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Press/Journalism (Austria-Hungary)

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The undisputed superiority of the Western Powers, above all Great Britain in the domain of propaganda together with the collapse of Austria-Hungary suggest that the Hapsburg monarchy was militarily in no position to wage a world war; nor was it able to do so in the area of propaganda. The article questions the general dictum of Austria's incapability of mastering a world war in propaganda terms. In a differentiated analysis the process of national mobilization through the press is examined. Although the specific practice of censorship within the monarchy proved to be a decisive stumbling block to mobilization in the first two years of the war, in the third and fourth years there was a temporary mobilization of the population, tailored to suit the person of the Foreign Minister Czernin, which is reminiscent of the propaganda patterns of the Western Powers in the First World War.

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Introduction

Mark Cornwall's publications aside, the range of issues relating to press and censorship in the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the First World War has until now only been discussed in single-case studies about individual press authorities or in major studies about the war, albeit in a somewhat peripheral fashion. This article focuses on the interaction between journalists, state press authorities and political decision-makers, and examines the factors which fostered or opposed large-scale mobilization in the war.

Wartime Regimen and Wartime Society

The "bureaucratic-military regime"^[1] which was set up in July 1914 in the Austrian half of the Empire concurrently with military mobilization entailed massive cuts to citizens' rights for Austrian wartime society.^[2] The Magyar oligarchy governed with their own set of emergency laws, although their approach, altogether, was no less authoritarian.^[3]

For the political decision-makers in the Austro-Hungarian Empire the establishment of an authoritarian political system was a necessity brought about by the war. Although it is true that mobilization had proceeded smoothly even in regions where sections of the population were made up of Slavs, the political leadership was aware of the existence of broad swathes of the population whose attitude to the war was somewhat reserved. The nationality issue had remained unresolved; the much discussed restructuring of the dualistic Empire in favour of the Slav nationalities had not taken place. A broad supranational war consensus encompassing the whole nation on the lines of the "union sacrée" in France was an unachievable goal in the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. This led to political decision-makers attaching utmost importance to maintaining civil order within the country. To achieve this they made use of a range of repressive measures, among them press censorship as well as the subjugation of ethnic groups classified as unreliable and the refusal to summon the Cisleithanian parliament which had been adjourned since May 1914.^[4]

Early war years

The censorship apparatus

With the beginning of hostilities long-standing press authorities were joined by new ones, whose legal foundations had been established in the years prior to the war.^[5] Compared with those of the German Empire, state-controlled press agencies in Austria-Hungary were small enough in number to be manageable and were, in addition, overseen by the *Kriegsüberwachungsamt*, KÜA, (War Surveillance Office), later renamed the *Ministerialkommission im Kriegsministerium*, MK/KM, (Ministerial Commission in the War Ministry). The KÜA was a control centre for monitoring the execution of the repressive measures. Although the public knew of the existence of the KÜA, whose

area of jurisdiction was the entire territory of the kingdoms and lands represented in the *Reichsrat* (the Austrian Parliament), including Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was not aware of its exact activities until the reopening of the *Reichsrat* in spring 1917.^[6]

In the Hungarian half of the Empire preventive censorship did not exist during the war (until 1917). The only government decree to be passed at the outbreak of the war was one which forbade the publication of news that damaged military interests or could alarm the population. The Hungarian government massively resisted attempts to extend the powers of the KÜA to Hungary and set up a censorship body of its own, the *Ungarische Kriegsüberwachungskommission, KÜK*, (War Surveillance Commission, Budapest) in order to give newspapers the opportunity of having authorities check the admissibility of articles.^[7]

The *Kriegspressequartier, KPQ*, (War Press Office) was established in Vienna on 28 July 1914 under the direction of Colonel Maximilian von Hoen (1867-1940). It was a sub-division of the *Armeeoberkommando*, AOK, (Austro-Hungarian High Command) and among its roles was that of supreme military advisory counsel on press censorship executed by the KÜA, Vienna, and the War Surveillance Commission, Budapest.^[8] The war correspondents of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and of allied and neutral countries were also concentrated in the KPQ.^[9]

The Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, known as *Literarisches Bureau* (Literary Office), served to liaise between the Foreign Ministry and the Press and was intended to exert influence on public opinion at home and abroad, to compile a review of the press for the Emperor and to make available published material from domestic and international sources for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.^[10] The domestic Cisleithanian press policy was not part of its area of responsibility. This was given to the Pressedepartement im Minsterratspräsidium (Press Department in the office of the Austrian Prime Minister). The Literarisches Bureau under its head Oskar Ritter von Montlong (1874-1932) maintained contact with all Viennese newspapers with the exception of the Arbeiter-Zeitung (Workers' Newspaper), and was in a position to influence the respective tendencies of the newspapers.^[11] Before the war a tight network of press links had been established by means of allocating money from the disposition fund.^[12] Now it was possible to extend this network.^[13] The Austro-Hungarian press strategists, however, placed no value in contacts with the Illustrierte Kronenzeitung, the Viennese popular paper with a large circulation and a readership from the domestic servant and worker milieu, with which one could have trumped the rebellious Arbeiter-Zeitung whose aimed-for clientele was essentially the same. They put their bets on the quality, not the quantity of state propaganda, thus ignoring the fact that in order to boost domestic patriotism and to oppose war-weariness it was vital to influence mass opinion.^[14]

The censorship of periodicals was transferred to justice and administrative authorities in the respective administrative region: the Public Prosecutor's Office and the state police authority or political authority. The Public Prosecutor's Office imposed censorship on the instructions of the KÜA. To keep a close surveillance on periodicals, officers or military officials were seconded to support the Press/Journalism (Austria-Hungary) - 1914-1918-Online

Censorship in practice

War censorship had already begun in the Austro-Hungarian Empire by the end of July 1914 and with a severity that was unfamiliar to the journalists accustomed to a long period of peace. After the Sarajevo assassination a large proportion of the German-language newspapers had strongly supported the Austro-Hungarian government's option for a drastic solution to the Serb problem. The survival of the Monarchy, in their view, depended on a quick and permanent solution of the South Slav question, which included war as a sad but unavoidable ultima ratio.^[16] Patriotic journalism notwithstanding, control of information was the number one priority when at last war broke out. All newspapers, including those from neutral foreign countries, were censored. It was above all the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of the Interior which insisted that the reins of censorship should not be slackened. In July and August 1914 strict instructions were sent out to suppress communiqués about military operations as well as reports on Serbian and Pro-Russian rallies. Nothing was to be allowed through by the censors that might shed a negative light on the social, national and political situation of the monarchy.^[17]

The social democratic and Czech press felt the effects immediately, as did the newspapers in the "war zones" which were under martial law. No fewer than forty-six Czech newspapers were banned in the first months of the war. Further newspapers such as *Čas* (*Time*) followed. Some newspapers, for example the social democratic *Glas Slobode* (*Voice of Freedom*) in Bosnia, decided themselves to stop publishing owing to the harsh censorship. Italy's entry into the war in May 1915 immediately led to the banning of all newspapers in the Italian language with the exception of *Risveglio Austriaco* (*Austrian Awakening*).^[18]

In the Hungarian half of the Empire, where many newspapers had long been patriotic in tone, the decision was taken not to practise pre-censorship in the first years of the war.^[19] For tactical reasons, the Romanian press in Transylvania was initially spared censorship until Romania entered the war in 1916. After the military victories in the Balkans the authorities adopted a rigid approach and *Románul (Romania)*, the organ of the Romanian National Party, was closed down.^[20] Not only the newspapers which were critical of the state, but also the patriotic ones, which in July 1914 had supported a hard line towards Serbia, showed with their "blank spaces" visible signs of censorship. While they did not question war censorship as such, they were not willing to accept the loss-making practice of censorship. On 22 September 1914 the Governor of Upper Austria confidentially informed the Austrian Prime Minister Karl Graf Stürgkh (1859-1916) that the Viennese press was so enraged that it was planning to temporarily stop printing its papers.^[21]

The situation had become so unacceptable that the publishers of the newspapers appearing in Vienna turned directly to Leopold Graf Berchtold (1863-1942), the Foreign Minister. They pointed out that the copy of a map showing the southern theatres of war, which could be found in any atlas, or Press/Journalism (Austria-Hungary) - 1914-1918-Online

information about the surface area and population of Serbia, had been cut out by the censors; they complained that on one and the same day one newspaper was permitted to report on a subject while another was not allowed to do so and that one and the same article had to be presented to the KÜA and then, in addition, to the Public Prosecutor's Office. Even the correspondents from neutral foreign countries as well as the Viennese correspondents of newspapers in the German Empire criticized the prevailing censorship practice and came to the conclusion that journalistic work was virtually impossible in these circumstances.^[22]

Thus a great deal of energy was wasted in the struggle of editorial boards to deal with delayed and incomprehensible censorship decisions, double censorship, the unequal censorship practice in Cisleithania and Transleithania, in Vienna and the provinces, but especially in the struggle to deal with the severity shown by the censorship officials, who often cut out whole articles except for the headlines. Of great import were the considerable financial losses which then arose when the newspapers were forced to change articles at short notice and the editions could no longer be distributed in time to the Crown Lands.

