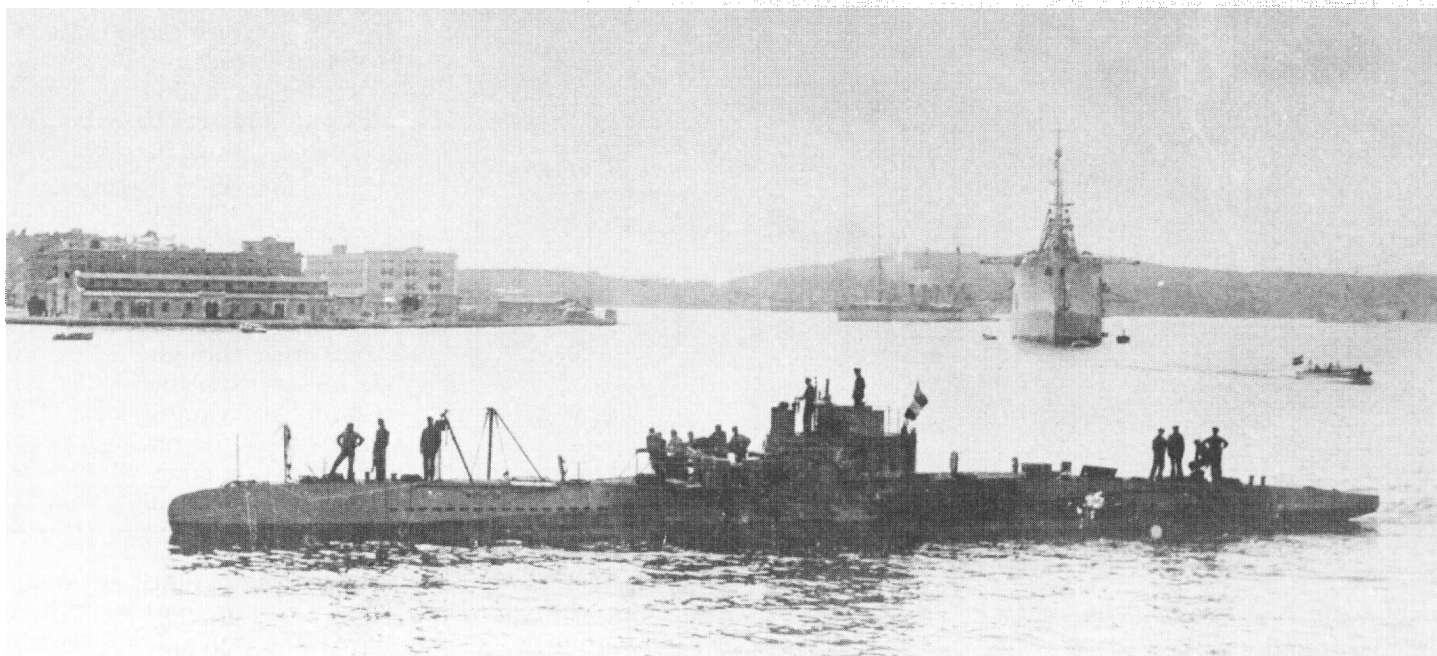


FRANZ JOSEF'S FORGOTTEN U-BOAT CAPTAINS



A present from our cousins: a VC-15 – one of the German-built minelaying class U-boats shipped for use by the Imperial Austro-Hungarian navy to Pola on the Croatian coast.

The Austro-Hungarian navy – a curious concept for an empire whose centre was landlocked – but **John Harbron** argues that its U-boats at least, manned by multi-national crews, not only worked, but worked well.

The fifty U-boat captains of the Imperial and Royal Navy of Austria-Hungary from the creation of its submarine corps in 1909 to the fleet's dissolution in 1918 are long forgotten, as is the imperial navy in which they served, defending the multi-ethnic Habsburg empire.

