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0521831245 - Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life
in World War I - Maureen Healy

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Introduction

For hundreds of years, residents of Vienna's inner city lived behind stone fortifications meant to keep them safe in times of war. During numerous battles against hostile invaders, the barrier around inner Vienna had repelled enemies, most famously the Ottoman Turks. In later times, military planners conceived of the fortifications as protection for the Habsburg court, state institutions and upper society against the potentially insurgent lower-class rabble in the outlying areas. In both cases, according to the logic of the walled city, the threat to Vienna was perceived as *external*. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Viennese did away with their walls: the land where they stood was developed as a grand, circular boulevard, the Ringstrasse, and districts beyond the buffer were incorporated into the city. By the early twentieth century, the city had expanded so rapidly, both in population growth and territorial annexation, that remnants of the old city walls appeared quaint reminders of antiquated modes of warfare.¹ But dreams of walling-off Vienna would resurface during the war that finally brought down the Habsburgs and ended Vienna's reign as an imperial capital. In World War I, military leaders again fantasized about a buffer zone, but this time one designed to protect their troops outside the city from the civilian war *within*.² Censors worried that news of the home-front reality would "infect" soldiers with poor morale. Letters from the home front that mentioned food shortage and hunger were confiscated, so as not to "endanger the discipline of front troops and negatively affect their spirits."³ Despair and defeatism, borne of scarcity and fueled by pre-existing ethnic tensions, had turned Vienna into a collection of mini-fronts, staged daily by women, children

¹ With immigration and territorial expansion, the population of Vienna grew from approximately 550,000 in 1850 to 2,100,000 in 1910.

² For changing perceptions of cities and war in the European cultural imagination, see Bernd Hüppauf, "Die Stadt als imaginiertes Kriegsschauplatz," in *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 5, no. 2 (1995): 317–35.

³ AdBDW Stimmungsberichte, January–April 1917 (misfiled). Letter from Marie Krbuschek in Vienna, to brother Anton Wolf; and censor's memo, 27 March 1918.

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and left-at-home men (*Daheimgebliebenen*). In this war, the “enemy” was not Russia, France or Britain, but one’s neighbors and colleagues.

Before the events of 1914–18 became known collectively as World War I, before the phrase the “Great War” had been coined, and before this civilian war in Vienna had begun to alarm state officials, contemporaries had referred to the conflict as the “War of 1914/15.” During this first year of war, residents of Vienna had performed symbolic acts meant to “fortify” themselves and their troops in the absence of more concrete fortification such as a wall. By the hundreds of thousands, they pounded nails into a knightly, wooden figure called the *Wehrmann im Eisen*, the “soldier in iron,” which sat in the Schwarzenbergplatz off the Ringstrasse. The *Wehrmann* was a site of ritual, participatory fortification: for a small donation, which benefited war widows and orphans, residents purchased nails and pounded them into the vulnerable figure, thereby covering him in iron, enveloping him in the strength of the Austrian *Volkskraft*. Berta Weiskirchner, wife of Vienna’s mayor, offered to a crowd in March, 1915, one explanation of the ritual:

In these seven months of war we have already dried so many tears that if we could transform them all into pearls and create from them a robe, this *Wehrmann* would have the most beautiful, precious robe ever known to man. I bid you, then, hammer this knight with nails!⁴

Whether he was dressed in iron or pearls, the *Wehrmann* was symbolic of civilians’ participation – and sacrifice – in the War of 1914/15.⁵ But as the war dragged on into 1916, 1917 and 1918, and civilians began to perceive their sacrifices not as generous gifts but as bitter injustice, the *Wehrmann* was abandoned. “The number of visitors grew smaller and smaller as the war stretched on, until finally nobody looked after him at all,” reported one newspaper. Another noted shortly after the war that golden nails donated to the *Wehrmann* early on by Austria’s allies had been stolen. “The last visitor was, then, a thief.”⁶

Both the inverted image of a wall that protects troops from civilians and a symbol of sacrifice that is itself sacrificed tell us something significant

⁴ WSLB ZAS Hilfsaktionen, *Fremdenblatt*, 16 March 1915.

⁵ The *Wehrmann* project was modeled on the *Stock im Eisen*, a wooden trunk near the Stephansplatz into which early modern journeymen passing through Vienna had pounded nails. The *Wehrmann* as fundraiser inspired many copy-cat nailing projects around Central Europe during World War I. For the symbolism of the *Wehrmann* during and after the war, see Irene Nierhaus, “Die nationalisierte Heimat: Wehrmann und städtische Öffentlichkeit,” in Gisela Ecker (ed.), *Kein Land in Sicht: Heimat–weiblich?* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1997), 57–79.

