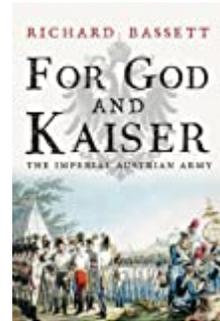




**Richard Bassett.** *For God and Kaiser: The Imperial Austrian Army, 1619-1918.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 616 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-17858-6; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-21967-8.



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Richard Bassett's *For God and Kaiser: The Imperial Army* is a massive campaign history of the armies that served the Habsburg dynasty from the Thirty Years' War to 1918. The book aims to be greater than the sum of its parts by contributing to several historiographic debates, some recent and some vintage. Bassett does this while writing in a magisterial but winning narrative style. He argues that the Imperial Austrian Army existed to serve the Habsburg dynasty and it did this job well. It won more battles and wars than it lost. Most importantly, it secured the continued existence of the Habsburg dynasty for nearly three centuries.

Bassett offers readers a comprehensive description of the major campaigns fought by the Imperial Austrian Army, from the start of the Thirty Years' War to the end of World War I. Part 1 begins with the Thirty Years' War and the Second Siege of Vienna. The rest of this section includes chapters on Prince Eugene, the War of the Austrian Succession, and the reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph II. Part 2 focuses on the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the revolutions of 1848, and battles of the Austro-Prussian War. Part 3 is devoted to the prelude and denouement of World War I. The individual chapters cover the occupation of Bosnia, the Redl Affair, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, and the conduct of World

War I. Along with these campaigns Bassett also chronicles some minor but interesting events related to the k.u.k Navy, like the Battle of Lissa and the Boxer Rebellion. Throughout the book, Bassett effectively summarizes and contextualizes some key military reforms undertaken by the Habsburg dynasty between campaigns.

The main actors in this story are the Habsburg rulers and their military leaders. Bassett sorts them into the good and the bad, based on their success on the battlefield as well as their loyalty to the Habsburg dynasty. Albrecht Wenzel Eusebius von Wallenstein was a good commander, but ultimately bad because of his suspect loyalty to Ferdinand II. In contrast, Archduke Charles, Prince Eugene, and Joseph Radetzky receive praise for both their competence as commanders and loyalty to the dynasty. Bassett gives Maria Theresa high marks for her choice of commanders and ability to reform both the army and the state. Her son Joseph II is judged unfavorably because of his truculent personality, lackluster battlefield results, and insistence on too much change too quickly. The Imperial Austrian Army's foreign opponents are judged on a similar scale: Napoleon was good, because of his military prowess, but Frederick the Great was bad. Despite his initial successes, Frederick lost several campaigns, emptied the treasury, and left the Kingdom of Prussia

weaker than he had found it.

One of the weaknesses in Bassett's argument is the way he handles nationalism. He is critical of older literature, like the work of A. J. P. Taylor (*The Habsburg Monarchy: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary* (1948), which has argued that the monarchy was in a state of decline because of nationalism and tensions between the dominant and minority ethnic groups. Bassett accepts, however, Taylor's presupposition that nationalism was inherently corrosive and destined to dismember the monarchy. He argues that imperial institutions, like the army, were what held the monarchy together and kept the dynasty in power. In the past thirty years, historians's understanding of nationalism has moved from it being a strictly centripetal force pulling the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary apart to one that had multiple causes and complex effects. Scholars like Pieter M. Judson (*The Habsburg Empire: A New History* [2016]) and Tara Zahra (*Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948* [2008]) have argued that nationalism was a more complicated phenomenon, one that sometimes tied ethnic groups closer to the dynasty and the institutions of the imperial state.

Bassett focuses on the army and its role in Habsburg diplomacy and foreign policy. And yet for most of the period covered by this book the main role of the Imperial Austrian Army was essentially to maintain domestic order during peacetime, especially the suppression of domestic rebellions and peasant uprisings. This focus on foreign policy is especially clear in Bassett's analysis of the revolutions of 1848. More attention is given to German and Italian affairs than the suppression of the revolution in Hungary, for example. During the dualist era, the regular army and, later on, the *Landwehr* or *honved* units played a key role in maintaining order during elections and suppressing internal dissent. Understandably the role of the military in the Habsburg monarchy's do-

mestic politics would be another topic in an already long book, but it would have been nice to see the issue raised or at least addressed more thoroughly in the chapter on 1848.

Bassett's book arrives with the centenary of the First World War. It, along with a raft of books about the Imperial Austrian Army, has been published with an eye toward reaching an audience outside academia. Two notable examples include Geoffroy Wawro's *A Mad Catastrophe: The Outbreak of World War I and the Collapse of the Habsburg Empire* (2014) and Alexander Watson's *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (2014). Bassett is certainly in dialogue with Wawro and what he calls the liberal English school of R. W. Seton-Watson and A. J. P. Taylor. Wawro is very much of the opinion that the Habsburg monarchy was already in a state of crisis before the war started and argues that the incompetence of the army in 1914-15 doomed it to destruction. Seton-Watson's scope is larger and takes into account the actions of both the Habsburg monarchy and its partner imperial Germany. His study of both military and home front efforts by the two central powers suggests that the Habsburg military and civilian mobilization was more successful than critics gave it credit for, even though it was not enough to save the dynasty.

At its best, *For God and Kaiser* provides readers with a handy summary of diverse campaigns, battles, and events. Bassett has written a readable narrative with compelling descriptions of some significant as well as minor battles and campaigns. This is good narrative history and its comprehensive nature makes it an interesting introduction to students or a general audience without much knowledge of the Habsburg monarchy. Another point in Bassett's favor is that he aims to situate this campaign history in the context of the larger debates about the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary and its viability in the early twentieth century.

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