Yet, in the 1,000th anniversary year of the founding of Austria, they deserve to be remembered. Their skill at sea made them among the most successful U-boat skippers of the First World War. And in our own era of unremitting racial genocide in the former Yugoslavia, we admire

them for their success as commanders of U-boats whose officers and men came from the many nationalities of the Austro-Hungarian empire, yet remained loyal to navy and state until their final collapse in October 1918.

'The warship of Austria-Hungary was a floating mechanism of the monarchy as a whole with most nationalities represented in a single crew', writes Lawrence Sondhaus, a US specialist on Austro-Hungarian seapower. Hence, a U-boat captain of, say, Hungarian (Magyar), Czech or German (Austrian) origin would com-

mand a crew composed mainly of Croats, all citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. By 1914, most officers in the *Kaiserliche und Königliche Kriegsmarine* (Imperial and Royal Navy) of the Dual Monarchy – the world's sixth largest fleet of dreadnought battleships, cruisers, destroyers and submarines – spoke at least three languages.

These included the officer's own native language – for example, Italian, Czech, Magyar or Polish – plus German, the official language of the navy, and Croat, the working language of the ships' crew. Almost half the U-boat captains were of Austro-German or Slavic origin – the latter meaning Czech, Croat, Polish and Bosnian. The remainder were Magyar and Italian.

By 1914, thirty per cent of the navy's crews, from the giant dreadnought battleships to the lowly submarines came from the maritime province of Croatia, whose long Adriatic Sea coastline contained most of the empire's major naval bases and



Austro-Hungarian battleship *Arpad* in Pola 'off-duty' while in port for a refit c. 1904. The informality of the crew 'at ease' and disorganisation of foredeck gear does not reflect any lack of morale or ability; élan and shiphandling/seagoing skills were high, despite the complexities of manning by multi-national, multi-lingual crews. The same mix of nationalities was seen at the command level as well, as the chart opposite indicates.

Nationalities of Austro-Hungarian Naval Officers and Seamen in 1910

	Officers	Seamen (Lower Deck)
	%	%
German (Austrian)	51.0	24.5
Magyars (Hungarians)	12.9	12.6
Czechs	9.2	7.1
Poles	2.8	1.0
Slovaks	N/A	2.4
Croatian	9.8	29.8
Romanians	0.3	0.4
Italians	9.8	18.3
Ruthenes	N/A	0.3
Slovenes	4.2	3.6

Source: *Militärstatistisches Jahrbuch*, 1911, Wien (Military Statistics Yearbook). The 1910 nationalities statistics of the empire were the last published before the outbreak of war in June, 1914.

Austro-Hungarian Navy U-Boat Commanding Officers by Nationalities

German (Austrian)		21
(Slavic together)		
Polish	4	} 21
Croat	6	
Bosnian	1	
Czech	9	
Slovak	1	
Magyar		7
Italian		1
Total number of U-Boat Cos		50

Source: *Die Unterseeboote Österreich-Ungarns 2. Band*, Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz, 1981, ps 474-482

commercial and fishing ports. The debilitating consumer and equipment shortages that plagued an empire *in extremis* near the war's end, and not racial strife, caused the only wartime naval mutiny at Cattaro in February, 1918.

It is difficult to say which was the major achievement of the Austro-Hungarian submarine commanders: their considerable skill as ship handlers when submarines were in their infancy, or as skippers who successfully commanded multi-ethnic crews in a part of Europe where racial hatreds have remained explosive.

In wartime, the ship handler role comes first. In the Adriatic and Mediterranean seas, Austro-Hungarian submarines, bolstered by the arrival of about thirty U-boats from Germany, actively participated in the German programme of unrestricted submarine warfare to sink any ship without warning after February 1st, 1917. By early 1918, Austro-Hungarian and Imperial German submarines were operating from their own separate Adriatic Sea commands at Cattaro (although the German vessels were assigned Austro-Hungarian U-boat numbers, they remained part of the German navy and so operated from German bases).

