Apple of Discord

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This is the author’s first book-length study of the role that Hungarian statesmen played in determining Habsburg policy toward Serbia. He anticipates producing a second volume that will take the story to the bloody palace revolution of 1903, and, perhaps, a third that would conclude with the outbreak of World War I.

This first installment is certainly timely, appearing as it has on the hundredth anniversary of that epochal event. At this very moment historians and journalists across the Atlantic community are busily commemorating the centenary of the “Great” War. One theme that will surface repeatedly both in print and in conference presentations will be the causes of the conflict that consumed so many lives, institutions, and whole societies during the course of the twentieth century. Experts and pundits alike will invoke the names of the ill-fated Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his assassin, Gavrilo Princip. Some will pontificate about the respective roles of Serbian intelligence, Germany’s “Blank Check,” the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum, and the Schlieffen Plan. A few will dig deeper by examining the statesmen and diplomacy that created the two rival alliance systems that seemed predestined to resolve their differences on the battlefield.

This volume gives due attention to the circumstances, events and personalities that produced the secret Austro-Serbian alliance of 1881. Although the few Habsburg officials in the know in both Vienna and Budapest hailed it as a diplomatic triumph, the treaty had succeeded all too well for the Dual Monarchy’s long-term interest. Moreover, there was a subplot to the story: namely, the agendas of Hungarian statesmen like Gyula Andrássy and Benjamin Kállay. Over the centuries, Habsburg statesmen had advanced the monarchy’s remarkable career by assembling coalitions that had been activated by its partners’ appreciation of a common interest and sanguine anticipation of mutual benefit. Time and again, monarchs and diplomats from Maximilian to Metternich had forged alliances through judicious moderation and mutual accommodation. They did so not out of some inbred timidity or empathy, but because the monarchy’s finite resources and vulnerable frontiers demanded an abiding sensitivity to core interests of
constituencies both within and beyond its frontiers. The circumstances surround-
ing the treaty of 28 June 1881 were different. The Habsburg negotiators could
afford to play from a position of unusual strength vis-à-vis Serbian Prince Milan.
In imposing their will they demonstrated that they were no different than other
hegemons when conditions gave them a free hand.

With the benefit of hindsight, historians can pass judgment on those victors
who, in retrospect, should have been more careful what they wish for. The refrain
applies to Austria-Hungary in 1881, much as it would to Serbia and so many of
its victorious allies in 1918.

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