

## Austro-Hungarian War Aims in the Balkans during World War I

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**Author:**

Marvin Benjamin Fried

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Mesut Uyar

‘Shackled to a corpse’ is a quote widely attributed to General Erich von Ludendorff, which allegedly describes the alliance between Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although Ludendorff complains bitterly in his memoir that the Austro-Hungarians were a continuous ‘drain on German blood and German war industries’ throughout the war (1), he probably never used this exact form of words. However, it has stuck to the Empire in such way that it not only became the title of an episode of the BBC’s highly successful *The First World War* documentary series, but also the general epitaph of Austria-Hungary’s war effort until recent times.(2) Therefore it is no great wonder that current literature often limits its coverage of Austro-Hungarian involvement to the outbreak of the war, military blunders and its disintegration at the end.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire has not been treated kindly by historians, but a new generation has now begun to redress the balance. Dr. Marvin Benjamin Fried’s book is one of the most successful examples of this new trend. There has long been a need for a work of scholarly synthesis on the war aims and strategy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Fried effectively and engagingly fills this void, arguing that the Empire’s principal military, political and economic objectives lay in the Balkans and that therefore until the end of 1917 it aimed to dominate this region.

While this book initially appears to be a military history, it actually focuses on Austro-Hungarian diplomacy and decision making during the war. The book is structured around eight chapters including an introduction and a conclusion. The author provides useful introductions to, and capsule summaries of, the long and highly

detailed chapters, thereby making it easier for general readers to fit developments into the general picture. Fried clearly points out his aims and arguments in the introduction. In contrast to other scholars Fried finds the Empire's war aims and strategy had been carried out by the Foreign Ministry coherently and consistently, but a series of military disasters and the continuous need for military help not only from the Germans but also the Bulgarians and Ottomans drastically limited the chances of their realization until it was too late. As far as Fried concern Austro-Hungarian campaigns against Russia and Italy were distractions from its aims and the war was prolonged as a direct result of the Austro-Hungarian obsession to achieve its aims in the Balkans (p. 3). Similarly he claims that Conrad von Hötzendorf, Chief of the General Staff, and other generals, unlike in Germany, failed to take control of foreign policy-making. 'The Foreign Ministry generally retained control of Imperial foreign policy' and 'remained surprisingly consistent' (pp. 3, 7).

The second chapter briefly describes the decision-making system and summarises current scholarship on the Austro-Hungarian war aims. Fried expresses his disappointment with the hitherto lack of interest in war aims, in contrast to the extensive literature about the July Crisis. However, this chapter reads in parts like the Ph.D. dissertation it was and the literature review too basic for such an ambitious project.

After these two short chapters Fried follows a chronological path and allocates more space to the intricacies of the internal decision-making system. The third chapter covers the period of July-December 1914. The Empire, just like the other powers, entered the war in the expectation that it would be short and victorious, and that teaching a harsh lesson to the Serbs and achieving their war aims in the Balkans as quickly as possible was key. In addition to its positive war aims against Serbia, Austria-Hungary also sought to preserve its territorial position against Italian and Romanian irredentist desires. The status of Albania and the need to gain a land bridge became important in this respect. Sadly the imperial army failed miserably against the small but apparently superior Serbian forces again and again. To make the matters worse Germany, anxious regarding Italian and Romanian participation in the Entente, put pressure on the Empire to make territorial concessions before it was too late. Fried explains the dilemmas of Austro-Hungarian decision makers superbly, and demonstrates how Hungarian interests defined the outcome, painting vivid pictures of various actors, including Hungarian Prime Minister Istvan Tisza in this chapter and Baron Istvan Burián, the new Foreign Minister, in the next chapter.

Burián looms large in the fourth chapter (January–September 1915). According to Fried, Burián was not a mere pawn receiving constant instructions from his real master Tisza (3), as he has been consistently portrayed, but a successful statesman with remarkable autonomy, though obsessed with the Balkans (p. 96). Throughout the book there are a number of attempts of this sort by Fried to correct the previous consensus as to the character of key actors. As a Balkanist true believer Burián was strongly opposed to giving concessions to Italy, Romania or Bulgaria. He not only fought viciously against the ever increasing lists of demands coming from these countries, but also against Germany and, surprisingly, the Austro-Hungarian High Command. Although Burián later regretted his 'dogmatic stance and hard negotiating style' he managed to protect 'the Monarchy's Great Power status, prestige and influence', albeit for only a few more years (pp. 61–2). On the other hand when concessions were to be given from somebody else's country Burián more than willingly joined forces with the Germans, for example in putting pressure on the Ottomans to give the right bank of the Maritza River to Bulgaria in order to maintain its friendship (pp. 80–1, 84–5). Deteriorating military fortunes prevented Burián from achieving his aims in the Balkans. More military defeats in Galicia and a costly stalemate in Serbia not only weakened Burián's diplomatic position with allies and the Balkan states but also were instrumental in the loss of faith in victory within governing circles, including by Burián's mentor Tisza. The search for an 'honourable peace' started and gained ground, to his great dismay (pp. 76–7, 90).

