

EMPEROR CHARLES I AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE INSTITUTION OF DECORATIONS IN THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN MONARCHY

The Emperor and King of Austria-Hungary Franz Joseph I died on 21 November 1916 at the age of 86, in the 68th year of his reign. Since he had no immediate heirs, his grand-nephew Charles I of Austria and Charles IV of Hungary-Croatia inherited the throne. The twenty-nine year old emperor was crowned on 30 December 1916. His rule lasted until the end of WWI, that is, until the disintegration of Austria-Hungary on 31 October 1918.

Just over one hundred years have passed since the beginning of Charles I's reign, which is an opportunity to look at his contribution to the institution of decorations in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. As Emperor and King of Austria-Hungary, Charles I(IV) took sovereignty over all existing state decorations. The high decorations – orders – had already been founded by his predecessors: Order of the Golden Fleece (1430), Order of Leopold (1808), Order of the Iron Crown (1816), Order of Franz Joseph (1849) and Order of Elisabeth (1898). Lower-class decorations – crosses and medals – had also already been founded in large numbers and Charles I did not have much space for innovation.

He had only just ascended the throne and did not have the chance to gain the reputation of his long-lived predecessor Franz Joseph I. The country was oppressed by living under war circumstances; people had to save whatever they could and there was a lot they had to go without. Still, Charles I did introduce some novelties that should be recorded.

The Hungarian Knightly Order of the Golden Spur (*Ungarischer Ritterorden der Goldenen Sporn*) was founded in the 14th century by King Charles I Robert (1301-1342) or his son Ludovik I (1342-1382). The knights received charters but no insignia, because they were recognised by wearing golden spurs on their boots. Charles was crowned with the Crown of St Stephen in Budapest (30 December 1916). On that occasion he bestowed the Order of the Golden Spur on twenty-three distinguished men and presented them with newly-created insignia of the order. The Statute of the Order of the Golden Spur was proclaimed on 21 April 1918 in the Official Gazette of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

The **Karl Troop Cross** (*Karl-Truppenkreuz*) was a new decoration instituted by Emperor Charles I (founded on 13 December 1916), and it was awarded to members of the armed forces. The **Medal for Courage** (*Tapferkeitsmedaille*) had been founded by Emperor Joseph II (1789) and was awarded for courageous acts and outstanding bravery only in wartime. The medal showed the figures of successive rulers so a new Medal of Courage with the figure of the young Emperor Charles I was minted on 4 April. On 28 April 1917 Emperor Charles I ordered the minting of new **Military Medals of Merit** (*Militärverdienstmedaille*) and on the new medal the figure of Emperor Charles I replaced the figure of Emperor Franz Joseph I.

The **Wound Medal** (*Verwundetendenmedaille*) was also a new Austro-Hungarian decoration for commissioned and non-commissioned officers and soldiers who fell ill or were wounded on the battlefield.

After the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Charles I did not abdicate and formally continued to be emperor. This uncertain state of affairs lasted until 24 March 1919, when Charles and his family were forced to leave Austria and went to Switzerland. On 3 April 1919 the Austrian Parliament passed a law prohibiting the return to Austria of Charles and his wife Zita of Bourbon-Parma.

Encouraged by Hungarian royalists, in 1921 Charles twice tried to assume the Hungarian throne, but both times without success. The royal couple was interned on 1 November 1921 and after a long trip transferred to Madeira Island in Portugal. Karl died there on 1 April 1922 at the age of only 34.