

# Centenary (Austria)

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## Summary

While for the official Austrian state it was in some ways an uneasy task to commemorate the centenary of World War I, the academic output was satisfying. Austria did play its role as a cultural superpower during the short-lived attention for the centenary events for 1914-1918.

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## Introduction

In contrast to the central role played by [Austria-Hungary](#) in 1914 for the start of the First World War, the [commemoration](#) of the conflict a hundred years later was far less sensational. This article aims to provide an overview of the various shades of commemoration in Austria in 2014. To this end, it focuses on the commemoration of official, political Austria, then examines the academic yield of the commemorative wave, and finally turns to the representation of the First World War in exhibitions, [media](#), and private commemorative events, as well as the more recent commemorative events of 2018.

## Official Austria: Stumbling into Memory?

The basic problem with the commemoration of World War I is that, for Austria, the memory of the European “seminal catastrophe” is not a major lieu de mémoire. Negative aspects surrounding the demise of the sometimes overly romanticized monarchy, such as feelings of defeat, humiliation, and trauma, contribute to this, as does the fact that National Socialism and World War II, with their crimes and horrors, had a strong overlapping effect. Between 1918 and 2014, the First World War did not play a significant role in public historical culture,

and its commemoration never had an identity-forming effect in republican Austria, contrasting to the kitschy Habsburg cultural nostalgia.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst the centenary was approaching in leaps and bounds in 2013, Austria's officials continued to give the impression of sleepwalkers. While [France](#) was already rolling out sprawling plans for pan-European [commemorations](#), only one act of cultural diplomacy had been decided for Austria: One of the small country's cultural figureheads, namely the [Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra](#), was to give a concert in Sarajevo on 28 June 2014. In addition, the Austrian Foreign Ministry was preparing to implement various initiatives and to encourage commemoration beyond war graves. For this purpose, a former ambassador was appointed as coordinator.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst France and, Austria's neighbor, [Slovenia](#) formed their own committees to commemorate the First World War, creating broad and officially legitimized platforms, the preparatory work in Austria was limited to the ministerial bureaucracy. The Republic of Austria based its program on the Basic Paper by Austrian Scholars on the Occasion of the Commemoration of the Outbreak of the First World War 100 Years Ago, published in August 2013 and initiated by the Austrian Foreign Ministry in cooperation with four other ministries and the Federal Chancellery. The paper was intended to provide "politicians, Austria's representatives at embassies abroad, and representatives of the individual ministries with a concise information aid" on the current state of research on the First World War.<sup>3</sup> In this basic paper, established historians (in order of the articles: Manfred Rauchensteiner, Helmut Konrad, Oliver Rathkolb, Christa Hämmerle, Wolfgang Maderthaner, Verena Moritz, Gabriella Hauch and Heidemarie Uhl) provided insights into topics such as war guilt, the dark sides of Viennese modernism, media in war, humanitarian consequences, women's history, aftermath, and memory traditions.<sup>4</sup> Further, Austrian missions abroad invited historians to lecture on World War I in 2014 and ministries were given a budget to support various events and publication projects. Beyond that, the matter of commemoration was settled for the Austrian bureaucracy.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, as far as Austrian politics is concerned, Austrian Federal President Heinz Fischer already set the tone in January 2014, aiming to bring a message of peace to the fore. Therefore, on the anniversary of the death of Austrian Nobel Peace Prize laureate [Bertha von Suttner \(1843-1914\)](#), there was a commemorative act at the Austrian National Library - held on 18 June 2014. On this occasion, the politicians present emphasized above all her commitment to peace, the importance of European unification, and the validity of [international law](#).<sup>6</sup>

This was very typical of the 2014 commemorative year. Indeed, a look at the official commemorative program at the national level makes it clear that the central message of various governments or government representatives was unmistakably an appeal for peaceful coexistence and a commitment to a united Europe. In view of the crises and conflicts that dominated 2014, such as those in the [Middle East](#) and [Ukraine](#), various commemorative days and events across Europe in 2014 called for lessons to be learned from history.<sup>7</sup>

Austria's politicians were unable, or unwilling, to provide a detailed localization of Austria-Hungary's position in the 1914 game between the great powers or the associated responsibility for the beginning of the world war. Federal President Fischer, for example, spoke of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy's "share of responsibility" in the First World War, but at the same time emphasized that "other people and other countries" also had a share. According to Fischer, the "wounds from that time have healed." A critical observer admittedly stated that the effect of this "bumpy" event had been "spasmodic", noting discord had given way to indifference rather than friendship in international relations.<sup>8</sup>