The fifth chapter (October 1915–June 1916) opens with the long-awaited victory against Serbia. The imperial army finally managed to overrun Serbia, with relative ease in the end, but only after getting substantial help from Germany and Bulgaria. The victory, however, did not provide the relief that Austro-Hungarians had been longing for. One day before the start of the invasion of Serbia the Entente opened a new front in

Salonika by 'violating Greek neutrality'. Dividing the spoils of war between the allies also turned out to be very difficult. The Bulgarians immediately increased their demands (pp. 144–52), while the Germans and the Ottomans tried hard to get something out of this, their sole substantial victory (pp. 121–3). On the other hand Tizsa, who was always scared of bringing more Slavs into the Empire, was keen to put an amputated Serbia under Hungarian influence (p. 109). In addition to intense diplomatic bargaining and internal disagreement about the fate of Serbia, Burián had to fight against Conrad who had been advocating for the annexation of Montenegro and Albania (pp. 129–37). For Burián small states were essential buffers against Serbian and Bulgarian encroachments towards the Adriatic. Astonishingly, Burián managed to contain demands coming from the allies and succeeded in getting Common Ministerial Council's approval but these successes turned out to be hollow, as the Russian Brusilov Offensive in June 1916 changed everything dramatically. Overall, Fried shows how Burián and other Austro-Hungarians shaped and reacted to these developments convincingly and in considerable detail.

Overall the sixth chapter (June 1916–May 1917) is a tragic read. Austro-Hungarian diplomacy under the leadership of the new Emperor Karl I and his new Foreign Minister Count Ottokar Czernin faced immense problems. Czernin, who initially shared a similar determination to achieve the war aims of his predecessor, was more powerful thanks to the dismissal of Conrad in February 1917 and finally Tizsa in May 1917. However, the Empire was disintegrating and the hardships of war were simply not bearable anymore. Under the threat of 'hunger and potential revolution' Czernin grudgingly had to 'move away from pursuing Balkan territorial or economic war aims', instead searching for a swift peace (pp. 169–70, 207–8). Fried explains the dilemmas of Czernin and his positional move from the Balkan war aims to a quest for peace in satisfying detail. In the end 'Czernin's independently minded peace policy effectively marked the end of Austro-Hungarian war aims planning', but did not provide the peace that the empire was desperately asking for. Peace-feelers and secret negotiations did not provide any meaningful results, and Czernin's efforts to convince the Germans completely failed. Interestingly, military victories like the overrunning of Romania in a surprisingly decisive campaign in fact increased Czernin's problems, as the increasingly confident Germans simply disregarded Austro-Hungarian leaders, so much so that 'even mid-level German officials plotted against the Monarchy' (pp. 208, 210).

The book actually finishes with the departure of Tizsa and the end of the Balkan war aims. The seventh chapter (May 1917–November 1918) simply provides readers with the aftermath of this change of policy, as Austria-Hungary fell under ever-increasing German diplomatic and military control. As Hegel once said, the Dual Monarchy 'was not a kingdom but an empire' which consisted of many political organizations and actors. Therefore it is amazing how the imperial ministers of foreign affairs remained in charge of the formulation and application of war aims and managed to be consistent throughout most of the war, although one wonders, if the Central Powers had won the War, whether these ministers would have managed to achieve their war aims or if the Empire would have become a German satellite.[\(4\)](#)

Fried's writing style is clear and given the breath of information and details contained within the text, appropriately matter-of-fact. The sources and bibliography used are impressive. The book makes available in English a wide range of Austro-Hungarian and other archival material, mostly in German, and provides a secondary bibliography that would otherwise have remained outside the reach of English-speaking world. Nearly all his claims and arguments are drawn from and supported by primary sources, though in relying on Habsburg primary documents to tell the story Fried occasionally yields to their influences and perspectives. Moreover the archival detail that is exciting for scholars may cause layman to get lost.

That being said, there are a number of minor errors within the text that are peripheral to the central themes of the book. For example, the Ottoman Empire did not enter the war on 22 October 1914 (p. 34) but on 29 October 1914. The academic research on the Ottoman war effort suffers not because of a lack of literacy in 'antiquated script' (p. 11) but because of the general lack of military historians in Turkey. Finally, although the photo essay (pp. 17–22) is useful, it is very brief and photos of some important characters like the new emperor Karl I, Prinz Gottfried Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, Count Johann (Janos) Forgach, General August von Mackensen and Johann (Janos) Pallavicini are missing.

These glitches aside this is a necessary book and any scholar serious about Austro-Hungary during the First World War needs to read it. The book will also be a great asset to generalists working on wartime foreign policy and decision-making process.

## Notes

1. General Ludendorff, *My War Memories 1914–1918* (2nd edition, London), vol. 1, p. 241.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Popular British historian A. J. P. Taylor played important role in this respect. See. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809–1918*, (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 251–2.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Taylor, op.cit., p. 253.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. F. R. Bridge, *The Habsburg Monarchy: Among the Great Powers, 1815–1918*, (New York, NY, 1990), pp. 341, 380.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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