⁶ WSLB ZAS Hilfsaktionen, *Reichspost*, 1 March 1919; *Neue Freie Presse*, 28 February 1919.

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about the Viennese experience of total war. World War I is often described as Europe's first total war for two reasons. The erosion of boundaries during World War I between the realms of war and "not war," of distinct places where soldiers fight and where civilians maintain social norms so that society can eventually return to peace, is one hallmark of conflicts in the twentieth century.⁷ This expansion and simultaneous blurring of the parameters of war is evident in the case of the imagined buffer around Vienna: we see an ambiguity about who needed to be protected from whom in wartime, and a confusion over who or what constituted the enemy. A second feature of total war is the mobilization of vast resources and civilian populations; all members of society, regardless of age or gender, are engaged in war-making in some capacity. In the case of the *Wehrmann*, whose patrons included schoolchildren, housewives and the elderly, we see that groups not traditionally counted as "warriors" were nonetheless engaged in an aspect of war-making and came to play key roles in the discourse of sacrifice.

A third feature of total war, not much noticed by historians but striking in the case of Vienna, is what could be called the refraction of the everyday. Refraction, the distorting of an image by viewing it through a medium, worked in the following way: everyday matters previously considered private or sub-political were refracted through the medium, or lens, of war and, like a ray of light, came out "bent" on the other side. The power of this particular lens was that nearly everything passed through it: food, fashion, shopping, child-rearing, leisure and neighbor relations were just some of the everyday matters reinterpreted through war. Total war, then, became a war in which no action or deed was too small or insignificant to be considered a matter of state.

As a case study of total war, this work interprets the social disintegration of the Habsburg Empire from the perspective of everyday life in the capital city. It reflects my view that the city fell before the state collapsed in a military and diplomatic sense in the autumn of 1918. This "falling" was not a single event, but a process of decline characterized by hunger, violence and a deterioration of social norms that left Vienna nearly ungovernable. At the outset of war, contemporaries had applied the military term "mobilization" – the calling-up and putting into service of troops and machinery – to civilians, who, like soldiers, would be called

⁷ See Arthur Marwick (ed.), *Total War and Social Change* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988); also John Horne, "Introduction: Mobilizing for 'Total War', 1914–1918," in Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe During the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1–17, for historical development of the term "total war."

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to work in unison for the good of the state. But the term was not really apt; there were no mechanisms by which to call up “society,” no institutions (such as the military) to impose order and discipline on the process, no established, hierarchical means of resolving conflicts that arose when an ethnically, religiously, and socio-economically heterogeneous population was asked to cooperate in a cause larger than itself. The outcome of the so-called mobilization of Vienna was communal disintegration. Personal tensions partially dormant in peacetime sprang to life under the material stress of war. War offered a rich vocabulary for understanding the hatred, jealousy, contempt or suspicion one felt for others, but had never put into words: he or she was a traitor, an enemy. Plots, intrigues and conspiracy theories were hatched over questions of “privilege” and access to basic foodstuffs. Contrary to expectations that this society would or could be mobilized, the experience of war in Vienna was not a coming together, but a falling apart.

Geography of the home front

That residents were able to imagine so many enemies in their midst was due in part to Vienna’s diverse population. The largest urban center in Habsburg Central Europe, the city was predominantly German-speaking but drew immigrants from around the Habsburg domains. Before the war, German-speakers had reacted to population growth by attempting to preserve legally the “German character” of Vienna.⁸ The 1910 census revealed that Vienna’s population of just over two million resembled a Central European mosaic. Only 56 percent of residents had legal domicile (*Heimatsberechtigung*) – a category that often indicated where a person was born or had “come from” – in Vienna. The other 44 percent of residents had legal domicile in places other than Vienna, most frequently Lower and Upper Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, Galicia, Silesia and the German Empire.⁹ These figures suggest that Vienna was a city of recent arrivals, people whose families had not been in the city long and who may or may not have intended to settle there permanently. Added to this mix came a host of wartime refugees and transient military personnel of various nationalities. In the fall of 1914, 50–70,000 Polish- and Yiddish-speaking refugees arrived from the Galician front, and refugees

⁸ Gerald Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in der Verfassung und Verwaltung Österreichs, 1848–1918* (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1985), 113.

