

Unlucky

In 1914, during the crisis that produced World War I, Austrian Emperor Francis Joseph did not favor a conflict because, he said, he had always been unlucky in war. We might modify that and observe that he was unlucky in life.

Francis Joseph was born on August 18, 1830, son of the heir to the throne Francis Charles. His uncle Ferdinand I was unfit to rule and during the revolutions of 1848 Prince Schwarzenberg secured his resignation, but Francis Charles refused to succeed him. He was forced to turn to the young and inexperienced Francis Joseph, who became Emperor on December 2, 1848. The new Emperor followed Schwarzenberg's advice as ruler, but the Prince died in 1852.

Austrian power declined precipitously under Francis Joseph. In 1855-1856, Austria refused to join the Anglo-French war against Russia, alienating both the allies and the Russians (who had intervened to restore Hungary to Austria in 1849 and wanted the Austrians to be on their side), who never forgave him. In 1859 and 1866 the Austrians lost their possessions in Italy; in 1866 they ceased being dominant in Germany. In 1867, in order to keep Hungary in the Empire, Francis Joseph agreed to the "Compromise" that created Austria-Hungary but that weakened him.



Bismarck (who would unite Germany) favored friendly relations with Austria-Hungary and signed a treaty with it. However, because of strategic considerations, he was primarily concerned with placating the Russians rather than bolstering the Austrians. After Kaiser William II fired Bismarck in 1890, Austro-German relations became closer because the Kaiser did not give as much weight to the Russian connection and because the two emperors had close personal ties. Francis Joseph's lack of independence from Germany contributed to the eventual breakup of the Austrian Empire.

Francis Joseph's bad luck extended to his personal and political life. In 1854, he insisted on marrying a sixteen-year old Bavarian princess, Elizabeth (Sissy), who his mother disliked. Sissy and his mother quarreled and Sissy became more eccentric over the years. The couple had one son, Rudolf, born in 1858, more liberal than his father. The two quarreled constantly and in 1889 the unhappy Rudolf committed suicide with his mistress at Mayerling, outside Vienna. In yet another tragic occurrence, an Anarchist assassinated Sissy in 1898.

These were not the only misfortunes in Francis Joseph's life. He was particularly close to his younger brother Maximilian, who cooperated with the French attempt to take over Mexico by becoming its monarch. The Mexicans revolted and executed him on June 19, 1867 despite his brother's attempt to rescue him. In 1896, his other brother, Charles Ludwig, died on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land when he drank disease-laden water. With the death of his two



brothers, the succession to the throne passed to his nephew Francis Ferdinand.

The new heir did not get along with the old Emperor, not least because he insisted on marrying Sophie Chotek, who did not belong to the restricted aristocratic circle into which Austrian royalty married, and any children were ineligible for the throne. On June 28, 1914 assassins murdered Francis Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, touching off World War I despite the Emperor's feeling that his luck would get worse.

Luckily, Francis Joseph died on November 21, 1916, before his Empire and ancient dynasty ended. Transformed in the decades after his death into an Austrian national hero, Francis Joseph proved luckier in death than in life.