The Austro-Hungarian Navy's small, unwieldy and often unsafe submarines – all of which were less than

600 tons displacement – were built in the empire's domestic shipyards or transported overland by rail in pre-fabricated sections from German shipyards for re-assembly at Pola.

Compared with the many submarines of its German ally, the number of submarines in the Habsburg navy was always small, beginning with a meagre six in July 1914 and reaching a total of only twenty-seven by the end of the war. Yet, proportionately, the Dual Monarchy's submarines sank as much shipping as any one of the much larger wartime submarine fleets of Germany, Britain, France and, after April 1917, of the United States.

Between 1915 and 1918, sinkings included two heavy cruisers, one French and the other Italian, five destroyers and one Royal Italian Navy sub in addition to the 108 merchant ships sunk or captured in the Adriatic.

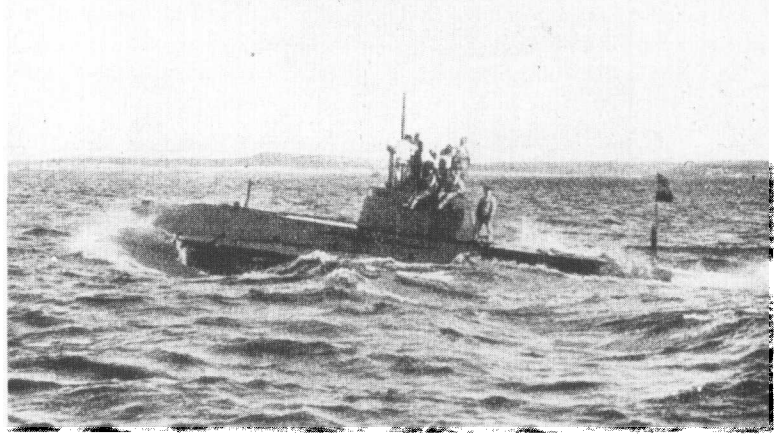
Although the overall 196,102 tons of displacement of all ships sunk by the navy equalled the tonnage of a single late twentieth-century supertanker, coastal shipping in the Adriatic at the start of the twentieth century was primarily made up of steam and sail cargo vessels of small tonnages. Sinking a large number of them largely disrupted sea trade in the Adriatic.

Linienschiffsleutnant (Lieutenant

Commander) Georg Ritter von Trapp, who later was the founder and literally the father of the Trapp Family Singers, achieved earlier fame as Austria-Hungary's leading U-boat ace. In *U-5* (his first command), a tiny dangerous submersible, he torpedoed and sank the 12,500 ton French heavy cruiser *Léon Gambetta*, with a loss of 680 of its crew, and later sank the Italian troop transport ship *Principe Umberto*, drowning 2,000 soldiers. In *U-14*, his second command captured from the French in 1915 to become the largest sub in the navy, von Trapp torpedoed the 11,480 ton Italian transporter *Milazzo* – the largest enemy merchant ship sunk by his navy during the war.

Similar to the U-boat captains and their crews, many senior officers in overall command of the fleet came from the empire's many nationalities. In mid-1917, *Linienschiffsleutnant* Johann Kršnjavi, the Czech skipper of the new *U-40* and *Marinekommandant* Vice Admiral Maximilian Njegovan, the navy's penultimate chief and a Croat who spoke five languages, jointly thanked the German-speaking executives of the *Österreichischen Flottenverein* (The Imperial Austrian Navy League) based in Vienna for the 2.2 million kronen it raised to help pay for *U-40*'s construction.

Rear Admiral Miklós Horthy de



The sound of torpedoes:
(left) George Ritter von Trapp, Austria-Hungary's leading U-boat 'ace' during the First World War.

With his first command vessel, the U-5 (see above in a peacetime shot moving at surface speed) and later the U-14, he took a heavy toll of French and Italian troops and tonnage.

