

Was the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 (Ausgleich)
necessary to preserve the Austrian Empire?

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Fig. 1. 1855 Ethnographic Map of the Austrian Monarchy from Von. Czörnig, Karl Freiherrn.

“Ethnographic map of the Austrian Monarchy from 1855.” *Wikimedia Common.*

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Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

Word Count: 579

This investigation will explore the significance of the Austrian-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, or the Ausgleich, to the preservation of the Austrian Empire. The Ausgleich established Hungary, the second most powerful realm in the Empire, as a separate Kingdom within Austria, attempting to solve long-standing problems and issues. This investigation will focus on the long-term problems and policies that threatened the Empire. Societal, political, and ethnic differences between the two realms are studied as to how these issues contributed to Austria's decline on the world stage as a great power through its foreign policy regarding how these issues threatened the Empire. The state of affairs before and after the Ausgleich, and its effects, will be analysed to consider if it was crucial for the Empire's preservation.

The first source used is R.J.W. Evan's "*Austria, Hungary, and the Habsburgs: Essays on Central Europe, C.1683-1867*" published in New York 2006. The origin provides value as Evans is a well-distinguished historian, having served as Regius Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Oxford, providing a valuable and reputable source. He is well versed in sociolinguistics, giving him an extra tool to examine the topic. Limitations lie in his British nationality and culture, possibly causing him to glorify British systems over Austrian ones, such as the importance of devolution. A value of the content is that the essays were written throughout twenty years, giving it multiple perspectives over a wide period. A limitation is that the essays are separate pieces of work, causing gaps in information and making trends and themes harder to form. A value of the purpose is the breadth of issues and events that it covers to develop a seasoned exploration of Austria, from nationalism to geography and tax systems. A

limitation of the purpose is that it can lacks cohesion and clarity, discussing different topics interchangeably, making connections and analysis more difficult.

The second source utilised is A.J.P. Taylor's "*The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809-1918: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary*" published in New York 1948. The origin provides value as Taylor was a Fellow of the British Academy. Born in 1906, he could personally witness the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its effects, being a primary source on the Empire's effects. Therefore he can also see the eventual consequences of the Austrian Empire, using hindsight to analyse the Empire's decisions. However, this is also a limitation, as his experiences regarding the Second World War may lead to bias. There was rampant anti-German and anti-Austrian propaganda in Britain during the World Wars, which may have influenced him, consciously or otherwise. Nazi Germany under the Austrian Adolf Hitler caused massive devastation in Britain; these all could have led Taylor to have an anti-Austria bias. A value of the purpose of the book is that it serves as a comprehensive political exploration of the Habsburgs, noting external affairs as factors, not just internal ones. A limitation of the purpose is that the people and relevant culture, such as works of art and literature, are not present, disregarding its effects on the populace and events. A value of the content is that it covers a long time, allowing for long-term and short-term trends to be noticed and distinguished more easily. A limitation of the content is that it does not have many other primary resources, relying on other books and secondary and tertiary sources, lowering its accuracy, increasing its susceptibility to bias.

Section 2: Investigation

Word Count: 1 274

The Austrian Empire ruled a vast and unforgiving territory, holding geographically different lands and distinct cultures (Brunn and Snyder 47). The Habsburgs, who ruled the Austrian Empire, were built on their dynastic legitimacy. Their entire legitimacy and right of law depended on the Habsburgs' indivisibility, prestige, and strength (Petrie 24). These conditions were generally met by the military, justifying the autocratic nature of the Empire (Taylor 35). Maintaining legitimacy was crucial to the rule of the Habsburgs, as their strength held together a huge population without a common geographic or cultural identity (Brunn and Snyder 47). They went to great lengths to preserve it, fighting major wars such as the War of Austrian Succession when it was threatened, showcasing its importance to the Empire ("Pragmatic Sanction, The Columbia Encyclopedia").

The Empire was extremely multiethnic, having Germans, Hungarians, Slavs, and Italians amongst others (Taylor 265). Lack of representation between these groups posed a large threat to the preservation of the Empire. Linguistics were one of particular importance. German was the main administrative language, even in non-German territories such as Hungary. German was spoken natively by fewer than 23% of the population, alienating the majority non-German population (Taylor 265). Power was centralised as major decisions were often made only at the Viennese Imperial Court (Evans 148). Local languages, such as the aforementioned, were unrepresented at the highest level. As a result, many citizens felt unrepresented and unaccommodated. The civil service and army were both dominated by ethnic Germans, creating a power imbalance between ethnic groups (Taylor 23).

