918. The chief of staff hoped army rule would become the future paradigm for the entire monarchy.^[7]

By mid-1916 another war aim issue emerged: the monarchy's future relationship with the German empire and especially its economic status. Already in 1915 [Friedrich Naumann \(1860-1919\)](#) had advanced the concept of a *Mitteleuropa*, clearly under German domination. A possible customs union with the Habsburg monarchy would be one byproduct and negotiations for such a union began in 1915 and were still underway in mid-1918. At every turn the Polish issue complicated the

economic discussions.^[8] Interestingly, some German-Austrians also supported this approach with the Magyar leadership always resistant to the idea. But more damagingly, in October 1915 German foreign minister [Gottlieb von Jagow \(1863-1935\)](#), sarcastically saw the monarchy as merely “a Germanic Ostmark,” a view that Burián categorically rejected and that poisoned the economic issue thereafter. On the other hand, by mid-1916 Vienna’s economic position was deteriorating rapidly with Vienna borrowing at the rate of one hundred million marks a month from Berlin. With or without an economic agreement the monarchy was dependent on Berlin.

More ominously, during the Brusilov Offensive, Russian troops had stunned Conrad’s forces. These defeats encouraged the Romanians to enter the war. Meanwhile, Vienna needed military help. One result, long evaded by Conrad, came quickly: the German High Command took effective control of Habsburg military fortunes, though at first operations against Italy remained separate. Swift German military successes against Romania now brought the Germans into territory long seen by the monarchy as in its special province.

The change in the military command structure of the allies reflected the inevitable. If one of Vienna’s goals in going to war had been to retain its great power status, its diminishing military effectiveness made this an increasingly hollow objective.^[9]

The battlefield situation, furthermore, was altering everything. In October 1916 Burián met with Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg to review the possibility of a peace offer to the Triple Entente. Once more the Habsburg minister wanted to resolve the issues of Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia, agree on border changes with Bucharest that benefitted Hungary’s hold on Transylvania, and settle details of a new Kingdom of Poland. The two allies settled nothing, though they agreed to explore a possible peace overture. Weeks later Emperor Francis Joseph died on 21 November and the young and untested [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#) came to the throne.

Until Francis Joseph’s death, strict military and civilian censorship limited public discussion of war aims beyond that of the monarchy’s survival. Out of sight various political and economic elites discussed possible war aims, including the possible transformation of the monarchy. Still, the views were those of German-Austrians and Magyars, with the Slavic issue getting only cursory attention.^[10]

1917: A Year of Muddle and Missed Opportunities

In early 1917 a series of events quickly changed the political pressures on the Habsburg leadership. A new emperor, abortive peace overtures, injection of the [United States](#) into the war, Conrad’s removal as chief of staff, and in March the collapse of the Russian monarchy: all presented new opportunities and challenges. Overshadowing all these events was Germany’s unilateral decision on 9 January 1917 to launch unrestricted submarine warfare. An unhappy Vienna was confronted with a strategic *fait accompli*. American entry into the war could only be a matter of time.