Nagybánya, the navy's last chief, was a Hungarian who not only survived his navy's complete demise but ruled as Regent of Hungary for almost a quarter of a century between 1920 and 1944. On state occasions, a nostalgic Horthy often wore his imperial uniform in a post-war Hungary made into a land-locked nation without a navy after its pre-war Croatian sea-girt province was ceded to the new Yugoslav state.

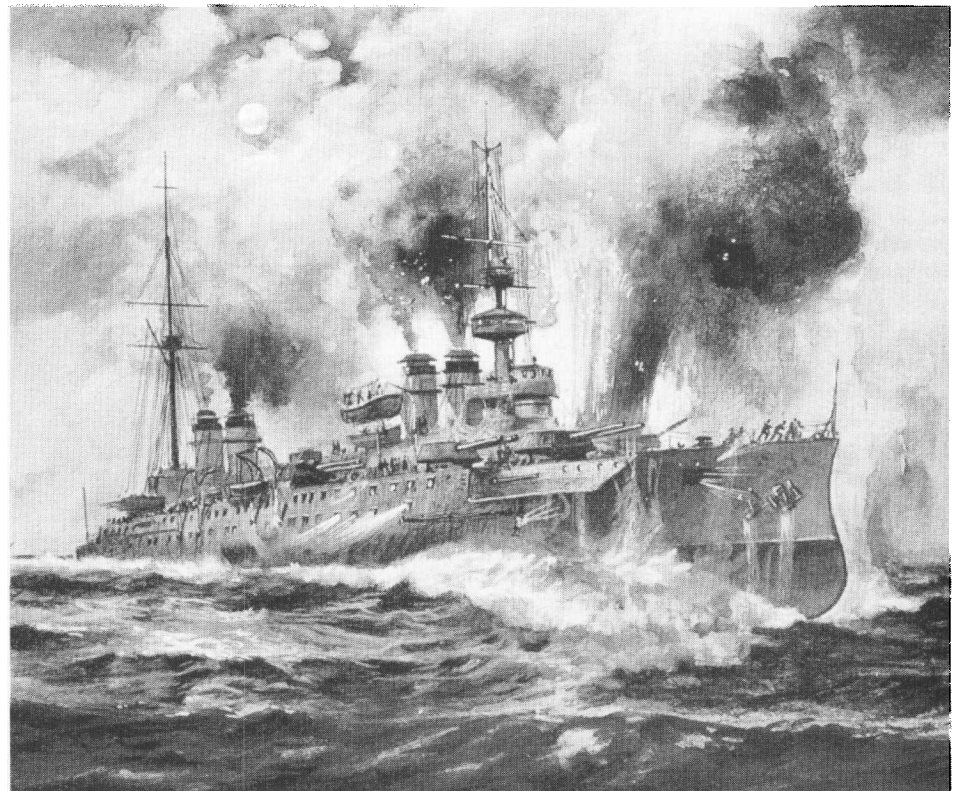
Although almost a quarter of the fifty U-boat captains were Austro-Germans, they came from across the empire where their fathers served in the imperial army, navy or civilian government. Lt. Cdr. Edgar Wolff, who commanded both *U-4* and *U-42* and later the U-boat training school, was born in Fiume, where his father was in the imperial bureaucracy. Lt. Cdr. Hermann Rigele, who commanded four submarines – *U-10*, *U-17*, *U-20* and *U-30* – was born in Sarajevo where his father was a major in the Austrian Army garrison. Rigele, von Trapp and Lt. Cdr. Rudolph Dingule born in Brün in Bohemia, were the only three U-boat officers decorated Knights of the Military Order of Maria Teresa. It was the Habsburg

equivalent to the more familiar German Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords awarded to only six U-boat captains during the Second World War.

Where the Austro-Hungarian navy's surface ships and their crews remained inactive and largely in port after 1916, the more active U-boat

officers and crews suffered higher casualties and were awarded more decorations. Of the 160 naval officers lost during the war, fourteen were submariners with five of them sub commanders. Rigele, who was one of the last surviving veterans of the imperial navy, died in 1982 at age 101.