⁹ “Ergebnisse der Volkszählung vom 31. Dezember 1910,” in *Statistisches Jahrbuch der Stadt Wien* (Vienna: Verlag des Wiener Magistrates, 1912), 890, 900–902.

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evacuated from areas behind the Italian front followed the next year.¹⁰ Some residents imagined themselves besieged by Jews, Czechs, Hungarians and Poles, who conspired to keep bread, milk, meat and potatoes from their “rightful” German recipients. The vocabulary of their neighborhood arguments and street skirmishes was a war vocabulary.

The incivility and low-level violence that thread through the following chapters bring into focus the multivalent meanings of the term “home front.” Three terms circulating in wartime Vienna – *Heimat*, *Hinterland* and *Hinterlandsfront* – bear relation to the English term home front.¹¹ The first, *Heimat*, meant home, but it also connoted a geographic space different from the space of war. Those who lived in Vienna lived “at home” (*in der Heimat*), and soldiers arriving in the city from battle referred to it as the *Heimat*, even if they were not from Vienna. *Hinterland* was a technical military designation for territory behind the front lines and behind the army staging area, but, like *Heimat*, also connoted more generally the civilian, non-combatant realm. As Christoph Führ’s map of the Habsburg war geography shows, Vienna was officially part of the Hinterland (see map 1).

The terms *Hinterländer* or *Hinterlandsheld* (hero of the hinterland) were derogatory names for men who did not leave “home,” and point to the gendered division of war into masculine and feminine realms. Popular split-images depicted a neatly gendered war with men on one side and women on the other (see plate 1).

Finally, *Hinterlandsfront* equated the war-making activities of civilians with those of soldiers: the work of civilians constituted a front (albeit a secondary one) that supported or complemented *the* front. Common to all of these terms was an assumption that the violence of war was located someplace other than “home.” Susan Grayzel writes of Britain and France, “While the First World War created the concept of ‘home front,’ it never stabilized the boundaries separating war from home.”¹² This was true of Vienna, where violence was part of the fabric of life “at home,” and

¹⁰ The number of war refugees fluctuated as territory in Galicia and Bukowina was captured, lost and recaptured. On refugees in Vienna, see Beatrix Hoffmann-Holter, ‘*Abreisendmachung.*’ *Jüdische Kriegsflüchtlinge in Wien, 1914–1923* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1995); and David Rechter, “Galicia in Vienna: Jewish Refugees in the First World War,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 28 (1997), 113–30.

¹¹ Richard G. Plaschka, Horst Haselsteiner and Arnold Suppan’s brilliant study of military disintegration in the hinterland uses the term “inner front” to describe battles the military waged against its own forces. *Innere Front: Militärassistenten, Widerstand und Umsturz in der Donaumonarchie 1918*, 2 vols. (Munich: R. Oldenburg, 1974).

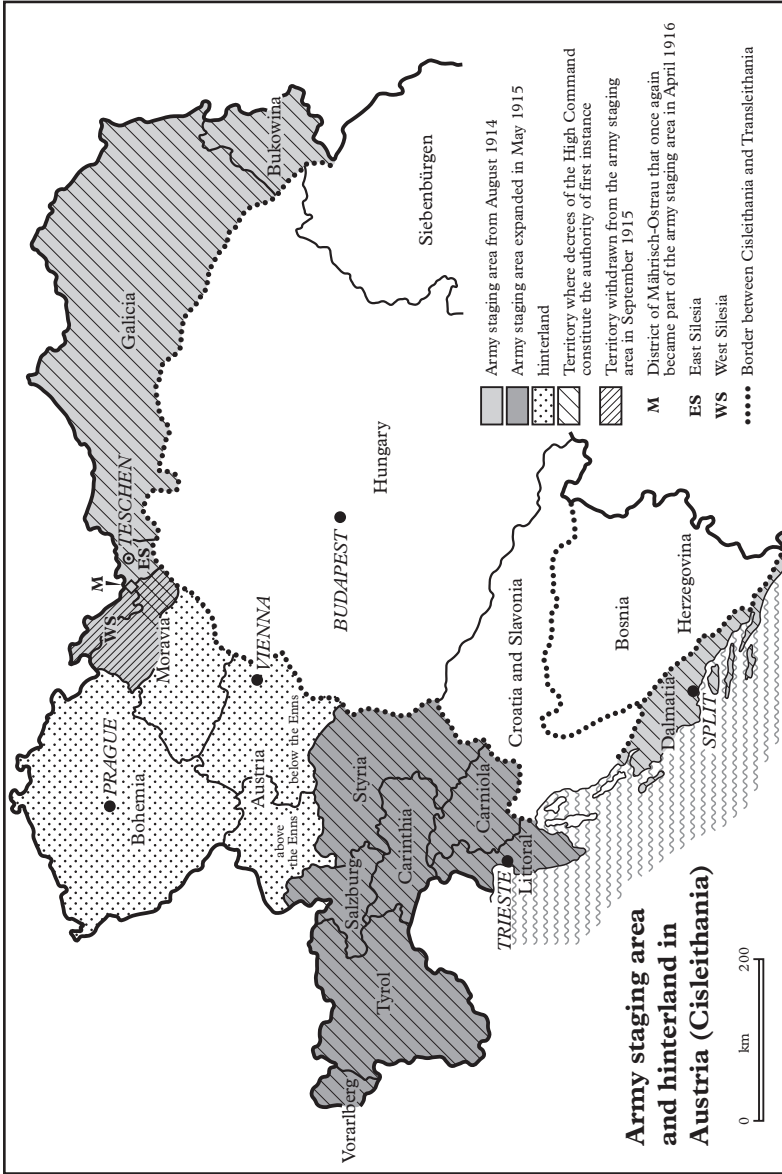
¹² Susan R. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 7.

