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World War One Veterans in Austria and Czechoslovakia

edited by
Laurence Cole, Rudolf Kučera, Hannes Leidinger and Ina Markova

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Laurence Cole / Rudolf Kučera

Editorial

Of the many novels written in interwar Europe about World War One, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen nichts Neues*, 1929) achieved world- wide fame in a way that few – if any – others could match. Just as interesting, but subsequently less noticed, is his second, follow-up novel, *The Way Back* (*Der Weg zurück*), which recounts the journey home of a group of young German soldiers after the armistice on the Western Front. The soldiers had been recruited young and some of them faced the prospect of having to finish their schooling on their return, while others returned to wife and family or the parental home. With great skill and insight, Remarque depicts the start of demobilization and the soldiers' difficult reintegration into civilian life. In doing so, he addresses a whole panorama of themes that have been of great interest to historical scholarship: the psychological damage caused by the war, the potential for violence, altered authority relationships, the distance between those who had experienced combat and the civilians at home, the nature of personal relationships, the political turmoil of the immediate post-war months, and conflicts over the meaning of the war.[1] One key scene towards the end of the book sees Georg Rahe leaving his flat in uniform, to the astonishment of some of his former comrades, in order to re-enlist in the German army. Seemingly, Georg had given up the struggle to return to "normal life" and saw no alternative but to go back to being a soldier. Taking leave from his close friend, Ernst Birkholz, Georg speaks in a staccato stream of consciousness, pointing to the houses in the street: "All trenches, Ernst […] nothing but dugouts – the war goes on – but a mean war – each against the other."[2] In many respects, therefore, Remarque's work encapsulates precisely the numerous issues bound up with demobilization and the

1 Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (eds.), *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

2 Erich Maria Remarque, *Der Weg zurück* (Berlin: Licensed edition Axel Springer AG, 2013; original 1931), 183.

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socio-political transition accompanying the end of the fighting, while showing that the war was not over in 1918 – either at the individual or the societal level.

The question of what became of former soldiers in Central Europe after 1918 lies at the centre of this special issue. Returning soldiers were, of course, known throughout Europe's history from the ancient era onwards, but the veteran as a cultural and political actor and the object of state policy is a comparatively recent phenomenon, deriving above all from the nineteenth century. The large-scale battles of the Napoleonic Wars left numerous veterans across the continent after 1815 and they subsequently formed part of the social question, as the first veterans' associations arose in Britain, France, the German states, and the Habsburg Monarchy.[3] However, it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that veterans' associations developed into large scale organizations, mainly on a self-help, mutual insurance basis. As such, they formed important lobby groups in a period of mass politicization, growing nationalism and societal militarization, and state governments became increasingly concerned to channel and control their activities.[4] While these developments meant that the "military veteran" was already a recognizable figure at the start of the twentieth century, the First World War massively changed the scale and nature of the "veteran question." The enormous impact of mass deaths and destruction, the demise of old empires, and the rise of new nation states resulting from total war made the fate of ex-soldiers into a key issue that shaped all societies in interwar Europe. The unprecedented number of combatants, together with the severity and frequency of injuries incurred in industrialized warfare, meant that the relationship between ex-soldiers and the state became a crucial issue for all governments. In short, every belligerent state, as well as the new states emerging from the ruins of the fallen Empires, had to come to terms with hundreds of thousands of war veterans. With most states having become more interventionist during the course of the war, as well as having raised popular expectations or offered incentives through propaganda, war veterans and their dependents raised major questions for welfare provisions, social policy, party politics and national memory cultures.[5]

3 See, for example, the contributions in Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann and Jane Rendall (eds.), *Soldiers, Citizens and Civilians: Experiences and Perceptions of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1790–1820* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

4 See, among others, Harm-Peer Zimmermann, "*Der feste Wall gegen die rote Flut": Kriegervereine in Schleswig-Holstein 1864–1914* (Neumünster: Wachholtz Verlag, 1989); Thomas Rohkrämer, *Der Militarismus der "kleinen Leute": Die Kriegervereine im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1871–1914* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1990); Laurence Cole, *Military Culture and Popular Patriotism in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

5 Cf. Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Berkeley – Los Angeles – London: University of California Press, 2001); Chris Millington, *From Victory to Vichy: Veterans in Inter-War France* (Manchester – New York:

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While there has been much recent research on war veterans in Germany and other European countries, other regions of Central and East-Central Europe have attracted noticeably less attention. For this reason, this special issue presents research on the comparative history of the World War One veterans in Austria and Czechoslovakia. This transnational investigation breaks new ground by comparing two neighbouring states that showed distinct patterns of immediate post-war reconstruction, as well as of subsequent development. While the social and discursive environment formed by a prima facie hegemonic "culture of victory" shaped developments in Czechoslovakia, Austria, on the contrary, was seemingly shaped by a "culture of defeat." As the articles in this special issue show, however, there are good reasons for questioning the validity of this usual dichotomy between victory and defeat cultures, given that most of the "successor states" of the Habsburg Monarchy contained a mix of both.