The next program item of the official Austria in 2014 was the aforementioned concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in the former city hall of Sarajevo on 28 June. 330 invited guests attended the concert in the town hall itself, whilst in front of the building a "public viewing" was held, with the European Broadcasting Union transmitting the concert to thirty countries. Speeches by politicians were not included in this act of cultural diplomacy. In a short speech, the chairman of the Vienna Philharmonic, Clemens Hellberg, emphasized the unifying power of music and pleaded for reconciliation and the idea of a united Europe. Works by Joseph Haydn, Franz Schubert, Ludwig van Beethoven, and others were performed.<sup>9</sup>

A month later, on the anniversary of Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on [Serbia](#), the leaders of the Austrian government simply spoke out without further events. They wanted to draw "the right lessons" from the past. Chancellor Werner Faymann referred mainly to the then current conflict hotspots and called for "enabling peace in those areas" and Vice-Chancellor Michael Spindelegger saw nationalism, extremism, and hatred as still the greatest threat to peace. Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz, in turn, stressed the need for European unification.<sup>10</sup>

At the great European commemoration of the beginning of the First World War in Liège on 4 August 2014, Austria was represented by President Fischer. However, this did not have a significant role for the nation compared to the "big players" [Germany](#) and France.<sup>11</sup> Thus, for official Austria, the commemoration of the First World War was over. The fact that Austria's

official commemoration appeared mishandled was not, however, purely down to Austria's government but also due to historical trends and the nation's memory culture. This is illustrated by the comments of several historians regarding the 2014 spectacle, for instance, Helmut Konrad noted that Austria has "no grand narrative" about World War I as its end did not lead to a "national birth", but the country was simply "the rest", left over from the dissolution of Austria-Hungary. Furthermore, Manfred Rauchensteiner attested to the Austrian population's tendency to forget. This had already begun in the First Republic and led to a detachment from earlier eras. According to Oliver Rathkolb, "a typical Austrian approach" is to "bury one's head in the sand and feel like a victim". This is one of the reasons why Christopher Clark's bestseller of the commemorative year, *The Sleepwalkers*, with its thesis of shared guilt for the beginning of the war, was so well-received in Austria.<sup>12</sup>

## **Austrian Historiography around the Centenary: Old Wine in New Bottles or Explosion of Innovative Knowledge?**

Looking back on the commemorative year, Elena Messner formulated the following criticism: "Existing theses on the reasons and causes of the outbreak of war were dealt with, negated, affirmed and publicly discussed in various ways during the 2014 commemorative year. The debates did not produce anything genuinely new (even if some publishers and historians claimed just that), only the media breadth of the discussion was remarkable [...]"<sup>13</sup> Even if exaggerated, this criticism nevertheless applies to other topics on the World War, not just questions of the war's outbreak. Around the 2014 commemorative year, there were numerous initiatives and publications.<sup>14</sup> There was a lot of attention on World War I at universities, and many historians published related essays and books around this year. The sheer number of [publications](#) was surprising even for experts and provided a panorama of different topics, for which a few examples will have to suffice here.

First, it should be noted that overall accounts and books that unite the various [political](#), [military](#), social, and [economic](#) aspects of the war are rare. An exception to this rule was the large-scale study by Manfred Rauchensteiner, "The Death of the Double Eagle", published in the late 1980s.<sup>15</sup> Here, for the first time, military history of the First World War was combined with economic history, political history, and social history in one work, showing the entire conflict from an Austro-Hungarian perspective. The book became a standard work and, on the eve of the centenary commemoration in 2013, saw a considerably expanded new edition under the title *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*.<sup>16</sup> The book represents "an encyclopedic work of reference for any historian of Austria-Hungary's Great War" and a "a formidable achievement that takes us far in the direction of explaining the