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Map 1. Habsburg war geography: the army staging area and the hinterland. Source: Christoph Führ, *Das k.u.k. Armeoberkommando und die Innenpolitik in Österreich, 1914–1917* (Graz: Böhlau, 1968), 23.

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Plate 1. "Front" and "home" – the ideal gender division. Source: Postcard in author's possession.

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neighborhood animosities were explained in war terms: battles (*Kämpfe*) over scarce resources were waged against “enemies” and “traitors.”

Although Vienna was geographically distant from the three Habsburg battle fronts, residents did not feel physically or psychologically secure. The line between front and home did not exist in reality, but people imagined its existence and feared its permeability. The city was not physically attacked, as it was during the Second World War, but Viennese nonetheless felt vulnerable to invaders: fellow Austrians carrying diseases. Diseases, associated with “the east,” and carried on the bodies of returning soldiers and Galician refugees, threatened the local (*einheimische*) population. Even before large transports of refugees arrived in the fall of 1914, disease and east had become linked in the popular imagination and in the minds of city doctors. In August, a police doctor warned that transports from Galicia posed “an imminent danger of infection for Vienna as well as for the regions [the refugees will travel to] after they leave Vienna.” Subsequent memos warned that “all of Vienna” would be infected unless the transports of “political unreliaables” from Galicia and Bukowina were routed elsewhere.¹³ Fears about external contagions were not unwarranted, but the language in which they were expressed created or reinforced divisions among Vienna’s constantly fluctuating population. On November 30, 1914, the leading city physician reported 366 cases of cholera in the city. Of these, 349 were military personnel and only seventeen were civilian, most of them *ortsfremd* rather than *einheimisch*. Over the next two years, bi-weekly municipal reports on contagious diseases distinguished between “refugees” and “the population.”¹⁴ This official bias also found expression in everyday interactions among the population. Police reported “altercations” among shoppers at markets because “these refugees . . . touch the merchandise, put it back, haggle over the price and then don’t buy it in the end.” Residents of Vienna’s II. District, where many of the refugees were housed, spoke of a Galician “invasion” of their neighborhood.¹⁵

As people interpreted social relationships through the prism of war, they were simultaneously defining their political relation to Austria. The state came to serve as a convenient benchmark for measuring one’s own heroism, sacrifice or unjust victimization against the perfidy of others. Of course, Herr Prochaska was hoarding milk; he was a *bad Austrian*.

¹³ NÖLA Präs. “P” 1914 9/77. Report from Polizei-Oberbezirksarzt, 23 August 1914; 384 1155/366 Pol. Dir. to Statthaltereipräs., 4 November 1914.

¹⁴ WSLA B23/73. Protokoll Obmänner-Konferenz, 1 December 1914; B23/74, 28 December 1916.

¹⁵ AdBDW Stimmungsberichte, 11 November 1914; 1 October 1914.

