

Civilian and Military Power (Austria-Hungary)

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Summary

The relationship between civilian and military power in Austria-Hungary during the First World War was determined by a number of factors, including the dual state structure and the controversial nationality question. The joint army leadership tried to deal with these difficulties even before the outbreak of the war by implementing far-reaching absolutist measures aimed at introducing modern methods of warfare and mobilization. This policy was imposed with such ruthlessness on the multi-national civilian population during the war – and this can definitely be seen as domestic warfare – that the resulting system of mistrust and persecution, along with harsh living conditions, caused escalating protest and ultimately alienated the people from the state. By the time it came, the reaction from the government and the monarchy was far too late.

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Introduction

The Habsburg Monarchy, which, since the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, had been a real union of two independent and equal states with differing constitutions and separate parliamentary representatives – on the basis of two different forms of suffrage – and governments, was a multinational state. Apart from the figure of the ruler or the dynasty, the two halves shared only foreign, financial and defence policy. These were run by the so-called k. u. k. (*kaiserlich und königlich*, literally “imperial and royal”) ministries common to the two halves of the empire and agreed on by parliamentary delegation at regular intervals.

Equality between all [nationalities](#) should have become the foundation stone of the Habsburg concept of [empire](#). In reality, however, the two majority groupings, the Magyars in the Hungarian (Transleithanian) and the Germans in the Austrian (Cisleithanian) half of the empire, continued to control political activities.¹ As a result, other ethnic nations, especially the Slavs, began to demand their historic rights and to fight for a just position in the state. This national inhomogeneity gave rise to constant disputes, conflicts and national disagreements between the parliamentary representations and governments in Austria and Hungary. It became increasingly common in Cisleithania to use k. u. k. troops in the form of assistance deployments to restore order, for example during the hunger riots in Vienna in 1911 and demonstrations for suffrage in Prague in 1905, and to temporarily take over civilian administration, and the military thus gained influence on civilian political decisions. In contrast, Hungary was unable to deploy the army without [government](#) approval so during demonstrations it relied on gendarmes and the Honvéd.

In general it seemed that, for the various nationalities and parties and for the state, the exertion of force was an appropriate measure for solving domestic political tension. The widening economic, social and cultural disparities, together with the attempt by the political elites to stabilize domestic rule by pursuing an aggressive foreign policy, led to the socialization of violence in [Austria-Hungary](#) long before the First World War.² The national conflicts also caused deep mistrust on the part of the state and military authorities regarding the loyalty of the non-German population in particular. The cooperation that did exist between the administration and political and national elite groups, as well as their willingness to compromise, contributed to the deterioration of military-civil relations. The military increasingly perceived the constitutional state and the participatory role of society in the empire as a threat from within that must be fought with mounting force: [Jonathan Gumz](#) and John Deak describe it as an “internal war”.³ All these conflicts made the army high command draw up exceptionally authoritarian emergency legislation that essentially amounted to the militarization of Austro-Hungarian society during war.

The legal basis on which the relationship between [civilian and military power](#) developed, and the repercussions the conflict between them had on living conditions, are discussed in the context of the disintegration of the Dual Monarchy.

Socialized Violence in Austria-Hungary before the First World War

The majority of recent research on the First World War backs politician and lawyer [Josef Redlich's \(1869-1936\)](#) view, namely that a dictatorial war regime became established in the

Dual Monarchy as early as the general mobilization at the end of July 1914, which, unlike for other nations in the war, would bring about a lasting and radical change in the relationship between the state and its citizens.⁴ This was especially true of the Austrian half of the empire, where the army, citing “military necessity”, was soon able to expand its influence to the civil administration. This was made possible by a series of laws and emergency orders, which had been applicable since 1867 and encroached enormously on basic individual rights, creating the basis for a repressive military system. However, these laws were only applicable for the Cisleithanian half of the empire. Despite considerable pressure from Vienna, attempts to extend them to include the kingdom failed for almost thirty years due to resistance by the Hungarian government. This was because, according to Hungarian legal interpretation, the special powers established by a law of exception should be bestowed on government authorities and not, as in Cisleithania, the army. The Hungarian government was careful to limit the military’s influence on politics and society and conserve as much (economic) autonomy as possible. From 1905 onwards, these differences of opinion between Vienna and Budapest complicated negotiations. When the first *“Orientierungsbehelf über Ausnahmeverfügungen für Österreich”* (Guidelines for Emergency Orders in the Event of War) were compiled in 1905 – later to be appended – Hungary was urged to ratify or create similar emergency orders.⁵ This resulted in massive protests against Austria’s attempted interference. Budapest was already working on its own decrees, which, in the event of war, were to expand the responsibilities and powers of the governmental authorities and at the same time expand the power of the army high command in southern Hungary and prevent attacks on the civilian population.⁶