In this context the German and Habsburg leadership met in Vienna in 16 March 1917 to discuss war aims and a possible peace overture to [France](#) and [Britain](#). Emperor Charles insisted the monarchy could not fight another year. These allied negotiations resolved nothing, though the new Habsburg foreign minister, [Ottokar Graf Czernin \(1872-1932\)](#), expressed a willingness to concede Poland to Germany in return for gains in Romania and continued control of the Balkan situation, all in the hope of a peace accord with France. Those hopes soon proved illusory.^[11] Six days later, on 22 March, Charles presided over a crown council discussion of war aims. Czernin reported on his talks with Bethmann Hollweg. He also indicated the Germans had agreed that Mount Lovćen could be theirs, that a much smaller Serbia could join a customs union with the monarchy, that the rest of Serbia would go to Bulgaria, and Wallachia would be annexed to Hungary. Nor did he neglect German ambitions toward [Romania](#). Czernin's disclosures did not please Tisza. Still optimistic about the war, he saw no need to make concessions to Berlin over Poland nor did he want more Romanians in Hungary. He wanted Austria to take Bosnia and Herzegovina for territorial balance. The Austrian premier [Heinrich Clam-Martinic \(1863-1932\)](#) still wanted part of Poland, while refusing to see the two southern provinces as offsetting Hungarian gains in Romania. He refused to make a deal. The young emperor naively thought both halves of the monarchy could be satisfied. At length the group agreed to ask Berlin to guarantee the integrity of the monarchy, a virtual admission of dependence. Further, Berlin would be reminded that any increase in German territory must see a corresponding gain for the monarchy. At no point did the emperor mention one of the most controversial of all the war's peace efforts, his [covert peace negotiations](#) with the French with [Sixtus, Prince of Parma \(1866-1934\)](#), brother of [Zita, consort of Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1892-1989\)](#), serving as a conduit. Eventually nothing came of the effort and it remained secret until 1918.^[12]

After the crown council, a chastened Czernin had Charles write Wilhelm II on the need for peace. Stressing the economic impact of the war on Austria-Hungary and possible [revolution](#) if peace did not come soon, Charles' letter suggested territorial concessions to the enemies to achieve a settlement. In Berlin, however, the German leaders remained confident, easily brushing aside Habsburg fears. Still they agreed to another meeting on war aims. On 17-18 May Bethmann Hollweg and Czernin met at Bad Kreuznach. The Habsburg minister got few concessions. Poland still went to Germany and the monarchy got part of Romania but with the Germans taking the Romanian oil fields and the port of Constanta. Still more aggravating, Berlin wanted a naval base at Valona and economic concessions from Bulgaria. At length Czernin got a German guarantee of Habsburg integrity and agreement to his vague proposals on the South Slav problem.^[13]

The reopening of the Austrian Reichsrat on 30 May, for the first time since March 1914, completely altered the domestic context for discussing war aims. Suddenly domestic political considerations publicly emerged in Austria and soon also in Hungary, buffeting the question of war aims. In Vienna Czech leaders, many amnestied by the new *Kaiser*, resumed their passionate demands for concessions from the German-Austrians who continued to resist. Their refusals edged the Czech leaders toward exile groups that now wanted a quasi-independent Czechoslovakia. For their part the Poles wanted concessions and the South Slavs watched an exile group at Corfu in July demand a

separate state altogether. The desertion of some Czech military units also fueled tension.

The Czech talk of joining Hungarian Slovakia with Bohemia infuriated Tisza. And the Magyar leader also faced domestic pressures to enlarge the paltry 7 percent franchise in Hungary, finally agreeing to 15 percent under heavy pressure. Eventually in mid-1917 Charles pushed Tisza out of office, though the Magyar titan remained the most powerful person in Budapest. More dangerously, by the end of 1917, the German-Austrian and Magyar elites were united in their determination to keep the recently renewed *Ausgleich* arrangement intact and their own power positions undiminished.^[14] In the summer of 1917 the war continued even as Russia was disintegrating. For Vienna and Budapest peace was ever more urgent but they were increasingly in a cul de sac. The Germans still believed they held the upper hand and watched the Russian situation with some glee. Rather than peace, Germany urged Vienna to finish off the Italians.