Sociopolitical tensions between the populace and the court also caused a disconnect between the two. Metternich, as State Chancellor, passed the reactionary Carlsbad Decrees, using vigorous censorship to ban all state criticism, often enforced through military force (Mital). Civil rights were limited as forced labour and manorial obligations still remained (Stearns 102). People's feelings and ambitions were oppressed and ignored by the government, exasperating national dissent, as people felt the government did not represent their best interests (Evans 252).

In 1848 the people, influenced by other European revolutions, revolted. German liberals and nationalists demanded universal suffrage and equal rights for nationalities, the antithesis to Habsburg rule (Taylor 59). They even forced Metternich's resignation (Stearns 96). The current policies' failings and the disconnect between the people and their rulers was startling. There was fear of breakup and disintegration as Habsburg indivisibility and strength was crumbling. Revolutionaries took the capital Vienna, showing the extent of the people's anger (Stearns 102). This was compounded with rampant movements of nationalism and independence throughout the entire Empire from Poland to Bohemia, highlighting the widespread deficiencies of Habsburg policies. Metternich's failures were most apparent in the 1848 Hungarian Revolution as Hungarians, the second most populous group after Germans, demanded reforms such as freedom of speech and self-autonomy (Stearns 104).

The absolutism that the Habsburg Empire was built upon was challenged, demonstrating the people's strength and willpower, and the lengths they would go through for self-autonomy. The revolutions were quelled with Russian aid, but the ideas they created and its effects would remain (Taylor 84). A return to the status quo was attempted, as an era of absolutism was

ushered in (Taylor 85). The Empire was broken by the revolutions, the people were discontent with the failures of their nationalism, and the economy suffered (Taylor 89). The ethnic non-German lands lost their previous special privileges, such as Hungarian corporate privileges, further angering them (Evans 90). Moreover, German liberals still wanted a constitution (Taylor 89). While outright dissolution was avoided, increasing ethnic and political opposition still posed a significant challenge to the Austrian Empire. It proved to be “the most extreme breakdown of political authority,” unable to be reasserted for the rest of the Empire's existence (Evans 266).

Austrian indivisibility also came under threat due to its isolation as hostile powers now surrounded it. Austria opposed Italian unification, advocated by France and Britain. Austria's lack of support for Russia, its longstanding ally, during the Crimean War created a vengeful Russia and left it isolated against pro-Italy France and Britain, as well as its rival Prussia (Taylor 93). To stop Italian nationalism, Austria took up arms against France and Sardinia, fighting and losing the Second War of Italian Unification. The Austrian Army was “antiquated” and filled with “incompetence,” with its defeat displaying its failure to carry out its foreign policy, stand against nationalist movements, further cementing its isolation (Taylor 94). Hungary was “essential... to Italy's success” as troops were diverted away from the war due to the Hungarian occupation, exposing the effect of domestic nationalism on foreign affairs (Taylor 94). Austria was forced to cede Lombardy, damaging Habsburg prestige. Furthermore, ethnic Italians inhabited Lombardy, further exhibiting Austria's inability to combat nationalism, emboldening nationalistic movements within Austria (Taylor 94).

Austria's new struggles and challenges contributed to the Prussia's rise as the dominant German power in place of the former. Its military inferiority compared to Prussia was on full display as the two German states fought against Denmark in the Second Schleswig War

(Friedjung and Taylor 54). Bismarck masterfully manipulated the peace conference in Prussia's favour, convincing "the lesser [German] states that Austrian friendship was not to be relied on" (Friedjung and Taylor 76). The Iron Chancellor then orchestrated the Austro-Prussian War, in which Prussia swiftly defeated an isolated Austria and asserted its position as the dominant German power (Friedjung and Taylor 302). Austria's defeat also meant the abandonment of the *Großdeutsche*, a union of all German states under Habsburg leadership, replaced by the Prussian *Kleindeutsche*, advocating a union of German states which excluded Austria, further exacerbating Austrian isolation among the German states (Taylor 86).

