

[Sambaluk on Tunstall, 'The Austro-Hungarian Army and the First World War \(Armies of the Great War\)'](#)

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Graydon A. Tunstall. *The Austro-Hungarian Army and the First World War (Armies of the Great War)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. x + 466 pp. \$69.04 (cloth), [ISBN](#)

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Reviewed by Nicholas Sambaluk (Air University) **Published on** H-War (November, 2022)
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Although all too often overlooked, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its armed forces stand at the epicenter of World War I from the start of the conflict to major events transforming the outcome of the war. In some sense, the highly documented and monumental carnage of the European western front long helped push other aspects of the war seemingly to the periphery. Austro-Hungarian military calamities in 1914 also dealt the empire essentially mortal blows that have encouraged the impression of Germany being “shackled to a corpse” and periodically having to rescue it from ultimate disaster.

Graydon Tunstall’s study of the Austro-Hungarian army helps show that the popular thumbnail overview took hold because it reflected certain key truths. General Conrad von Hotzendorf, the energetic exponent of preventive war and the tireless planner of ill-conceived offensive campaigns, underestimated enemy armies and technology while remaining inexplicably ignorant of the character and capabilities of his own forces. Conrad (and other key leaders) placed the empire in a horrifically bad position almost immediately from the outset of the conflict. Furthermore, Conrad’s chronic inability to coordinate with counterparts maximized certain problems by ensuring that the Central Powers’ eastern front would boil over for two years without effective coordination. A penchant for blaming others, particularly the frontline troops of non-German and non-Magyar ethnicity, as an expedient to avoid culpability for high command failings helped aggravate intra-imperial ethnic strife that would not in fact fully metastasize until the final months of the war.

The book, one of nine volumes in Cambridge University Press’s formidable series on the various major national and imperial armies of World War I, ably describes the rather ponderous makeup of the Dual Monarchy’s military forces. In 1914, the Austrian empire and the Hungarian kingdom possessed an imperial army, as well as respective entities that had been conceptually fitted as second-line elements that had for political reasons been practically elevated to parity with the main army, and also a complex set of reserve force structures. Many characterizations of the empire’s armed forces struggle to capture the army’s byzantine structure, but here Tunstall offers a coherent picture of a complicated subject.

Tunstall’s study benefits from extensive and appropriate German-language research and a career

largely devoted to the subject of the empire; his preceding books examined the World War I fighting for the fortress town of Przemyśl, Austro-Hungary's war on the Carpathian front against tsarist Russia, and imperial strategy in relation to Germany, Russia, and Serbia for the half-century between German consolidation and the outbreak of World War I.

This book is at its best during the overviews at the outset of each chapter, in which the empire's many intersecting strategic challenges are characterized and some of the chapter's key events are given preliminary description. An inescapable challenge in describing the Austro-Hungarian Empire's strategic difficulties is the pattern of mutual impacts and interrelationships borne on three fronts against up to six enemy powers. Austro-Hungarian troops faced many enemies: Italy on the Italian front; Serbia on the Balkan front, later reconstituted as a Franco-British-Serb force pushing back from Salonika; and also Russia and sometimes Romania on the eastern front. From the beginning of the war, with the botched deployments of the empire's Second Army diverted between the eastern and Serb fronts, competing demands strained Austro-Hungarian logistics, resources, and strategic perspectives.

Unfortunately, these multifaceted and competing factors can be difficult to describe and explain in a detailed yet coherent narrative form. The empire's war history is unavoidably difficult to earnestly encapsulate. Beyond the establishment of the book's ten main chapters, no further subdivision of the text is contemplated, and this was a mistake in the book's organization. Perhaps subdivisions were spurned in hopes of preserving a fluid narrative that could seamlessly address myriad issues, but if this was the intention the end result fell short of its aim. The reader will repeatedly encounter allusions to factors that are out of chronological order, often because they relate to (or are impinged upon by) one or another factor from another fighting front. Sadly this approach, and in the absence of subdivisions within chapters, whipsaws the reader. Although it demonstrates that the empire could never truly focus attention on a single critical problem, it does so at the expense of providing the reader with an orderly sense of events. Readers are cautioned against picking up *The Austro-Hungarian Army and the First World War* unless they have already done at least a moderate degree of reading about the respective Italian, Balkan, and eastern fronts. Having done so helps alleviate reader confusion, but it narrows the book's applicability to classroom settings and also the advantage of possessing a single-volume study of the Dual Monarchy's armed forces.

Other topics of complaint are more quibbling but cumulative. These include a tendency to characterize imperial strengths and losses in some detail while providing little about enemy losses (and therefore undercutting the basis for meaningful comparison). Occasionally the chronological zigzagging appears to occur for discursive purposes. The book frequently refers to "Allied" activities, and the reader should remember that Tunstall as a scholar of the Austro-Hungarian Empire refers to *Austro-Hungarian* allies—especially Germany—not to the World War I Entente powers that many authors often (if somewhat imprecisely) refer to as "the Allies." These are the kinds of limitations that prevent the book from fitting smoothly into an advanced undergraduate setting.

In summary, Graydon Tunstall's *The Austro-Hungarian Army* does offer an army-oriented single-volume examination of the empire's military fortune during the conflict, and its contribution in that respect bears attention by those curious about much of the European combat that occurred beyond the gory imbroglio from the Swiss border to the English Channel.

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