Not only the Social Democratic *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (*Workers' Newspaper*), but above all the patriotic newspapers, which had worked together with the state press authorities in peacetime, went to the barricades against a censorship practice which the press strategists of the *Literarisches Bureau* often did not understand themselves. Censorship was particularly counter-productive whenever passages were removed which, in propagandistic terms, were of benefit to Austria-Hungary.^[23] While the German ambassador to Vienna Heinrich von Tschirschky (1858-1916) was amazed at this practice, Friedrich von Wiesner (1871-1951), representative of the Foreign Ministry at the AOK, described this total domination of the press as foolish and, with much foresight, pointed to the likely consequences once censorship had been lifted.^[24] The civil authorities, especially Prime Minister Stürgkh, were of the opinion that first and foremost a change in censorship as practised by the military had to follow. But the latter was in no way willing to make any concessions, attempting instead to operate a press policy which was in nature not only military but also political.^[25]

It was in the "war zones" in particular that the military authorities insisted on their decision-making prerogative over the Public Prosecutor's Office. The latter stated, however, that they were exclusively accountable to the Ministry of Justice or conversely, the KÜA, their argument being that the rigorous directives of local military authorities frequently contradicted those of the KÜA.^[26]

Even at the beginning of the war it became evident that - in the day-in, day-out practice of censorship - the goal of achieving uniformity, which had been intended through the setting up of the KÜA, had been totally undermined, not least owing to the considerable difficulties arising when Cisleithanian and Transleithanian censorship authorities attempted to, or, rather, failed to cooperate with each other.^[27]

What was also lacking on the civilian side, but especially so with regard to the military, was a

tactically clever and, above all, sensitive treatment of the representatives of the press, a strategy which would give the latter the feeling of not simply being manipulated for national purposes, but being in fact an essential and active cornerstone of success in the war.^[28] All the objections raised by private individuals, journalists or Austro-Hungarian diplomats quickly faded away, objections to the effect that silence, mere expressions of gratitude and phrases that spoke of an unavoidable struggle to defend the Empire were not enough. Instead, they argued, the public had to be motivated to be steadfast and determined with clearly formulated war objectives, visions and ideas.^[29]

And so it was that, just as at the front, important battles were lost in using the resources of the press in the first weeks of the war in Austria-Hungary. The exemplary attitude of the press, of which the head of the Press Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been so proud in the first year of the war,^[30] had been achieved through closing down above all Czech and social-democratic newspapers, through rigid censorship and by withholding information. The price was high. The journalists, who in July 1914 had spoken out for hard measures against Serbia and had been in support of patriotic journalism, could increasingly no longer identify themselves with the task they had been given, namely of undertaking patriotic educational work. Their attitude to the state authorities was now one of cool reserve.

Late War Years

Press and Censorship in the Second half of the War

Everything seemed to indicate that the Parliamentary Representatives would use the reopening of the Cisleithanian *Reichsrat* in May 1917 to denounce the grievances caused by military absolutism, including rigid censorship. For tactical reasons therefore censorship was gradually eased before the *Reichsrat* was summoned. Clearance was first of all given to discussions of military objectives, later to all news relating to purely domestic politics, and to reports which did not adversely affect the prosecution of the war. The newspapers, primarily the Czech press, now explored the boundaries of the new freedom. Some papers were not overly exact with the number of deposit copies, others loosened their hitherto close ties to the Ballhausplatz (Foreign Ministry). The *Fremdenblatt*, which had functioned as the half-official organ of the Ballhausplatz and now switched over to opposing the government, went furthest.^[31]

As a counter-measure the *Literarisches Bureau* was reorganized, was given a new director and new staff. Friedrich Ritter von Wiesner, whom Foreign Secretary Ottokar Graf Czernin (1872-1932) had appointed as his confidant to head the organization, intensified the cooperation between Budapest and Vienna in questions of censorship by sending a representative of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs to the Hungarian KÜK. He also sought to involve the provincial press in both halves of the Empire in activities of the *Literarisches Bureau*, and financed newspapers which were intended to counter the unwanted demands for the "self-determination of the peoples" and "democratization".^[32] The KPQ, which had been reorganized as early as September 1916 to optimize press relations, increased its Press/Journalism (Austria-Hungary) - 1914-1918-Online

activities in 1917 under its new director Colonel Wilhelm Eisner-Bubna (1875-1926). It sent press and propaganda officers to allied and neutral countries, improved picture propaganda and reorganized film propaganda.^[33]

