



For God and Kaiser: The Imperial Austrian Army, 1619–1918 by Richard Bassett.

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In *For God and Kaiser*, veteran British journalist Richard Bassett offers the first English-language history of the Imperial Austrian Army from the Thirty Years War to the aftermath of the First World War. He is best known for his successful popular history of the Nazi intelligence chief, Adm. Wilhelm Canaris.¹

The book comprises three parts. The first, “Habsburg Connection,” covers the period from Albrecht—not “Alfred” (passim)—Wallenstein’s rapid expansion of the Habsburg military force in the 1620s to the end of Joseph II’s reign in 1790. Part II, “Revolution and Reaction,” extends from the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras to the Austro-Prussian (“Seven Weeks”) War in 1866. Part III, “Imperial and Royal,” runs from the creation of the Austro-Hungarian Dual (*Kaiserlich und Königlich*) Monarchy in 1867 through World War I.

To compress the entire three hundred-year history of the Habsburg army into a single readable volume is a daunting task.² Bassett’s solution is to eschew a comprehensive, nuts-and-bolts account in favor of engaging readers with a series of vignettes centered on particularly interesting moments and characters, couched in a breezy, journalistic prose style. Novice students of Austrian military history will like this, but readers with a bit more knowledge of any of the eras covered will be repulsed by the airy and frequently jingoistic narrative. Too often, Bassett reduces campaigns to a general’s quotation or the experience of a single (usually, cavalry) regiment.

In Part I, the author leaves unexplained the complicated notions of armies and states in the early modern period as well as the relations between the Spanish and Eastern Habsburgs; instead, he attempts to rehabilitate the reputation of the Austrian military in the most energetic language and, concomitantly, to demonize the Habsburgs’ opponents. For him, the House of Austria’s defeats were the result of accidents, bad luck, or the occasional incompetent general. An early example:

Moreover not only did Ferdinand [II]’s piety inspire his subjects through the widespread dissemination of the *Virtutes Ferdinandi II* penned by his Jesuit confessor [Wilhelm] Lamormaini, but the international flavour of the new orders, like Ferdinand’s army, was a powerful intellectual weapon.... These principles guided Ferdinand’s vision of his army. The offensive of the intellect was supported by more practical steps. In 1621, all of the ringleaders of the Bohemian rebels were executed on Ferdinand’s orders in the Old Town Square in Prague. (25)

The use of the term “intellectual” here is opaque, as is the influence of religion on tactical or strategic thinking.

More disturbing is the chauvinist portrayal of Maria Theresa and the characterization of Frederick II as a villain of cartoonish proportions. Though Bassett describes the reforms instituted by the Empress af-

1. *Hitler’s Spy Chief: The Wilhelm Canaris Betrayal: The Intelligence Campaign against Adolf Hitler* (NY: Pegasus, 2012).

2. There are excellent books on specific segments of that history: e.g., Gunther E. Rothenberg, *Napoleon’s Great Adversaries: The Archduke Charles and the Austrian Army, 1792–1814* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1982) and *The Army of Francis Joseph* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue U Pr, 1981).

ter the Silesian Wars, he relies too exclusively on a single, outdated secondary source.³ Though the army revamped by Maria Theresa and some of her better generals was structurally sound, it could not secure victory in the Seven Years' War. Bassett ignores the fact that Kaunitz's grand coalition and the Empress's maternal obsession with regaining Silesia led Austria into a disastrous conflict that gained nothing. At the war's end, Joseph II took over an exhausted army and state. But in Bassett's rendition, Austria seems to have won the Seven Year's War: "Kolin shattered the myth of Prussian invincibility. It [the war] also changed the view in the German lands of Maria Theresa. Her armies marched to victory and as the number of these mounted and Prussia was gradually laid waste it was hard not to see the Empress as a Mater Castrorum, Mother of War" (137).

Next comes a description of Frederick II's heralded victories over the Austrians at Rossbach and Leuthen (1757). The subsequent era of the French Revolution was an important (and exhausting) one for Austrian arms. Here Bassett does detail the course of specific battles, especially Aspern and Wagram (1809). Sadly, he glosses over the two reform programs led by the Archduke Charles, whom he calls the greatest commander of the age (except for Napoleon) and credits with Clausewitzian insight⁴ and physical attractiveness. In fact, Charles was a conservative who rejected real change and achieved no effective reforms.⁵

In Part III, Bassett ventures an overview of the Austrian navy. He recounts in great detail (an entire chapter) Austria's participation in the pan-European attempts to suppress the Chinese "Boxer" Rebellion, a story filled with individual heroism and featuring a last minute rescue, but having no relevance to the actual construction of the navy or the troubles that plagued the Monarchy before 1914.

The author clearly describes the consequences of the years before and during World War I for the Monarchy, though with an emphasis on diplomatic rather than military matters. The villains in his accounting are the Germans, not the Serbs, Russians, or Italians. While this is not wholly wrong, the focus is misplaced. Even Conrad von Hötendorf, perhaps the most criticized of all of the war's commanders, is treated sympathetically: his "concept of a breakthrough at Gorlice (Görlitz) in the Carpathians was to be one of the war's most effective thrusts. Conrad wanted the offensive to have a much more ambitious objective, at the very least the relief of Lemberg. But the Germans were more modest in their aims" (487).

For God and Kaiser is not a book for academics or anyone with some knowledge of European military history. It is, for one thing, woefully short on institutional and intellectual analysis. For example, it barely touches on the *Hofkriegsrat* (1556–1848), that great, crushingly byzantine organ of the State and Army that governed all military actions and finances. Indeed, its creation would have been a better starting date for the book. Similarly underappreciated is the vitally important Military Border system that oversaw the Monarchy's frontier with the Ottoman Empire. Finally, there is no in-depth explanation of the Army's place in the social and political fabric of the Monarchy. How was it recruited? What was its structure? How did it perform in battle?

The book suffers, too, from a distressing number of errors in dating, spelling, and usage. Too many of the author's dubious claims go unattested in the book's sparse footnotes. The seven (inadequate) maps at the beginning of the book are never cited in the text—a sad irony, given the Habsburg penchant for creating meticulous military maps of the empire's defenses. In light of these many defects of perspective, emphasis, and even routine source citation, I cannot recommend *For God and Kaiser* to readers with a serious interest in the military history of the Habsburg Monarchy or of Europe in general.

3. Christopher Duffy, *The Army of Maria Theresa: The Armed Forces of Imperial Austria, 1740–1780* (NY: Hippocrene, 1977).

4. Publication of the archduke's work on strategy, *Grundsätze der Strategie*, is incorrectly dated to 1796—read "after 1814."

5. See my *The Formative Theories, Influences and Campaigns of the Archduke Carl of Austria* (NY: Praeger, 1990).