scale of the last Habsburg war”, according to British historian Mark Cornwall.<sup>17</sup> A comparable effort was made only by the editors and authors of the relevant volume of the well-known series *The Habsburg Monarchy 1848-1918*, entitled *The Habsburg Monarchy and the First World War: The Struggle for the Reorganization of Central Europe*<sup>18</sup>, in which many historians presented both new studies and a broad panorama of the state of research on the First World War. German historian Matthias Stickler notes in a book review that it “represents a valuable contribution to filling an important research gap, the significance of which extends far beyond the Republic of Austria”.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the subjects of investigation were expansive. Studies on socio-psychological aspects featured, such as [emotion](#) and habitus, as well as [women’s](#) and gender history.<sup>20</sup> There was also research on population groups such as the [Czechs](#), for whom Richard Lein had already presented groundbreaking work somewhat before the commemorative year,<sup>21</sup> or on the Jewish soldiers of Austria-Hungary, published as an anthology edited by Marcus Patka, which developed on previous work by Erwin Schmidl.<sup>22</sup> Lutz Musner’s book *The Injured Drum: The War in the Slovenian-Triestinian Karst 1915-1917* covered cultural aspects of warfare.<sup>23</sup> According to Christoph Nübel, Musner’s book offered “culturalist spatial analysis material that adds new facets to the debate” about the battlefields along the [Isonzo](#).<sup>24</sup> In addition, illustrated books were published on previously unpublished photographs from the Austrian State Archives<sup>25</sup> as well as on films.<sup>26</sup> Numerous publications dealt with personal ancestry and new soldier diaries appeared,<sup>27</sup> very often about the front between Austria-Hungary and the Kingdom of Italy. In addition, new editions of older books could be found, some first published only recently, others already decades ago. A good example is the study on Austro-Hungarian [war crimes](#) by Anton Holzer. A publication by Hannes Leidinger, Verena Moritz, Karin Moser, and Wolfram Dornik entitled *Habsburgs Dirty War* also appeared on the same general topic, namely the particularly dark sides of the war of the Danube Monarchy. They demonstrate the many layers of violence the Austro-Hungarian military was capable and guilty of.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the results of many congresses were published as anthologies, some of which were devoted to new topics or offered new, broader perspectives on the past.<sup>29</sup> Economic topics were almost completely absent and only very few historians worked on domestic politics, one being Lothar Höbelt with his study *Stand or Fall? Austrian Politics during World War One*, which illuminates the many interconnected facets of domestic, foreign, and party and national politics, setting out to dispel historical myths surrounding these topics.<sup>30</sup>

A special feature of Austrian historiography on World War I is that regional history

experienced a real flowering.<sup>31</sup> Thanks to a wave of local exhibitions and initiatives a number of books dealing with small communities, towns, and regions appeared. The list is long and includes, for example, Retz<sup>32</sup>, Vöcklabruck<sup>33</sup>, Wiener Neustadt<sup>34</sup> and Zwettl.<sup>35</sup> New studies on regions have emerged, for example, on the Burgenland,<sup>36</sup> Salzburg<sup>37</sup> and Styria.<sup>38</sup> Special mention should be made of Vienna and Tyrol: Alfred Pfoser and Andreas Weigl presented a comprehensive study of the capital during the war, setting new standards,<sup>39</sup> and Tyrol continues to enjoy the attention of some capable historians, as in pre-2014.<sup>40</sup> These studies are mostly anthologies exploring a variety of topics, from history of everyday life and social history, to problems of the administrators during the conflict.

In terms of publication content, research strands were indeed often continued from pre-2014, without venturing into completely new terrain. On the other hand, there were also new studies on general and specific topics, which, taken together, paint a much more accurate picture of the Habsburg monarchy during World War I. Although the picture in Austria mainly concentrates on the German-speaking Alpine countries due to the nationally determined academic culture, some studies provide much more depth. Thus, Elena Messner's statement at the start of this section, claiming that no new material was produced, is only partially true.

## Museums, Media, and Commemoration Away from Politics and Universities

In 2014, numerous [museums](#) brought World War I commemoration to the attention of the broader public. In Vienna alone there were eleven exhibitions dedicated to the topic. Wide attention was paid to the show "To My Peoples! The First World War 1914-1918" in the State Hall of the Austrian National Library, which was essentially based on the "War Collection" already created during the war itself. It featured 250 exhibits out of the War Collection's 52,000 documents and 38,000 photographs. Almost 159,000 people visited the exhibition.<sup>41</sup> In addition, visitors could learn about the effects of the war on the civilian population at the Vienna City and Provincial Archives, the Jewish Museum was dedicated to the lives and deaths of Habsburg Jewish subjects, and the Army History Museum opened its newly designed section on the First World War. On the [artistic](#) side, the Leopold Museum offered an exhibition titled "Nevertheless Art! Austria 1914-1918". Regional accents were set in the provinces by exhibitions in Eisenstadt, Graz, Innsbruck, Klagenfurt, Linz, and Schallaburg.<sup>42</sup> The latter was also the Lower Austrian provincial exhibition and showed the many regional, global, social, economic, political, and military facets of the war and featured objects from public and private lenders. It was able to attract some 170,000 visitors over the course of 230