The articles focus on First World War veterans in Czechoslovakia and Austria as distinct social actors as well as the object of state policies and broader public discourse. The first contribution, by Rudolf Kučera and Hannes Leidinger, looks at psychologically damaged war returnees, their position in the new republics post-1918, and the policies and attitudes employed by the state and broader society to integrate or exclude them from the state-building process. It follows the psychiatric discussions about war-related mental illness, as well as more general discussions about interwar social provisioning for the war disabled. Despite the different situations in the two states regarding the war's outcome, the article points to the prevailing similarities between the two countries. In general, medical experts observed neurotic soldiers with suspicion and did not view them within a medical framework, but rather in terms of financial constraints in the era of post-war reconstruction. Hence, war-related neurotic disorders became the object of exclusionary welfare provisions rather than of psychiatric care.

The second article, by Verena Moritz, scrutinizes the only POW association that lasted throughout the interwar period in Austria. The *Federal Association of former Austrian POWs* (B.e.ö.K.) accepted the division between vanquished and victorious states in terms of its self-perception and its stated public mission. The article shows how the association's attitudes mirrored the heterogeneous development of war remembrance in interwar Austria. Although the association

Manchester University Press, 2012); Barbara Bracco, *La patria ferita: I corpi dei soldati italiani e la Grande Guerra* (Florence: Giunti Editore, 2012); Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman (eds.), *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism* (New York – Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Verena Pawlowsky and Harald Wendelin, *Die Wunden des Staates: Kriegsopfer und Sozialstaat in Österreich 1914–1938* (Vienna – Cologne – Weimar: Böhlau, 2015); John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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struggled to overturn the stigma of surrender attached to POWs in public perception, among its membership it nevertheless managed to convey the experience of captivity in terms of a victory of true humanity and mental vigour. On balance, however, the association participated in strengthening the authoritarian right in interwar Austria, not least because its leadership – dominated by former members of the Austro-Hungarian officer corps – enthusiastically supported the idea of "Anschluss".

Julia Walleczek-Fritz's piece examines similar issues, but does so from an in-depth, regional historical perspective. Based on a close reading of sources and literature connected to the predominantly right-wing war veterans' scene in Carinthia and Styria, Walleczek-Fritz argues that a considerable proportion of local veterans never properly demobilized. Instead, veterans followed a path from military to political (re-)mobilization, which was caused by borderland conflicts and continuing social and political friction. Before coming under government control in the 1930s, however, the Styrian and Carinthian veterans' associations in the 1920s cannot be characterized as paramilitary formations, despite interconnections at the individual level. Nevertheless, their support for right-wing ideological demands bolstered the burgeoning right-wing political space in Austria's South, much as the B.e.ö.K. did at the state level.

Václav Šmidrkal then investigates World War One veterans from the Habsburg army and their (re)mobilization in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s. While the state allowed "defeated" veterans to organize themselves into various associations that expressed different interpretations of wartime experiences, it was not willing to include them within its veterans' policy, which gave preference to veterans who had volunteered for the victorious pro-Entente armies. However, in the late 1930s, the state additionally recognized volunteers from the post-1918 borderland wars as a new group of veterans and unified Czech veterans from the Austro-Hungarian Army into a group known as "Reservists and Ex-Soldiers" of the Czechoslovak Army. The problem with integrating German-speaking veterans became internationalized by the fascist-dominated *Comité International Permanent* (CIP), which repeatedly thematicized the unequal treatment of Czech and German veterans and instrumentalized the myth of the frontline soldier in order to criticize Czechoslovak statehood. Hence, Šmidrkal illustrates the complexities behind the attempts to unite the highly diverse spectrum of war veterans' associations in Czechoslovakia.

Finally, Radka Šustrová takes this argument further by scrutinizing welfare policies towards war veterans in interwar Czechoslovakia, which aimed not only at easing their complicated material situation but also at binding them closer to the democratic republic. Czechoslovakia developed its social welfare legislation for veterans immediately after the war, but the government only viewed legionnaires, invalids, professional soldiers, their relatives, and surviving family

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members as worthy recipients of social welfare. The ideological basis for this policy was "politically desired heroism," which defined what constituted a "rightful" entitlement to social provisions. While the state strove to find a balance between veterans' wartime deeds and social welfare benefits, the veterans themselves formulated numerous criticisms of the existing welfare system and repeatedly expressed their dissatisfaction with it. Once again, therefore, the article lays bare the complicated relationship between a large number of former Austro-Hungarian soldiers and the newly established Czechoslovak nation state.

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