The annexation of the regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908 together with the two [Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913](#) intensified the domestic political situation in the Dual Monarchy. Austria-Hungary went to war with different conceptions of how to deal with politics, the military and the civilian administration. Unlike the Hungarian half of the empire, the Austrian half had been governed for some considerable time without any parliamentary checks and balances, with the cabinet of Prime Minister [Karl Graf Stürgkh \(1859-1916\)](#) governing by virtue of article 14 – described by Josef Redlich as the “dictatorship clause” – on emergency orders contained in the Basic Law of 1867.⁷ Stürgkh considered it natural that the civilian administration should submit to the military authorities and the army high command after the outbreak of war.⁸ In Transleithania opinions were different. With the Hungarian Emergency Law of 1912 it was possible, in the event of war, to effect exceptions to laws – albeit restricted by time and geographical position – and to expand the powers of the civil authorities. These special powers were to be bestowed on government commissars, who would then adopt measures in coordination with the army. So with regard to emergency

orders, Hungary had taken a different, independent path.⁹

Soon after the beginning of the war, extensive plans were developed for fighting [pan-Slavism](#) and irredentism and for comprehensive state and administration reform, intended especially in the non-German speaking regions of the Habsburg Monarchy to remain in place even after the end of the war. These military plans went too far even for the Austrian [government](#), and it postponed any decision until after the war. The reform proposals were left unrealised.¹⁰ When the Austrian parliament was recalled at the end of May 1917 by [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#), it did not pick up on the reform plans of the military. By contrast, the parliament in Hungary sat throughout the war and helped to give the wartime governments greater legitimacy in the enforcement of civil interests over military demands.¹¹

The Militarization of Society: Wartime and Emergency Legislation

The plans and measures to mobilize the army, immediately put into practice when the war began, showed that Austria-Hungary's military strategy was well prepared. This was not the case, however, in an economic or social sense.¹² The Habsburg Monarchy's mobilization plans provided for an extensive militarization of society and the political administration, which had major repercussions for daily life on the home front. From the outset these dictatorial ideas went far beyond the merely logistical aspect of securing mobilization. They were principally aimed at using the necessary ruthlessness to force the different nationalities to carry out their duties to the state.¹³

For example, the emperor and his government could pass decrees with temporary legal force without approval from the Imperial Council.¹⁴ Constitutional guarantees of fundamental civil rights could be repealed, such as the freedom of the individual (i.e. freedom of movement and freedom from unlawful detention), the inviolability of the right to refuse entry to one's home, the right to congregate and associate freely, or freedom of expression and the [press](#). Civil servants were put under the control of the military. Moreover, any civilian accused of crimes against the external and internal security of the state, imperial dynasty or armed authorities could be placed under the jurisdiction of the military courts.¹⁵ This last point was dealt with quite differently in Hungary.¹⁶ Contact with the press was also dealt with differently in the Hungarian half of the empire, where civilian authorities managed [censorship](#). All in all, Hungary's "military absolutism" took a "milder" form than in Austria, where even the civilian population was dealt with severely in order to maintain domestic order and to suppress nationalistic and political manifestations.

