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WEEKEND

The empire fights back

At the end of World War I, four vast empires were dismantled. Seemingly a positive development, but one that, a century later, seems to have left humanity ill-equipped to cope with contemporary global challenges

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When World War I ended, a hundred years ago this month, inhabitants of continental Europe confronted destruction on a vast scale. Some nine million soldiers and another six million civilians had been killed in a mass slaughter that dragged on for four years. Seven million POWs returned home. But the borders of the countries also changed unrecognizably. Four empires, which had dominated much of the Continent's area, disappeared from the map almost in one fell swoop. The German kaiser, Wilhelm II, fled to Holland by train and devoted his remaining years to wood carving. At the same time, the Austro-Hungarian Empire also collapsed. Emperor Charles I left his country and settled in Switzerland. The last Ottoman sultan remained on the throne until 1922, but his empire disintegrated at the end of the war. Russia's czar, deposed already in 1917, was executed about a year and a half later.

These empires were multinational and multilingual. For those living in the post-imperial era, it's hard to comprehend the shock generated by their sudden disappearance. The Habsburg Empire had existed for almost 500 years, and seemed to be eternal. "In this vast empire everything stood firmly and immovably in its appointed place, and at its head was the aged emperor; and were

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he to die, everyone knew (or believed) another would come to take his place, and nothing would change in the well-regulated order," wrote Stefan Zweig, in "The World of Yesterday."

But that isn't what happened. The map of Europe was redrawn. The Habsburg Empire broke up into a number of nation-states: Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the union of countries that would be called Yugoslavia all declared independence, and after them, Poland, Austria, and Germany also became nation-states, as did Turkey.

For many of the citizens of postwar nation-states, the collapse of the empires was a positive development. The arrogant, corrupt royal houses left the stage of history, to be supplanted by fresh states with flag, anthem and soccer team. European peoples who had fought for independence for more than half a century were at least freed from foreign rule. Self-determination became the definitive principle in international relations. In the areas that had been under the control of the former Ottoman Empire, too, several national movements also began to move toward the goal of independence – among them the Zionist movement.

Yet, was the victory of the nation-states over the empire really such a great achievement for the human spirit? These new entities were soon brawling with one another. But the national minorities who remained imprisoned in hostile nation-states – among them, Greeks in Turkey, Germans in Czechoslovakia – were especially bitter. Not one of the nation-states established after the war in Europe was ethnically homogeneous, and about one-third of their citizens, on average, were members of minority groups. Thus were planted the seeds that led to World War II.

The Jews suffered acutely from the emergence of the nation-states, which effectively sealed their fate in Europe. It wasn't the German character but the nation-states that gave rise to their calamity. Zweig emphasizes the great feeling of security the Jews felt in the multinational Habsburg Empire.

"Having resided for more than two hundred years in the Imperial city [Vienna], the Jews encountered there an easygoing people, inclined to conciliation," he wrote. The Jewish situation in the German and Ottoman Empires before the world wars could be described in similar terms. Only the empires facilitated their diaspora existence, within whose framework the Jews achieved some of the high points in their history.

Between 1918 and 1945, the new nation-states went about getting rid of their minorities. The Greeks were evicted from Turkey, the Germans were expelled from Czechoslovakia and the Jews were annihilated or immigrated to Palestine – whose indigenous Palestinian majority was soon also expelled.

The attempt to create ethnically homogeneous states gave rise to some of the greatest disasters in the last century. The cultural diversity that existed in the imperial metropolises was erased and has never been restored. The national conflicts did not end after World War II. The disintegration of the multinational empires kicked off an endless series of wars, among them those in the Middle East.

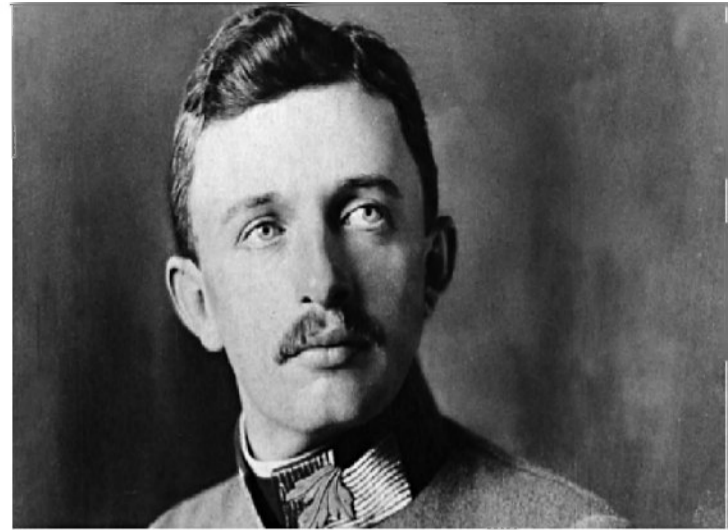
Studies in recent years have underscored more than in the past the positive aspects of the multinational empires, including that of the Ottomans. In his 2017 book, "Jerusalem 1900: The Holy City in the Age of Possibilities," Vincent Lemire depicts the waning days of that empire as a time of prosperity. A fluid urban society existed in Jerusalem, and relative harmony prevailed among its various communities. In contrast to its usual image, the Ottoman Empire wasn't all that backward. In fact, it was the last power that succeeded in ensuring peace and stability in the Middle East.

The empires were monarchies, but in some cases their governments were subject to a constitution. Furthermore, before the Great War, ideas had been put forward about how to preserve the multinational structure while also vesting them with a democratic, even socialist structure. Marxist thinker Otto Bauer, for example, for example, advocated the preservation of the multinational structure of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while ensuring cultural autonomy for its various peoples.

Curse of nationalism

In the present era, we are witnessing renewed outbursts of nationalism in Europe and elsewhere. Poland and Hungary have become the leaders of this trend on the Continent, and a nationalist wave is washing over Austria, too. But it's not only happening in Europe: The nation-state law in Israel is an expression of this outburst too. The curse of nationalism is still with us – although there are alternatives to it. As citizens of nation-states, it is easy for us to imagine history as though the current political structure is the most natural one for the human race. Yet, for most of history humankind has lived in political frameworks other than nation-states, such as coalitions of tribes, city-states, sultanates and above all, empires. At least since ancient Egypt, empires have offered the most stable form of political organization. The nation-state, in contrast, is a new experiment, and it is in large measure turning out to be unsuccessful.

The nation-state is thus raising its head anew today, but behind the nationalist bluster lurks weakness. It's not at all certain that contemporary political whirlwinds will lead to the strengthening of nation-states in the long run. It's very possible that the future lies with multinational empires – which is not all that bad. The creation of almost 200 screeching nation-states has turned out to be a particularly poor way to cope with such global challenges as climate change, population movements and economic gaps. Maybe the empires knew how to do it better.



Charles I of Austria. His kingdom and others in the pre-World War I era were multicultural and multilingual. Getty Images