

BOOK REVIEWS

**Martyn Rady, *Habsburgii. Ambiția de a stăpâni lumea*
[The Habsburgs. The ambition to rule the world], transl.
Lia Decei (București: Corint, 2023), 592 pages**

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A fundamental question for any new work is: what does it truly add to the existing historiography? This question may have been the starting point for Martyn Rady in his project, which resulted in the work titled *The Habsburgs. To Rule the World*, published in 2020. It was translated into in Romanian under the title *Habsburgii. Ambiția de a stăpâni lumea*,¹ published in 2023. The history of the Habsburgs has been the subject of substantial monographs in terms of both volume and quality; to name but a few: R.J.W. Evans, A.J.P. Taylor, Jean Berenger, Charles. W. Ingrao, Jean des Cars, or the synthesis of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Accordingly, at first glance, considering the qualitative and quantitative consistency of earlier scholarship, Martyn Rady's work could appear redundant within Habsburg historiography.

Concerning the author, it is crucial to note that Martyn Rady is a renowned medievalist and specialist in Slavic studies. Professor Emeritus at University College London, Rady has devoted his research to Central and Eastern Europe, focusing on areas such as Poland, Hungary, and Transylvania.

1 The original version: Martyn Rady, *The Habsburgs. To Rule the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 416 pages.

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Owing to his extensive studies and research dedicated to the history of Transylvania, this region remained a recurring theme throughout his work. It was rare for the Romanian space to be mentioned so frequently and integrated to such an extent in a work of Western historiography. Thus, his familiarity with Central and Eastern Europe gave him greater insight into the political, cultural, and economic influence and hegemony of the Habsburgs.

Through this work, Rady undertakes an ambitious and remarkable project. Although the history of the Habsburgs has been extensively studied, the author aims to present it from an atypical perspective. Rady's engaging writing style makes the book a pleasure to read, despite the substantial amount of information. Divided into 29 chapters, the work covers the entire history of the *House of Habsburg*, from its founding to its demise at the end of World War I. In addition to its narrative style, the work demonstrates consistent academic rigour, making it both an essential academic resource for those new to the history of the House of Habsburg and an easy read for history enthusiasts.

The author offers an innovative perspective on Habsburg history by attempting to reconstruct a general history of the dynasty based on several *micro-histories* covering various subjects and themes. These micro-histories revolve around certain key figures from the history of the Habsburgs. Therefore, the reader is guided through a work that addresses a cultural, social, economic and, last but not least, political history. For the author, the history of the Habsburgs is not limited to political and military developments alone.

Martyn Rady's work stands out for its method of analysis. The history of the Habsburgs is presented through the relationships between *the centre* and *the periphery*. This method is innovative, as seen in studies such as those by Peter Burke.² As a matter of fact, this kind of approach is necessary for the history of a dynasty that ruled a state in continuous expansion. In this regard, Martyn Rady's work integrates the history of the Romanian space and of Transylvania. This mention must also be linked to the author's scholarly background, as his research demonstrates a deep familiarity with the historical realities of this political and geographical area. For example, in his work, the author attaches considerable importance to the city of Cluj, which is present both in the history of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation.

² See Peter Burke, *Renașterea europeană. Centre și periferii*, transl. Alina Radu (Iași: Polirom, 2005).

The author notes how the two religious movements influenced the history of the city through two examples: St. Michael's Church and the Jesuit/Piarist Church. Furthermore, the history of Transylvania is present in Rady's work through the adventures of the Rákóczi princes, through the Enlightenment and the Uprising of 1784, and through the Revolution of 1848 and the political competitiveness of the peoples of the empire. Nonetheless, the Romanians' history remains secondary to that of the Hungarians and the achievements of Lajos Kossuth. In the modern era, the author does not hesitate to present the position of Romanian diplomacy in relation to the Dual Monarchy, through the activities and decisions of Ion I.C. Brătianu. The inclusion of the Romanian lands in a work dedicated to world history is most welcome.

Additionally, this work manages to underscore Habsburg genealogies and marriage policies. In this regard, Rady starts from the famous saying *Bella gerant alii, felix Austria tu nube*. Thus, the author starts from the medieval origins of the Habsburg dynasty and highlights how, through marriage alliances and the development of legitimizing ideologies and narratives, a simple family from Switzerland rose to dominate an entire segment of European and global history. Moreover, the author also takes certain legal aspects into account. Starting from the first Habsburg division in the 16th century, between Ferdinand and Charles V, and continuing until the issuance of the *Pragmatic Sanction* by Charles VII, Rady notes the Habsburgs' legal focus on shaping policies that would ensure their domination. These measures played an important role in shaping later legacies and political projects. For example, the Pragmatic Sanction is for Rady the act that not only facilitated Maria Theresa's rise, but also prepared a legal basis for the establishment of the *Ausgleich* of 1867, through the efforts of Empress Elisabeth (Sissi) among the Hungarian elite and society.

Within this context, Martyn Rady's work is notable for its approach to the major figures in the history of the House of Habsburg. The author presents the history of the Habsburgs through the biographies of various historical figures (emperors, empresses, generals, military leaders, diplomats, bankers, clergymen) and offers a nuanced portrait of them. These figures are portrayed not only through the prism of their successes but also through their personal failures (the case of Don Juan of Austria, for instance). Moreover, the idealization of such figures disappears with the revelation of details from

their private lives, such as the health issues or promiscuity of many rulers. In this regard, Rady shows particular skill in his portrayal of the private lives of Francis Joseph and Empress Elisabeth (Sissi). Through these biographies, Rady attempts to present the lives and histories of often idealized historical figures from a more nuanced and objective perspective. This phenomenon is specific to contemporary historiography.

At the same time, a defining aspect of the work is the focus on the role of women. Rady challenges the stereotypical image of a strictly patriarchal history by adding nuances to the ways in which women played an essential role in the Habsburg dynasty. Their authority stemmed precisely from their dynastic origins. The author starts with marriage policies and observes how they facilitated the Habsburgs' seizure of political and territorial authority. Furthermore, power could also be held by women in the Habsburg dynasty (Isabella of Parma, Maria Theresa). The author also mentions the more atypical cases (Marie Antoinette), integrating them into a somewhat broader discussion around women's means of asserting themselves in politics. Concurrently, the author nuances the cultural and administrative contribution of Habsburg women, who played an important role in strengthening the bureaucratic system, as well as certain institutions and cultural activities. Their charisma and charm often ended up saving the dynasty, as was the case with the myth of Empress Sissi in Hungarian society.

The author manages to provide a very good and engaging overview on the history of the Habsburgs, analysing it from its medieval beginnings to the contemporary era. Such a vast history is depicted in an accessible manner, which makes the work interesting not only for professional historians, but also for history enthusiasts. The author's interest in the Romanian space is also commendable. References to Romanian history effectively integrate local and regional history into a broader historical approach, while paying close attention to *centre-periphery* relations.