An even more far-reaching law aimed at limiting the political and social rights of the population was the Act on War Services (*Kriegsleistungsgesetz*) passed in December 1912. It allowed the state to force every citizen to provide specific services in the event of war, such as the garrisoning of troops in private quarters, supplying [transport](#), [food](#), [animal](#) fodder and cattle, as well as militarizing certain firms and operations. Its objective was not only to guarantee production at firms central to the war effort but also to supply these with workers or to have the power to force civilians to work in the arms industry or agriculture. Moreover, it allowed public or private property to be confiscated indefinitely, for example, for defensive purposes or to support and safeguard military operations directly or indirectly. The aim of the act was to exploit to the full the population's material and moral potential in such a way that the country's entire economy and industry were at the service of modern methods of [warfare](#). Military institutions were given the right to requisition war services either by having the local authorities issue an order to that effect or by making their demands directly to the local population. This concerned above all the conscription of all male civilians capable of work up to the age of fifty, who became subject to military disciplinary and penal power.¹⁷

The system of emergency orders within the framework of the laws of war replaced the highly secret *Orientierungsbehelf über Ausnahmeverfügungen für den Kriegsfall* of the k. u. k. War Ministry from 1912.¹⁸ It only came into force in the Austrian half of the empire and in Bosnia-Herzegovina, while a similar regulation (*Orientierungsbehelf über Ausnahmsverfügungen für den Kriegsfall auf Grund des Gesetzartikels LXIII vom Jahre 1912 für die Länder der heiligen ungarischen Krone*) was established for Hungary. These guidelines provided for the creation of the *Kriegsüberwachungsamt* ([War Surveillance Office](#)) within the Ministry of War. Its main task was to manage and enforce the implementation of the emergency orders. In Hungary, this function was assumed by the royal Hungarian *Kriegsüberwachungskommission* (War Surveillance Commission), although only in an advisory role for the civilian and military administration.

On the very day of the mobilization against [Serbia](#) on 25 July 1914, [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#) issued a number of decrees repealing civil rights.¹⁹ Three days later Minister President [István Tisza \(1861-1918\)](#) announced the first emergency orders in Hungary. Within less than a week, over thirty important emergency decrees which encroached on major aspects of basic individual rights were enacted. At the beginning there was surprisingly little political or national opposition worthy of note. This remained the case even when the civilian administration was put under the orders of the responsible military commander throughout much of the Slav- and Italian-speaking territories. The so-called "narrower" and "broader" war zones, where the military ruled with absolute dictatorial powers, came to be defined extremely generously in territorial terms. These zones

encompassed entire crown lands such as the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dalmatia, the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria including Cracow, Bukovina, and parts of Silesia, Moravia and the Banat. When [Italy](#) joined the war in May 1915, it was extended to the whole of Tyrol, Vorarlberg, Salzburg, Carinthia, Carniola, Gorizia, Gradisca, Trieste and Istria. The army commands had the power to enforce decrees in these territories in order to preserve military interests within the political domain.²⁰

Civilian Living Conditions and Political Protest in the Context of the Struggle between Military and State Power

Even before the war, the different ideas proposed by politicians, the military and the civilian administrations of both halves of the empire for dealing with the growing social demands and political emancipation movements of the various nationalities had created considerable [tension](#). These pressures increasingly damaged the relationship between the military authorities, specifically the Ministry of War and the general staff, and the civil authorities.

With the outbreak of the war, this national antagonism increased as a consequence of the huge transfer of power to the military.²¹ When the army was mobilised against Serbia, far-reaching measures to uphold military interests came into effect, which resulted in authoritarian conditions. Accusations of political unreliability, [espionage](#) or being a “security risk”, mainly addressed at Serbians but also at Ruthenians in Galicia, led to military incursions that were criticised, for example by Tisza, who was concerned they would influence the loyalty of minorities living in Hungary.²² This profoundly shaped the civilian population’s everyday experience of war. At the same time, the army lost its aura as an integrating force in the multi-national state. When the Russian army captured the capitals [Lemberg/Lviv/Lwów](#) and Czernowitz/Chernivtsi/Cernăuți shortly after the war began, Ruthenians were held responsible for these military failures. The result was a wave of hostage-takings, executions and finally deportations and [internments](#) in the hinterland under the guise of “military necessity”.²³ This last would develop into an important tool used by military leaders against the civilian population. In the deployment zones of Galicia and later in Italy, the army leadership had no clear idea of how to deal with the remaining non-German population in particular, and thus opted for a policy of extreme ruthlessness to show strength. Agricultural workers came off worst because they were conscripted to details for defensive work or to cover army supplies on top of having to collect the harvest. Sizeable military requisitions and billeting of troops took place in larger localities, [fortresses](#) and towns. The endless objections to the military measures by the overwhelmed civilian bureaucracy largely fell on deaf ears.

