Introduction: Robert A. Kann on "Speculative History"

Stanley B. Winters

Forty-five years ago, in May 1966, Professor Robert A. Kann delivered a paper titled "Should the Habsburg Empire Have Been Saved? An Exercise in Speculative History." The venue was the spring banquet of the Phi Alpha Theta History Society, held at the State University College of New York in Cortland. The theme was provocative and on a subject of much discussion about the fate of the empire and its implications for Europe. Kann never expanded it for publication.

One month earlier, in April 1966, he had been lead speaker at the epochal conference on "The Nationality Problem in the Habsburg Monarchy: A Critical Appraisal" held at Indiana University. A thaw in East-West relations had made possible the participation of scholars from the Soviet bloc. Kann met historians Jan Havránek and Jiří Kořalka from Prague and told them of his desire to study materials about the Archduke Francis Ferdinand d'Este in Bohemian archives. He hoped to supplement material he was already researching in Vienna. This became possible in the summer of 1967, when he again met the Czechs at the "Conference on the Centennial of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise" held in Bratislava. The two Czechs gained approval from their archivists for Kann to study the archduke's materials in Bohemia.

This was a heady period in Kann's career. He produced articles and a book about the archduke, as well as many other writings. His *A History of the Habsburg Empire 1526–1918* appeared in 1974 (University of California, revised 1977). In 1976, he retired from Rutgers University and took up residency in Vienna. He engaged in teaching, finishing unpublished works, lecturing, and meeting colleagues on the Continent and in Great Britain, until his death in 1981.

After his passing was memorialized in the *Austrian History Yearbook* (Vol. 17–18), Mrs. Kann wished to publish his remaining works of interest to the profession. Three articles and his co-authored *The Peoples of the Eastern Habsburg Lands, 1516–1918* (University of Washington Press, 1984) appeared posthumously.

His paper from 1966 was among them. I was reminded of it after reading "Counterfactual History: A Forum" published in *Historically Speaking* (March 2004). Its eight erudite essayists ranged over the whole history of civilization to debate the what-might-have-beens of actions taken by its movers and shakers. Austria-Hungary and the Habsburg Empire drew only a fleeting mention (15). Kann's twenty-page draft on "speculative history," by contrast,

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focused entirely on the Habsburg monarchy and its breakup. He suggested that if the victorious Allies had allowed a great power to exist in postwar Central Europe in order to maintain a balance of power on the Continent, future catastrophes might have been avoided.

Scholars have noted the remarkable upsurge in the study of Austrian and Habsburg history in recent years. The works of Robert A. Kann, including this unpublished essay, remind us of the contributions that he and his contemporaries made to Austrian studies.

Stanley B. Winters was born in New York City in 1924. He taught for 35 years at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, where he retired as a Distinguished Professor Emeritus. He published numerous scholarly articles and edited volumes on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Austrian and Czech history, including the collections, *Intellectual and Social Developments in the Habsburg Empire* (1975); *T.G. Masaryk (1850–1937): Thinker and Politician* (1990); *Great Britain, the United States and the Bohemian Lands* (1991); and *Dynasty, Politics and Culture: Selected Essays by Robert A. Kann* (1991). He was elected a member of Collegium Carolinum in Munich, and in May 1991 was awarded a medal by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences for service to Czech historical scholarship. He died on 28 January 2011.

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