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Of course, the market stall of Frau Steiner had to be destroyed; *hungry patriots* had a duty to punish *traitors*. We find frequent reference to a concept crucial to discussion of citizenship or national belonging in Central Europe: *Gesinnung*, which referred to one's disposition, attitude or political proclivities. Assessing another's *Gesinnung* towards Austria in its time of need was a subjective, and nearly always self-referential exercise in which the righteous assessor interpreted social discord in state terms.

The study focuses on everyday sites of politics where civilians and state officials fought over resources, responsibility and the power to define the meanings of the war. These everyday sites (shops, street corners, schools, pubs, apartment buildings) were more important than traditional political bodies (parliament, political parties, organized interest groups) for determining the course of the war in Vienna, in part because the latter were shut down or restricted, creating a political vacuum. The Vienna city council did not meet until 1916, and then met only occasionally, the Austrian parliament had been dissolved in the spring of 1914 and did not convene until May, 1917, and political parties and their publications were heavily censored. John W. Boyer describes a privatization of traditional politics in wartime, whereby "small groups of conspirators" worked behind the scenes marshaling prewar contacts.¹⁶ During the war, politics slipped temporarily out of the hands of politicians and into the hands of previously "unpolitical" women and children. With greater urgency than male party leaders, and with more room to maneuver in unorthodox political venues, women and children strongly influenced public discourse in wartime Vienna and constituted its newest, fiercest political actors.

With the layer of traditional politics peeled away, the state intervened, through wartime decree, in the everyday lives of Viennese residents in unprecedented ways.¹⁷ Prime Minister Karl Stürgkh, pleased to be governing without the interference of parliament, announced his government's intention at the outset of war to "orient all energies of the state towards the secure, speedy and complete fulfillment of war aims."¹⁸ Civilians were considered "energies of the state," and consequently, authorities attempted to regulate where people worked, what they produced, their

¹⁶ John W. Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna: Christian Socialism in Power, 1897–1918* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 379.

¹⁷ See Josef Redlich, *Österreichische Regierung und Verwaltung im Weltkrieg* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925).

¹⁸ Cited in Gustav Spann, "Zensur in Österreich" (Ph.D. diss., University of Vienna, 1972), 39.

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modes of transportation, the content of news and entertainment, the heating of homes, the kinds of fabrics used for clothing, the methods of food preparation, and finally, the number of calories consumed per day. People who had not had much occasion to *think* about the state were now working for it, receiving payments from it, being monitored by it, sacrificing for it, praying for it and cursing it. In wartime, many citizens and proto-citizens developed a *consciousness* of the state that had not existed previously. (The term “proto-citizen” is used here to signal that Austrian citizenship was not an absolute status, but a spectrum, on which age and gender determined one’s place.) Some blamed the state for its failure to provide enough food and other essential resources for the maintenance of life. Others appealed to it for assistance in battles against fellow residents, expressing a solidarity or alliance with the state (manifested, for example, in the practice of denunciation) that they did not feel within their local communities. Whether citizens and proto-citizens welcomed state intervention, found it menacing, or experienced a mixture of both, they contended with the Habsburg state in their everyday lives far more after 1914 than they had previously.

In turn, governing Vienna in wartime became nearly impossible if we understand governance as the ability to make and enforce laws. For municipal, regional and imperial officials, who had competing and often contradictory agendas, the largest obstacle to effective governance was their inability to provision the city with food. Other resources – coal, wood, leather, cloth, paper, metal and medicines – were also in critical short supply, but none was as basic to survival, or as central to the process of social unraveling, as food. The provisioning crisis resembled a dance in which the rule-making authorities, unable to secure adequate supplies, lagged one step behind the rule-breaking population, which resorted to illegal means to find them. As this dance sped up, and previously law-abiding residents grew increasingly willing to break laws in order to satisfy needs, “governing” became an exercise in wringing hands and issuing empty decrees. A similar pattern of rule-making and rule-breaking characterized relations between state and population in matters such as the spread of news and information, the control of youth delinquency and civilian interactions with enemy prisoners of war. The astounding number of wartime decrees (those from the imperial level fill four volumes alone)¹⁹ carried with it no guarantee of compliance. Law-breaking and law-making stood in a dialectic relation: behavior produced laws that then defined this behavior as in violation of the law.

¹⁹ See the compilation of wartime decrees, *Denkschrift über die von der k.k. Regierung aus Anlaß des Krieges getroffenen Maßnahmen*, 4 vols. (Vienna, 1918).