2. From Empire to Nation

Even more than in 1918, Austria in 1945 seemed to have reached the bottom of the abyss and to face a very uncertain future in a Europe which was in the process of radical change. She had few cards in her hand.

Fundamentally, her status was unclear: she was cast by the Allies as part victim and part co-aggressor with Nazi Germany. She was again cut off, and this time more decisively, from both Germany and her traditional Central European hinterland. She was occupied and under Allied supervision. Vienna and Eastern Austria were under Soviet occupation and the Renner government, installed by the USSR, was at first not recognised by the three Western Allies. Despite the promises of the Moscow Declaration, the future seemed bleak and would obviously depend as much on the latitude accorded to her by the Allies as on the will of her people.

To understand either of these elements which would determine the future of Austria, it is necessary to go back well beyond 1945. The makings of modern Austria’s situation are to be found in the nineteenth century and even before. Indeed, what did the term ‘Austria’ signify in 1945? It certainly was not a clear, self-confident and unequivocal declaration of nationhood. For many, it was like an old garment which, being all that one had, one had to make the best use of. In such a situation, there was an inevitable tendency towards nostalgia and a preference for looking back to the better past, rather than towards the uncertain future. The past had, though, seen several fatal turning points, on which the ‘if only …’ schools of history hinged. These fell in the years 1849, 1866 and 1867 and 1918. All represent vital turning points in modern Austrian history.

In 1849, revolution was defeated and the chance of creating a liberal German State was lost. In 1866, Prussia defeated Austria and excluded her from German affairs. A conservative and narrow German State came into being under Prussian leadership. All chances of a democratic Germany evolving was lost. Austria lost her possessions in Italy, was turned towards the Balkans and eventually became tied to the German alliance against pan-Slavic Russia. In 1867, a weakened Empire was forced to compromise with Hungary, creating the dual Monarchy, in which Hungary possessed full internal
autonomy. With this compromise, any serious hopes of structural reform of the Empire was lost. Finally, the defeat of 1918 led to the break-up of the Empire, under the combined pressure of its component peoples. The Treaty of Trianon then denied the rump Austrian territory the right to join Germany, as it would have wished. This was the second exclusion. Austria was forced into existence as a State and that existence was then confirmed in 1943. So the die was essentially cast by 1867, but what was Austria in that year?

Austria was a vast, sprawling, multinational Empire astride the Danube, stretching from the Alps to the approaches to the Black Sea. Her destiny had been sealed: she was a middle European or even Balkan Empire and not a German State, as her earlier history down to the demise of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 might have led her to expect. The State was above all a dynasty – the Habsburgs. The first Habsburg Archduke of the Lower and Upper Austrian Lands was elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1273 and ensured the Germanic character of its inner core by defeating Ottokar II of Bohemia at the gates of Vienna.

It was only after the accession of Maximilian in 1477 that the Habsburg Empire came to take on the familiar form that we recognise. His marriage to Anne of Bohemia and the dynastic arrangements with the Jagellon Kings of Poland led in 1526-27 to the unification, under his successor Ferdinand, of the German Austrian areas, Bohemia, Hungary and the Triune Kingdom of Croatia. In 1521, the Pact of Brussels had split the western, Spanish and the eastern parts of the Empire between two quite separate branches of the family. The separation of the eastern and western branches of the Empire was definitive.

On the abdication of Charles V in 1566, Ferdinand also became Holy Roman Emperor. He set in motion important administrative reforms that gradually began the process of integration of the various disparate lands of the Empire, which process eventually established links going well beyond the dynastic. The Turkish threat, the battle against Protestantism and the economic subsidiarity of the various lands all contributed to this process. Now the Imperial Crown was, despite its formally elective character, a hereditary Habsburg anapage.

Following the decisive battle of the White Mountain against Protestant Bohemia in 1621 and the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War in 1648, Catholic domination of southern Germany was assured.