The result on the north-eastern front in the first few weeks of the war was shocking. About half of the 800,000 soldiers serving in the four Austro-Hungarian armies in Galicia had been [killed](#), wounded, or taken [prisoner](#). Nearly 100,000 soldiers were under siege at the fortress of Przemyśl, while countless towns and villages had been razed to the ground, destroyed or set fire to.²⁴ The course of the war on the north-western front and later on the south-western front led to a massive wave of evacuations and forced deportations of tens of thousands of civilians, who flooded the military deployment routes behind the front lines under chaotic conditions. They had horrific stories to tell and soon became a common sight on the streets of the larger towns and cities of the Habsburg Monarchy. As a visible reminder of the fact that modern warfare was no longer just taking place somewhere “out there” on the borders and military fronts, these socially, culturally and linguistically disparate [refugees](#), often homeless and hungry, undermined the image of a state able to provide for its people. The situation worsened as the war dragged on; the native population increasingly saw the incomers as rivals in the daily battle for food and survival as supplies became scarcer and prices soared.²⁵

Not just the permanent requisition of grain, cattle, milk and animal fodder, but also the increasingly critical shortage of seed, fertiliser and carts caused nearly insuperable problems for the few remaining agricultural workers. [Women](#) and [children](#) in rural areas and towns were forced to carry out heavy manual labour and were soon on the verge of physical and psychological exhaustion. Countless petitions to the local civilian authorities asking for the release of an enlisted husband, brother or son were largely unsuccessful. The military authorities had meanwhile even begun to cultivate or harvest the fields on their own, requisitioning the few remaining available human and material resources. The army high command nevertheless continued to demand the full exploitation of the civilian workforce, including women and children, in order to maintain the effectiveness of military power, whose force the population would be made to feel when necessary.²⁶

All attempts by the state to distribute the increasingly scarce supplies as fairly as possible were powerless to halt the dramatic decline in living conditions and provisions, particularly in the Austrian half of the empire, from 1917 onwards. Although Austria-Hungary usually produced enough food to cover its own needs, especially grain, potatoes, sugar and meat, the much more industrialized Austrian half depended on food imports from Hungary even in peacetime. Such imports became increasingly scarce during the course of the war. Only the army continued to receive sufficient supplies, with little left for the civilian population. The dual structure of the monarchy thus also proved a disadvantage as far as economic mobilization was concerned as each half of the Dual Monarchy set out to exploit the emergency situation for its own benefit and interests, which led to conflicts between the two halves of the empire.²⁷

Even though the Austrian government and administration gradually tried to free themselves from the stranglehold of the military during the course of the war, attempting to regain their role as the social and political representatives of the civilian population, it was too late to stop the advanced process by which state and nation had lost their legitimacy. The state was now blamed for the shortages and economic mismanagement. The famine in the winter of 1916/1917 was followed by mass [protests](#) throughout the Dual Monarchy in early 1917 against the catastrophic shortage of supplies, aggravated by high prices, corruption and profiteering. As workers once again began to organize themselves in [trade unions](#) and politically, the war government, fearing further uncontrolled strike movements, attempted to impose public welfare measures and to change wage and employment conditions. So-called “complaint commissions” were set up by the military authorities in March 1917 in Austria – similar institutions had been established in Hungary in 1916 –, mainly intended as an outlet for workers to bring their grievances against the conditions in the war firms and factories. Trade unionists and businessmen were equally represented under a military chairman in these arbitration boards, although these had very little room for manoeuvre. Their task was to counteract any negative consequences for production resulting from the oppressive treatment of workers and – with mainly meagre results – to ensure decent working conditions and fair wages. The implementation of these commissions was accompanied, however, by a deterioration in legal working conditions, and women, too, became subject to compulsory work and the onerous conditions of the [war economy](#).