In October 1917, *Korvetten Kapitän* (Commander) Francišek Sokol, who was in charge of the submarine construction unit of the Marine Arsenal at Pola, prepared a staff duty list that reveals the same multinational make-up of personnel in the navy's shore establishments. Sokol's name as a Czech-born machine construction engineer from Pilsen, who joined the navy in 1902, is followed by those of his technicians – for example, Voaječk (Czech), Freund



Charles J. de Lacy's depiction of the last moments of the French cruiser *Leon Gambetta*, torpedoed by von Trapp with the loss of 680 crew.

Jakubicaka (Croat), Hajós (Magyar) and Hevera (Polish).

As a mechanical engineering graduate of the Technical University in

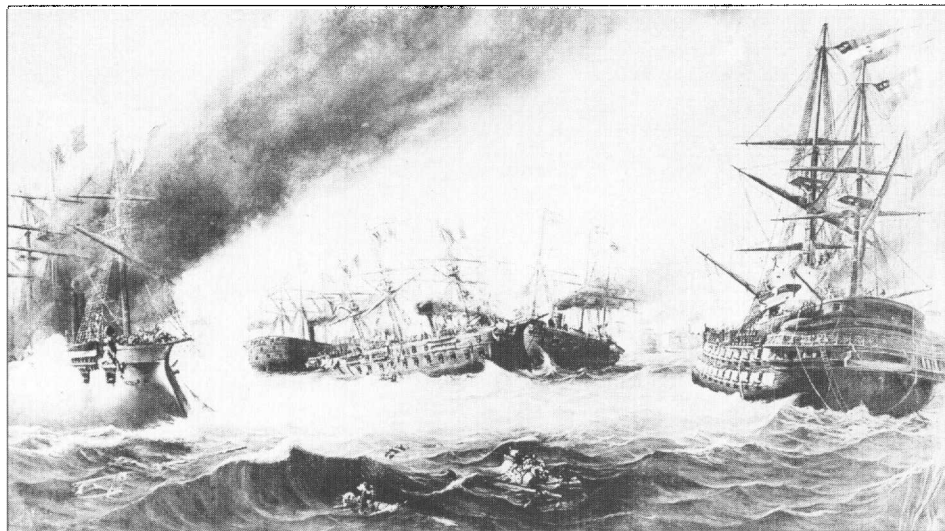
Prague, in his case as a colonel. During the 1920s and 1930s, Sokol's distinguished post-war career included director-general of the heavy machinery division of the world-famous Skoda Works and vice-president of the Czechoslovak-Moravian Steel Works in Trineč. He died in his native Pilsen in 1963, aged eighty-four, where he was one of the founders of the Rotary Club in his Communist-dominated homeland.

Army, in his case as a colonel.

Von Trapp's immediate source of post-war income – before the Trapp Family Singers became rich and world famous – was a dramatic irony. Because the Dalmatian port of Zara, his birthplace, was made an enclave of Italy in 1919, he became an Italian citizen and accepted a government pension. Thus, von Trapp received his post-war pension from the country whose navy was his chief wartime enemy at sea in the Adriatic.

Von Trapp died at Stowe, Vermont, in 1947 where his family built the Trapp Family Lodge as an élite New

A contemporary depiction of the battle of Lissa in 1866: the crushing defeat of the Italian navy by the Habsburg commander Wilhelm van Tegetthoff, despite the latter's technological inferiority, gave a sense of self-confidence to the Austro-Hungarian navy, bolstered as it subsequently modernised itself.