The military side, AOK and KPQ, remained consistent in its demands for a rigorous approach to newspapers that were critical of the government. This, however, was rejected by the civilian press departments in view of the expected criticism of censorship in the *Reichsrat*. They put their trust in education and in influencing journalists and newspaper owners with the help of financial incentives. Czernin and Wiesner supported a flexible approach to censorship, allowed critical reporting to go through, but insisted on strict censorship in situations which were highly delicate in terms of foreign policy, such as the peace negotiations of Brest-Litowsk.^[34] To counter the loss of reputation of the Imperial House the *Pressedienst für die Allerhöchsten Herrschaften*, PDAH, (Press Service for the Imperial Family) was set up on 20 February 1917 on the order of the Emperor.^[35]

In February 1918 press conferences were introduced in the k.k. *Ministerratspräsidium* on the lines of what existed in the <u>German Empire</u>. These were aimed at explaining, informing, influencing and generally strengthening contact with newspapers. Mistrust of the propaganda activities of the German ally, indeed even fear of German domination in the domain of newspaper politics, led to this proven, well-known set of instruments, disregarding earlier forms, not being taken over until four years of the war had passed.^[36] In particular that section of the press which was calling for a rapid "peace of understanding" without annexations and which criticized in no uncertain terms the policy of the German ally, such as the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, the *Morgen*, the *Abend* or the *Neues Wiener Journal*, moved further and further away from the influence of the authorities.^[37]

Many newspapers, among them those which had sizeable circulations and which were able to mobilize large numbers, such as *Der Abend* and the *Neue Zeitung*, had long given up "patriotic reporting". They rejected the call to show restraint with reports about the critical food supply situation, appealing to the state authorities instead to make improvements.^[38] The civilian press departments could have made use of the possibility of withdrawing state paper subsidies in order to force newspapers critical of the state to conform, a strategy supported by the AOK, but declined to do so.^[39]

Mobilization Attempts Against the Backdrop of Public Discourse on Peace

Ever since the failed Peace Proposal of the Central Powers of December 1916 the peace question had dominated public discourse. The supporters of a "Peace through Victory" and the advocates of a "Negotiated Peace" faced each other with neither side indicating any willingness to compromise. They laid out their respective positions at meetings and gatherings, in petitions, and, above all, in the press and stood as evidence of the rifts within Austria-Hungary's wartime society.^[40]

The wish to bring about a rapid conclusion to the war was also the primary goal of Charles I, Emperor of Austria (1887-1922) and his Foreign Minister, Ottokar Graf Czernin, who was convinced that the Austro-Hungarian Empire did not have the resources at its disposal to survive another winter of war. Czernin believed that a swift peace settlement on the basis of a status guo could only be achieved with the strong backing of public opinion in Austria-Hungary. It was also clear to Czernin that to mobilize the war-weary and, as a result of the dire state of the economy, totally demoralized population of Austria-Hungary, its leaders had to demonstrate closeness to their people, and dynamism, and, if necessary, also the determination to assert their own political standpoint, independent of Germany's.^[41] With the ending of the conflict with Serbia and Russia, the concept of a defensive war which had been forced upon Austria-Hungary lost all meaning. Now Czernin turned to a domestic and foreign audience with the demand for an honourable negotiated peace and the vision of a new world order with international disarmament and arbitral jurisdiction.^[42] In cooperation with the new chief press officer, Wiesner, Czernin exerted influence on the press of the Monarchy directly, doing so in the sense of the "Politics of the Diagonal", which avoided both extremely rigid and extremely conciliatory peace positions; he attempted to integrate both peace camps and to create the possibility of a flexible foreign policy.^[43]