In late October and the first weeks of November Austro-German troops won the Twelfth [Battle of the Isonzo](#), often called the [battle of Caporetto](#)/Karfreit. German troops provided the edge, though their logistical failures prevented any exploitation of the victory beyond the Piave River. But German troops soon withdrew, leaving the Habsburg forces to face the Italians. An injection of French and British troops into Italy stalled any further gains. In mid-June 1918, Conrad, now commander in the Italian sector, tried again but totally failed. Interestingly, even after Italy entered the war in 1915, Vienna had paid only modest attention to its war aims against its former ally. For some the recapture of Venetia became the ultimate rationale for the endless campaigns, though Conrad talked grandiosely of taking all of Italy. ^[15]

While the campaign progressed against Italy, the two allies, with one now clearly subservient, renewed peace discussions in late October and early November. This time the Germans found Czernin anxious to abandon the earlier agreement on Poland. The reopening of the Austria Reichsrat had shown that the government needed their traditional Polish deputies, especially given Czech obstruction. He now proposed a German dominated Poland that, like Hungary, had a personal union with the Habsburg emperor. This would keep the Polish deputies in the Reichsrat. Surprisingly, the Germans accepted this proposal, while agreeing to a twenty-year alliance with the Habsburg monarchy that made it almost wholly dependent on German goodwill.

With the Bolshevik triumph in St. Petersburg; peace talks now beckoned. The Habsburg monarchy, now faced with a belated American declaration of war against it, virtually begged for peace. On Christmas Day 1917 Czernin announced that Vienna would settle for peace with no annexations, a move that won some domestic support from the Social Democrats. Peace and territorial integrity had now become central war aims, even as strikes and desperate food shortages roiled the political scene.

The Collapse of the Monarchy

In January 1918 [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) announced his [Fourteen Point peace plan](#) with its

self-determination of peoples, a concept that directly attacked the integrity of the Habsburg Empire. The Germans, meanwhile, ignored Czernin in negotiating with Russia at [Brest-Litovsk](#). The conclusion of peace in the east on 3 March brought few tangible gains for the beleaguered Habsburg monarchy, though it soon brought home tens of thousands of radicalized Austrian and Hungarian prisoners of war who opposed the war's continuation. A few weeks later, in the Treaty of Bucharest on 7 May 1918, Germany offered some Romanian concessions to the Habsburgs. Austria gained 600 square kilometers of territory and the Magyars 5,000 square kilometers. But the Germans got the better deal: effective control of the Romanian oil fields. In addition the ill-fated peace negotiations with the newly independent Ukraine so angered the Poles that they now turned against the monarchy altogether. The modest gains from the peace negotiations were not enough to save Czernin whose submissiveness to Berlin, along with publicity about the ill-fated Sixtus caper, cost him his job.^[16]

At the same time and more fatally, Britain and the United States shifted their position on the monarchy's existence. Self-determination, the formation of a new [Czechoslovakian state](#), the impact of the efforts of the [Czech Legion](#), and demands by the Croats and other South Slavic groups took center stage. Washington and London would no longer support the continuation of the monarchy. An April conference in Rome saw the panoply of the monarchy's nationalities, including Italians and Poles, press their territorial aims against the monarchy. When the Entente powers a few weeks later embraced the Rome demands, the monarchy was doomed. The missed opportunities of 1917, when both Austria and Hungary might have offered internal reforms to the Slavic groups, now proved catastrophic. Peace, a key war aim since early 1917, could only come if the Germans won the war in the west; the preservation of the old order depended on Berlin. And even if victory came, Austria-Hungary's status might resemble that of Bavaria as the continuing economic negotiations made abundantly clear.^[17] The war continued and the Germans failed. In the Balkans, allied forces soon put the German and Habsburg forces on the defensive. By early October Vienna and Budapest needed peace. But now events outran them and revolutionary fervor swept across the monarchy.

On 11 November Emperor Charles renounced any political role in Austria and two days later he abandoned any political role in Hungary. Months later Charles and his family moved to [Switzerland](#), but at the border, while still in Austria, he refuted his earlier abandonment of power. In April 1919 the Austrian Parliament permanently barred his return and his later efforts to return to Hungary were also thwarted. In July 1914 the Habsburg leadership went to war to preserve the monarchy from the Serbian threat. Instead their decision condemned the venerable dynasty. Austria-Hungary had become history.

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Notes

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