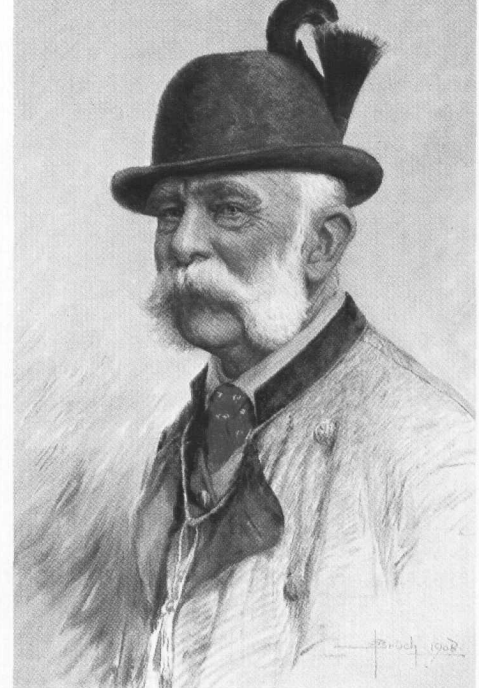
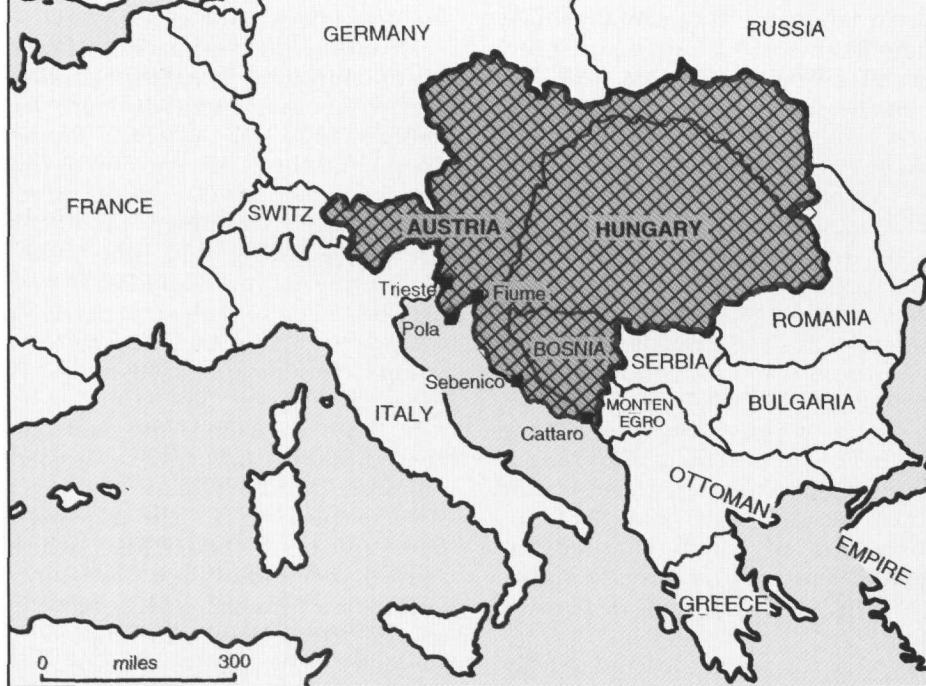
Prague, where his thesis was on the construction of ships' main engines, Sokol was a senior naval engineering officer whose maritime service involved both the construction and the overhaul and maintenance of its submarines. His personal papers also include his memo at Pola of May 29th, 1915, proposing basic underwater sounding devices for the entrance to Pola after shore batteries sank the French submarine *Curie* as it attempted to penetrate the harbour. The *Curie* was refloated and converted as the Austro-Hungarian *U-14*. In 1919, *U-14*, which survived the war, was renamed *Curie* and returned to the French navy.

Cdr. Sokol's papers also outline his important function in 1915 as his navy's liaison officer with the Germania Werft shipyard at Kiel for the rail shipment of the prefabricated sections of the German-built *U-10* and *U-11* to Pola where the two subs were completed.