Austrian foreign policy, power, and prestige were in decline, and its status as a great power was in doubt (Evans 266). Its defeat in the Austro-Prussian War had damaged the legitimacy of the Habsburgs, bringing a constitutional threat, empowering ethnic groups who sensed weakness, diminishing its foreign position. Austrian internal instability played a huge role in their decline as a huge amount of energy and resources went to dealing with ethnic and political dissent, reducing the amount of energy and resources it had to deal with other issues, such as foreign policy. Its isolation meant that it was unstable with no help (Friedjung and Taylor 256). A response was needed, and the answer was the *Ausgleich*.

The *Ausgleich* was able to remedy these issues, transforming Austria into Austria-Hungary. Austria and Hungary would have largely independent internal affairs, while sharing a foreign policy and Emperor, preserving the Habsburg dynasty and invisibility (Taylor 130). The Compromise gave Hungarians increased autonomy and power in the empire, giving them incentives for the Empire's preservation. Hungary became centralised and liberalised, soothing ethnic and nationalistic tensions within the Empire, stabilising the state. Reforms were passed, offering new civil securities and expanding human rights (Taylor 138). Austria was

centralised, pleasing the Emperor, German liberals, and nationalists. Hungarians were no longer hostile, and many came to hold prominent positions in Austria-Hungary (Taylor 159). United, the Germans and Hungarians could stop Slavic nationalism from threatening the empire, preserving the Habsburg strength (Evans 261). According to Taylor, the Emperor, while surrendering some control, still “exercised supreme power,” retaining prestige (Taylor 140). However, according to Evans, “the Ausgleich [also] sealed a gradual alienation of Austria and Hungary,” arguably further undermining Habsburg unity (Evans 265). Additionally, new Hungarian rights made Slavic leaders “[insist] – vis-à-vis – on a total implementation of equal rights,” threatening to undermine Habsburg authority (Evans 280).

After the Compromise, its foreign relations and prestige improved, as Austria-Hungary “restored the... alliance with Russia and Germany,” emerging from its foreign isolation and guaranteeing its safety from hostile powers (Taylor 151). Later, Russia was forced to surrender some of its territorial gains made during the Russo-Turkish War by a British and German-backed Austria-Hungary (Taylor 152). State stability was crucial, as ethnic groups would not hesitate to assert independence during instability. These showcases of foreign strength increased legitimacy for the Habsburgs and decreased the chances of revolt in the Empire.

Ultimately, domestic nationalist movements still proved the downfall of Austria-Hungary during instability caused by the Great War (“Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, The Columbia Encyclopedia”). Nevertheless, the Ausgleich, although not solving Austria’s long-standing ethnic problems such as Slavic nationalism, managed to curtail nationalist dissent enough for Austrian legitimacy and stability to recover, reasserting its status as a great power. While perhaps the multiethnic Empire was always doomed to fail, the Ausgleich managed to conserve it at a time of great trouble, preserving it for another 51 years.

Section 3: Reflection

Word Count: 347

Investigating the effects and context of the Ausgleich has given me a vast array of skills and the techniques of historians, and the challenges they face. I was made more conscious of the importance of having multiple sources and analysing their origin, purpose, value, content, and limitations to maximise accuracy.

I learned the various ways authors may develop a perspective based on their explorations. While differing perspectives is common, how these are formed because of their analyses taught me a lot. For instance, Evans used his linguistics background to consider the effect and role of differing languages when exploring Austria and Europe. Using these interdisciplinary techniques, Evans could use another means for the topic's study, providing greater depth to the exploration. Inversely, perhaps Evans overestimated its effects, underestimating others. This all gets down to a major problem: claims and sources. Unlike a science experiment, historical events cannot be reproduced to ensure accurate information. Everything depends on the source. Individuals are the origins of all sources as even they have to see something then retell it. Thus sources are inevitably influenced by the people telling it and their motives and bias, intentional or otherwise. Furthermore, the importance and effect of those factors also have to be based on the sources. Thus an exploration can never be complete and there will always be more to add, consider, or revise.

Analysing a source became even more important when sources collided over their information as I needed to decide which source I should use. Some were minor, such as Tonge's 24% value for native German speakers or Taylor's 23%. While the main point, that German was a minority language was unhindered, it speaks to how a historian must deal with differing data. I

chose Taylor's value because I considered Taylor having greater expertise, but citing my bias, perhaps I chose Taylor's because it promoted my point better. Other times I had to omit information altogether because the sources contradicted greatly, depriving my exploration of further resources, but also possibly shielding it from misinformation.

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