Another late attempt to deal with the endless national, political and socio-economic conflicts occurred when the Austrian parliament, which had been adjourned since March 1914, was reactivated in May 1917. A general imperial amnesty for all “political suspects” was meant to assuage the mood of discontent in the nationalities ruled by the monarchy. However, those affected were not allowed to return home but transferred from internment to refugee camps, which hardly represented greater freedom in practice. At the same time, the ferocious arguments and debates in the recalled Austrian parliament showed that the process of social polarization and fragmentation in the Habsburg Monarchy was already well advanced. People had lost interest in grand political ideas, their perspective reduced to the daily fight for survival. Parliamentary representatives immediately embarked on an embittered debate on the role of the nation in the state and the future of Austria. Their public impact was limited, however, by censorship and doubts raised by the military authorities about the sincerity of some representatives’ loyalty to the state, and they had very little political influence.^{[28](#)}

New means of informal communication between the battlefields and the home front were invented to get round censorship as the blatant contradiction between reports of military successes and the pitiful conditions at home became clear.^{[29](#)} Only a rigid respect for

hierarchy, the fear of military repression, the soldier's sense of duty and occasionally also the bonds created by the shared experience at the front could maintain the supposedly "strong ties" to the monarchy. The numbers refusing to perform military duties steadily increased and soldiers at the front began to experience something akin to a patriotic identity crisis, worsened by the death of Emperor Francis Joseph on 21 November 1916. This was particularly true of the non-German nationalities, who resented the closer alliance with Germany following the failed unilateral [peace attempt](#) of the young Emperor Charles. Not even military successes could change this identity crisis in the long term.

The strikes that spontaneously erupted across Austria-Hungary and the violent unrest of January 1918, as well as the [naval mutinies in Kotor/Cattaro](#) in February of the same year, had their origins in food shortages and a desperate desire for peace.³⁰ Physical and psychological exhaustion, against which the civilian and military powers were increasingly helpless, had consumed both the military and the home front. Moreover, politically motivated conflicts between town and countryside, the province and the Viennese metropolis, were rising in the final year of the war. In the cities, demonstrations were led mainly by the urban workforce and organized by social democrats, who felt used and abandoned by the rural population. The bourgeois-rural protest, on the other hand, invoked the traditional figures of [hate](#) of "Jewish capitalism" and the "Semitized" metropolis of Vienna against social democracy. They portrayed workers as the "stateless rabble of imperial enemies and traitors", "Jewish parasites" and "Bolsheviks in tow to the Russian Revolution". The antiquated military bureaucratic structures of the Dual Monarchy were also heavily criticized, as was the absolutist approach of the military and the state to the war. The authorities for their part feared, not without reason, the outbreak of further unrest and therefore reinforced the police and military presence. Escalation loomed. While the military continued to adhere to their plans for an authoritarian remodelling of the Habsburg Monarchy, individual nationalities were already beginning to take their own constitutional paths.

Conclusion

In many ways the Habsburg Monarchy was no different from other warring states: at the beginning of the war in 1914 citizens' constitutional rights were suspended, the media was controlled and state [propaganda](#) increased. This decisive turning point was made possible by a series of emergency regulations that had been prepared far in advance and, although interpreted differently in the two halves of the empire, now came into effect and led to an expansion of the authority of various protagonists. While in Hungary these emergency laws gave the civilian government more power and control – carried out by officials of the civil service – in Austria the army seized the opportunity to expand its influence and to move against the administration, the political elite and minorities. Under the pretext of military

necessity, the army waged not only an external war, but also a domestic one. The army's instrumentalization of these laws and its arbitrary and extreme actions created an atmosphere of mistrust within the population and caused lasting damage, not only to the relationship between the civilian and the military realms, but also to the rule of law.

Although civilian and military power and authorities in Austria-Hungary were well aware of the growing mood of pessimism and resignation among the population, not to mention the growing support for [revolution](#), the political response came far too late. This was true especially of the dismissal of Chief of General Staff [Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf \(1852-1925\)](#), the reconvening of the Imperial Council by Emperor Charles in 1917 and the emperor's manifesto to the peoples of Austria-Hungary on 16 October 1918, the so-called *Völkermanifest*, in which he proposed converting Austria-Hungary into a federation of free nations.³¹ When the Habsburg Monarchy was dissolved as a state in October and November 1918, bringing about a transformation of the European map, the principal cause lay in the militarization and fragmentation of society. This process had already begun before the war and was massively accelerated by it, with the civil and military powers as well as the monarchy losing their unifying roles.

The war's consequences and the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy left deep political and social scars in bilateral and regional relationships throughout Europe, creating a lasting chronological gap in the study of its history.

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