Austro-Hungarian naval officers in the submarine service of the calibre of Ritter von Trapp as a seagoing submarine skipper, and Sokol as a shore-based submarine construction specialist, did well after the war, despite the disappearance of their navy. In fact, the same magnanimity between the empire's nationalities that marked the old navy, took on new post-war forms after 1919, when most of the successor nations agreed to pay the pensions of surviving personnel of the vanished Austro-Hungarian navy

Commander František Sokol – seen here in naval dress uniform – was one of the key figures in the Austro-Hungarian navy during the First World War. His engineering and naval skills were put to good use in liaison with the Imperial German navy between 1915-17 as U-boats were handed over from the German base in Kiel. He was also instrumental, by virtue of his position at Pola, in keeping the U-boat patrols of the Habsburg navy seaworthy right up until the end of the war. A Czech by birth, Sokol played an active part in the formation of the new Republic after 1918, still receiving a pension from the new Czechoslovakia in recognition of his Austro-Hungarian service.





The Austro-Hungarian empire on the eve of war, June 1914. Personal loyalty of naval crews and officers to the icon of Habsburg unity, the Emperor Franz Josef (right), and the recognition of their services by the empire – as underlined on this pre-war imperial stamp showing a battleship – did much to neutralise potential dissent and inter-racial tensions.



England ski resort. He did not live to see the delightful but mainly inaccurate Hollywood-concocted story of his family's life and singing career in *The Sound of Music* in 1965. It remains the biggest money-making film musical ever made. Paradoxically, the once-dominant Austro-German naval personnel who returned to Austria did not fare so well with their naval pensions – in the early 1920s the Austrian republic was always close to bankruptcy.

Several strong reasons account for the ethnic peace in the Imperial and Royal Navy. The first was the natural camaraderie and personal loyalties that are shared by naval personnel everywhere who have volunteered to serve at sea, especially in the small submarines of the early twentieth century. When racial tension did exist in such cramped and unreliable boats, it quickly disappeared when a sub was under attack, or more often, when she was just under way. Second, fleet loyalty of both officers and crews was synonymous with their loyalty to the long-lived and venerable Habsburg Emperor Franz Josef I, who ruled for sixty-eight years until his death in 1916. In the iconoclastic late twentieth century, this kind of dynastic attachment is most difficult to comprehend. Yet in 1914, young men in naval uniform willingly took the *Kaisertreu*, or imperial oath of allegiance to an eighty-four-year-old remote emperor, even though he offi-

cially visited his navy only once during one of the longest reigns in European history.

Little understood by the general public of the largely land-based Habsburg empire for whom the navy was a distant entity, was the strong élan permanently generated in the fleet by its overwhelming mid-nineteenth century victory in the sea battle of Lissa near the Dalmatian coast in July 1866.

At Lissa, the bold tactics of Vice Admiral Wilhelm von Tegetthoff in command of a weaker Austrian navy of older wooden warships, defeated and scattered the more powerful and over-confident Italian navy equipped with some of the first ironclads. Where Nelson's overwhelming victory at Trafalgar in 1805 inspired successive generations of British naval officers, so Tegetthoff's sweeping victory at Lissa did the same for Austro-Hungarian naval officers down the years until the end came in October 1918. In one of history's ironic twists, during the First World War, as in 1866, the Habsburg empire's chief enemy at sea was the Italian navy.

The navy was also proud of the development of new naval technologies that began in the era of the Battle of Lissa, chiefly the Austrian invention in 1864 of the modern torpedo which, in the twentieth century would become the paramount submarine weapon. The inventor, *Fregatten Kapitän* (Captain) Johannes Luppis of the Imperial Austrian Navy (its

name changed the next year to The Imperial and Royal Navy after the formation of the Dual Monarchy), was fortunate to find an early manufacturer for it. He was Robert Whitehead, the late nineteenth-century British weapons entrepreneur who founded the Stabilimento Tecnico Triestino, which later became the leading shipyard in the empire.

Whitehead not only perfected and produced the Luppis torpedo, but when international demand mounted, sold it under licence as the Whitehead torpedo to world fleets including the Royal Navy. The Habsburg navy had torpedoes in 1868, the Royal Navy in 1871, and the navy of the new German Empire in 1873. In the mid-1880s Ludwig Obry, a technical officer in the fleet, invented the gyroscope which made the torpedo more accurate.