Up until the Brest-Litovsk peace settlement Czernin succeeded with his *Sammlungspolitik*" (literally, a "bringing-together" policy) to persuade both peace camps to support him, the supporters of a Negotiated Peace through the "Czernin Peace Formula" without annexations and contributions, and those who advocated a Peace through Victory through the "Pacifist Ultimatum"^[44], that is his announcement that the peace terms offered were not for perpetuity and could give way to a hard line, were the Entente to refuse. Encouraged by Czernin's peace speeches and the liberalization of censorship the Cisleithanian Negotiated Peace press, first and foremost the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, the *Abend*, the *Neue Zeitung* and the *Morgen*, who saw themselves as the protectors of the interests of the broad, economically suffering masses, applied great pressure on the government. The *Arbeiter-Zeitung* threatened revolution should the peace settlement fail, whereas the *Abend* threatened with individual peace settlements from people to people.^[45]

In the mass of German language and Hungarian newspapers of the Monarchy Czernin advanced to being the popular "People's Minister" and "Peace Count", who embodied the activity and dynamism which the German public in particular demanded in the July crisis and had missed in the Imperial House and the Government.^[46] The Czechs and the Southern Slavs, however, were left out of this mobilization offensive. In the Cisleithanian *Reichsrat* they demanded participation in the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations and opposed Czernin's political credo that the right of self-determination of states was greater than that of nations.^[47] In his last peace speech in April 1918 Czernin turned decisively against the "Peace Hysterics" and "Annexionists" just as he did against the "Masaryks in the Monarchy itself" and gave up his policy of "*Sammlung*" in 1917.^[48]

After Czernin's resignation in the aftermath of the Sixtus Affair, the food supply crisis and the national

extremes became more and more evident and acute. Neither the tough censorship policy, advocated by the AOK, nor the conciliatory course of Prime Minister Ernst von Seidler (1862-1931) could curb the growing hostility found in the press towards the State. Representatives of the press who remained loyal demanded more vehemently than ever the establishment of a Press Ministry modelled on the one in Britain.^[49] At the end of July 1918 the Ministry of the Interior decided to set up the *Zentralbureau für Feindesabwehr* (Central Bureau for Enemy Defence) with an annual budget of 1 million crowns. Three months later preparations were made for a much larger organization, the *Österreichische Propagandastelle* (Austrian Propaganda Centre).^[50] But these projects no longer had any prospect of success.

Conclusion

Austria-Hungary was, militarily speaking, far less well prepared for war in July 1914 than it was in terms of the institutional pre-requisites for successful wartime press-relations work. Press authorities set up for the war and close links to the press were available, and with the Kriegsüberwachungsamt (War Surveillance Office, Vienna) it also had at its disposal a central agency for the surveillance of repressive measures. That this quite satisfactory basis did not produce the wished-for successes was, on the one hand, a structural problem. The dualistic structure of the Austro-Hungarian nation allowed for two contrary, very differing systems of censorship, and the multi-ethnic society with the unresolved question of nationality made it more difficult for the public to find a consensus on the issue of the war. On the other hand, sustained mobilization was unsuccessful as a result of the massive shortcomings in the practice of censorship. So it came about that within just a few weeks after the outbreak of the war national mobilization in Austria-Hungary, which had been greatly encouraged by the German and Hungarian press following the July crisis of 1914, suddenly slowed down, the result of rigid censorship, a lack of compromise in censorship questions on the part of the military, and highly insensitive treatment of the representatives of the press. In the first two years of the war the patriotic newspapers were prevented from deploying their mobilization potential, whereas in the second half of the war, when the authorities realized the mobilization power of the press more than ever before, these very newspapers were no longer willing to lend their support. Until just before the end of the war no use was made in Austria-Hungary – in contrast to Great Britain and France – of mass propaganda shouldered by state or private organizations.

As a result, and bearing in mind the break-up of Austria-Hungary, the monarchy was considered quite simply incapable of rising to the demands of a world war in terms of its policies towards the press. With the exception of Foreign Minister Czernin, those in charge politically in Austria-Hungary realized too late that it was imperative in the third year of the war for the mass of the population to be committed to clear national objectives when it came to war and peace. At a time of increasing domestic destabilization and with the monarchy finding itself militarily in the stranglehold of its German ally, he succeeded in giving the country's foreign policy a more distinctive profile and in mobilizing the German and Hungarian sections of the monarchy's population. This, however, was done to fit Czernin's peace campaign, which failed to include the Slav population, and, after Czernin's Press/Journalism (Austria-Hungary) - 1914-1918-Online

resignation, national and social polarization was even greater. Thus one could find in Austria-Hungary both aspects: on the one hand antiquated forms of propaganda, on the other, temporarily, modern approaches to mobilization aimed at a mass public, the latter characteristic of France and Britain in 1917 and 1918.

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