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Lothar Höbelt, »Stehen oder Fallen?« Österreichische Politik im Ersten Weltkrieg, Wien, Köln, Weimar (Böhlau) 2015, 323 S., ISBN 978-3-412-79650-3, EUR 39,00.

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This important reappraisal of diplomatic, military, economic, and internal political issues in the last years of the Dual Monarchy is based on an impressive array of sources, often cited here for the first time, and ranging from official archive materials and the private papers of the military and political decision-making elite, to materials in Czech and Polish. Indeed, the lengthy sections on internal party politics and the eternal debate over nationality questions – about which the author indeed knows more than any other living authority – will be probably prove to be definitive for many years to come. Perhaps more controversial, though also impressively argued, is the underlying argument of the book, in which Höbelt takes issue with determinist claims that from the moment war was declared in 1914 the Monarchy was doomed as an independent Great Power; and that even if it had survived the war, it had by 1918 already lost its Great Power status to become a helpless satellite of Germany.

After analysing the decision-making structures in the Dual Monarchy – the Emperor and his advisers and the Austrian and Hungarian governments – the author argues that the outbreak of war enabled the Army to arrogate to itself the position of a third power in the realm; indeed, that while the initial defeats of 1914–1915 denied it the opportunity to extend its authority to territories beyond the frontiers, it acquired unprecedented powers at home, taking advantage, for example, of the outcry over the alleged treason of Czech regiments (for which the author notes that there was little evidence) and culminating, at the very depths of the crisis in 1915, in the arrest of Kramarz – to the dismay of the helpless civilian authorities.

Chronological sections survey the course of the war and the interaction of external and internal developments, always emphasizing the importance of contingent factors and demonstrating how more often than not the likely outcome appeared to be quite different from that which occurred in 1918. In all these cases the author is at pains to integrate diplomatic, military, social and economic factors into a coherent whole: to take just one of many examples, in explaining the initial success of the Monarchy against Italy in 1915, he cites not only the wave of enthusiasm for the war amongst patriots outraged by Italy's treachery, but the deep hostility of the Slav world, both inside the Monarchy and in the Balkan states (perhaps even Serbia), towards Italy's territorial ambitions; and military factors such as the tactical lessons the Austro-Germans had learned from their experiences of trench warfare in France – all of which came to fruition in the victorious Gorlice-Tarnow offensive.

Even victory brought its problems, however, witness the interminable debate between the allies over the Polish question, here analysed at length but always lucidly. Moves by the Austrians as early as August 1914 to stir up rebellion in Russian Poland were to come back to haunt them when the Allies resorted to similar tactics, but more effectively, against the Monarchy in 1918; but even the clear successes of the Central Powers in Poland left a legacy of disputes, both within the Monarchy (over the future of Galicia) and between the Allies. If the Germans were never willing to grant the Austrians complete control, and indeed sought to use the »Mitteleuropa« concept both to secure their own interests in the liberated kingdom, and to control the Austrians, the latter in turn, and to the bitter end, despite the disasters of 1916 and the establishment of a joint Austro-German command, and even after Kaiser Karl's alleged submission to Germany at Spa, always stubbornly refused to accept the German programme.

Of more general interest are a substantial digression about relations with the United States, although the author's view that their entry into the war actually reversed course of history and saved the Entente from defeat is debatable; likewise his claim that the events of the 20th and 21st centuries have shown the peace settlements of Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest to have been more realistic than the arrangements made by the victorious allies in 1919. More convincing is his argument that Spa did not doom the Monarchy to destruction by alienating the Allies: certainly, it severely damaged the chances of a separate peace; but the fall of the Monarchy was the internal consequence of its military defeat and the establishment of national states that presented the Allies with a fait accompli that they could do nothing but accept.

The sections on party-political disputes at home will be invaluable to anyone wishing for information on that subject; but some readers may find them heavy going, especially when it appears that the argumentative gentlemen involved were never really in a position to influence decisions: as Czernin loftily declared »the Czechs will scream anyway, so it does not matter how they are treated«. Even so, Lothar Höbelt's detailed and exhaustive account of the mood swings on the home front is yet another factor – but one that could only operate once military defeat had rendered the traditional decision-makers impotent – helping to determine the issue between »Stehen« and »Fallen«.