As an aside, Georg Ritter von Trapp's first wife, Agathe von Whitehead, was the torpedo millionaire's granddaughter. Even beneath Vienna's upper strata of archdukes and archduchesses and their carefully selected spouses, the social world of Franz Josef's sprawling imperial her-

For many of her submarines, however, Austria initially relied on the turn-of-the-century submarine technology of US inventors Simon Lake and John Philip Holland for its first submarines and, later, on the superior U-boats from Imperial Germany's shipyards. During the First World War, the morale of Austria-Hungary's U-boat officers and crews was also sustained by the knowledge that as the state-of-the-art of building submarines improved, the fleet's senior officers in Vienna were planning to build or buy new boats.

All of these developments – service in the most modern boats of the day and the later experience of wartime patrols – inevitably built up shiphandling and seagoing skills among Austro-Hungarian submariners. As in all other European navies, such activities increased the sense of élan. For a select few Habsburg U-boat officers who were very young when the First World War ended, the Second World War offered still further opportunities to practise their skills. Lieut. Cdr. Paul Meixner, a graduate of the naval academy class of 1910, taken prisoner by the Italian navy after the *U-16* was sunk in 1916, during the Second World War rose to the rank of rear admiral in the *Kriegsmarine* (German Navy). He was in charge of the vital trans-Mediterranean supply routes to Field Marshal Erwin von Rommel's Afrika Korps in North Africa.

Lt. Cdr. Leo Wolfbauer, a graduate of the last pre-war naval academy class in 1913, was the only Austro-Hungarian naval officer of the First World War to become a submarine commander in the next World War. When his command, *U-463*, an ocean oil-supply submarine of the German navy, was caught and sunk off the Scilly Isles by RAF bombers on May

garian submarine commanders finally came to an end – a long quarter-century after their fleet disappeared.

Finally, unlike the Imperial German Navy which tried to emulate the brutal Prussian code that dominated the Imperial German Army and barred Jews from the German officer corps, the Habsburg's fleet always remained open to the empire's many other nationalities in addition to the dominant Austro-Germans.

Anti-semitism did indeed exist throughout the Habsburg empire, yet Siegfried Popper, the chief naval architect who designed all of Austro-Hungary's sixteen battleships laid down between 1895 and 1911, the possession of which elevated the Dual Monarchy to seapower status, was a Jew with the rank of rear admiral.

Despite the calamitous and quickly-moving events that led to defeat in October 1918, and unlike the fleet's surface ships where a general mutiny of battleships' crews was expected as had broken out in the Imperial German Navy, the tiny but devoted submarine service held fast and remained loyal to the doomed Karl I, the last Habsburg emperor.

In fact, Lieutenant Franz Rzemensky von Trauteneck, the wartime commander of five U-boats and, at the end, captain of *U-28* in Pola harbour on October 29th, 1918, was approached by one of the senior fleet commanders about using the U-boats to torpedo any mutinous surface warship seized by the hastily-formed but mainly passive sailors' revolutionary councils.

However, open mutiny did not split the navy. Rear-Admiral Horthy, the last fleet commander-in-chief, agreed to a quick armistice for the navy and one of Karl's last imperial

put down fleet mutinies was obeyed. Meantime, the war patrols of most Austro-Hungarian submarines continued to the very end. Indeed, the famous *U-14* (the former French *Curie*) and the *U-29* returned to Cattaro from their last war patrols on the morning of November 1st, 1918, without knowing that, only hours before, the Imperial and Royal Navy fleet had been formally transferred to the newly-created Yugoslav national council and disappeared from history.

In both nostalgia and fact, the achievements of the vanished empire's U-boat captains had given special meaning to the Habsburg family motto of Franz Josef whom they served, and of their fleet's once great dreadnought which bore its name: *Viribus Unitis* (Through Effort United).

FOR FURTHER READING:

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The end: the surrendered Austrian fleet in harbour at Cattaro, November 1918.