days.<sup>43</sup>

From the beginning of the year to around the start of fall 2014, a “media barrage”<sup>44</sup> around the First World War unfolded on Austrian television. The Austrian Broadcasting Corporation placed a focus on corresponding content in its programming. Numerous documentaries showed, according to the television producers, “the background, causes and consequences of the First World War or show on the basis of personal fates of men, women and children what this war did to people in Europe and the world.”<sup>45</sup> Programs were devoted, for example, to the assassination in [Sarajevo](#), to [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#), to the railroad, and to diaries of contemporary witnesses. It is interesting to note that after the boom in the spring and summer of 2014, the topic quickly waned again in the media and ultimately attracted minimal attention.<sup>46</sup> Little attention was also paid to the two Austrian World War I films released in the 2014 commemorative year. In the film *The Silent Mountain*, shot in 2012, director Ernst Gossner staged a love drama on the front between Austria-Hungary and Italy, which realistically shows the merciless war in the mountains as well as interpersonal tensions during the conflict. The second film, *The Woods Are Still Green*, is also set on the front with the monarchy’s southern neighbor. In this Austrian-Slovenian co-production, director Marko Nabersnik, portrays a small observation post that is fired upon by three soldiers in the mountains. A young soldier survives and realizes the limited room for manoeuvre and thus deserts. Despite their high quality, both films hardly attracted a significant audience to the cinemas.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, two individual but very telling episodes of the 2014 commemorative year in Austria should be mentioned. On the centenary of the Sarajevo assassination, Franz Ferdinand’s granddaughter, [Anita Hohenberg \(1958\)](#), organized a commemorative ceremony. The event, held in the garden of Artstetten palace, featured over 500 uniformed representatives of reenactment associations, who presented a colorful spectacle to the approximately 120 direct descendants of the heir to the throne and the 100 members of the Habsburg-Lothringen family, as well as 700 invited guests. After the opening mass in the nearby church of Maria Taferl, marches, speeches, a wreath-laying ceremony, and a concert followed.<sup>48</sup> At last, the 2014 commemorative year was reflected in one of the most prestigious Austrian cultural events, the Salzburg Festival, for which historian Christopher Clark gave the opening speech on 27 July 2014. He spanned a broad arc from the history surrounding the outbreak of war to the present day with many catchy examples. His presence was typical of the Austrian attitude during the commemorative year. The historian, who had seemingly largely exculpated the Habsburg monarchy with his globally acclaimed book, was allowed to give the cultural nation his blessing, so to speak, at a central event.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion and Outlook

Austria's somewhat peculiar commemoration in 2014 reflects the various complexities of the country's history as well as its self-image as a cultural superpower. The difficult handling of the past of the early 20th century also continued during the next commemorative opportunity in 2018. Indeed, it can be difficult for Austrians to incorporate both feelings of belonging along with the nation's complicated history within national narratives. World War One has thus largely remained on the periphery since the end of the conflict, finding itself in the midst of the famous "years of eight" – 1918, 1938, 1948 and 1968. This proved fatal for WWI commemoration as, during 2018, it was mostly 1938 and the beginning of the Nazi Era in Austria that drew a lot of attention. When the official Austria convened on 12 November 2018 in the Austrian State Opera to commemorate the founding of the First Austrian Republic, the politicians first and foremost attempted to summon the spirit of unity and compromise as the basis for a liberal democracy. However, these traits were much less present during Austria's first democratic period than the second, established after 1945, thus revealing how little the Austrian politicians had in mind the actual situation of 1918. Nevertheless, the latest Austrian museum the "House of Austrian History", opened on 10 November 2018, shows the effect of World War One on society, culture, and politics of post-war Austria.<sup>50</sup> In the prominent "Heroes Square" on the Viennese Ring Street, a small open-air exhibition "Days of Decision: The Founding of the Republic in 1918" did touch briefly on some aspects of World War One that carried over into [peacetime](#), such as war psychosis. These events however did not compare to the much more extensive celebrations in the [Czech](#) and [Slovak](#) Republics as well as in [Poland](#). There, the positive themes of national statehood and independence after World War One offered more positive energy for commemoration than Austria's failed first democratic attempt in 1918, borne out of the despair of a lost war.<sup>51</sup>

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