

Revolutions (Austria-Hungary)

By [Hannes Leidinger](#)

Summary

The following pages - focusing on the collapse of the Habsburg Empire and the incidents in Austria in 1918/20 - are subdivided into four different periods and aspects: Firstly, World War One until the increasing protest movements of 1917/18, secondly, nonconformity and open resistance in the army in 1918, thirdly, the downfall of the monarchy and the disintegration of the political unit in the Danube basin in late 1918, and lastly, the rupture in November 1918, the subsequent formation of the republic, the democratization of the political system, unrest, coup d'état in 1919 and the end of the "revolutionary span" at the beginning of the 1920s.

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Introduction

"Revolution" as the fundamental idea of processes or moments fostering irreversible change became a key word for the conception of progress in the 19th and 20th century. At the same time the term was susceptible to being reduced to a theoretical and eventually empty expression of upheaval, so that phrasemongers stressed to "trigger", "defend" and "hasten" the "revolution" without defining what these actions actually meant. Notwithstanding the numbness of ideological speeches, especially in the former communist regimes, the term revolution can describe upheavals lasting for a few days, weeks or months but which create long term consequences lasting for decades, centuries or even longer.¹ Certainly, a fundamental rupture like this happened in the Russian society in 1917.² But is it possible to arrive at the conclusion that something similar took place in Austria? At a glance it seems

obvious that Central Europe experienced dramatic events in the wake of the First World War: the end of the German and Habsburg monarchies and the construction of a new geographical and political order at the hands of the three main Allied powers, Britain, France, and the United States.

Yet when examined more closely, scholars were nevertheless in doubt about the similarity between the events in the perishing Tsarist Empire and the dissolution of [Austria-Hungary](#). They argued that in Vienna, Budapest or Prague the old system had not been overthrown by organizations and parties of revolutionaries; neither did there exist influential social groups nor a ruling upper class willing to fight for the Danube monarchy. Finally, and contrary to the [Russian revolution](#), bloodshed and [civil war](#) were nearly completely avoided. Social structures and pecuniary circumstances did not change profoundly and elites retained their influence.³

Therefore quite a few commentators refused to use the term “revolution” with regard to Austrian history at the end of the First World War and the beginning of the 1920s, while others tried to distinguish between several alterations in various parts of Austrian society.⁴ Hence, Marxist interpreters conceded that Austria was transformed politically and legally from 1918 to 1920 by new constitutional regulations but social and economic reforms were merely rudimentary. That is why they prefer to speak – in their terminology – of a “bourgeois-democratic revolution”, sometimes analogous to the Russian Revolution in February (March by the western calendar) 1917.⁵ The most detailed analysis in this respect originated from the leading social democrat and theorist [Otto Bauer \(1881-1938\)](#). When Bauer spoke of a national and democratic revolution causing the disintegration of the Dual monarchy, he tried to differentiate between a political transformation (one that fell short of a complete implementation of a social revolution in the successor states of the “old empire”) in general and the young Austrian republic in particular.⁶

Shortcomings, discontent and unrest

Though Austria-Hungary’s leadership was also responsible for the outbreak of the First World War, the Dual monarchy – like most of the other belligerent powers – was only prepared for short-term military operations. The repercussions from these expectations were already perceptible in 1915 when food was rationed in the Western, Austrian, part of the [empire](#). The situation deteriorated in 1916 and after a bad harvest the supply reserves aggravated the severe winter of 1916/17. From autumn 1916 the number of riots due to hunger and even starvation increased.⁷

New institutions for food supply, such as the Institute for the circulation of grain in times of

war (*Kriegsgetreideverkehrsanstalt*), the Joint [Austrian-Hungarian] nutritional committee (*Gemeinsamer Ernährungsausschuss*), the Office for the nourishing of the people (*Amt für Volksernährung*), and the Commissariat-General for wartime and transitional economy (*Generalkommissariat für Kriegs- und Übergangswirtschaft*) were created, though these failed to ameliorate the living conditions of the population mainly due to the policy of isolation by provinces and local communities. Thus, the trade network in (East) Central Europe started to dissolve years before the rule of the Habsburg dynasty came to an end.⁸

This process went hand in hand with [waves of strikes](#), particularly during the first months of 1917. The protest movement – in many cases involving an enormous number of women caring for their families and employed in various branches of the wartime economy – reached its peak in January 1918 when industrial production in the Monarchy came almost to a halt. About a million workers demonstrated against the lack of “bread and fuel.” They also criticized [the government](#) for the continuation of the fighting and demanded new electoral laws. Moreover, these claims were also connected with manifestations of sympathy for the Russian revolution and the decision of the new Bolshevik regime’s call for a peace treaty. Though there was a general lack of reliable information about the developments in the former Tsarist Empire and communist attempts to establish the “dictatorship of the proletariat”, “Red October” and the Russian revolutionary slogan “All power to the soviets” appeared as a model for parts of the strengthened leftist wing within the Austrian labour movement. One impact of the series of strikes was therefore the emergence of “Soviet” organizations (worker’s councils) in the Habsburg monarchy.⁹

However, Russian ideas did not determine the course of events in Austria. The system did not collapse in January 1918 and was at least not shaken directly by the messages of [Vladimir Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) and his comrades. On the contrary tensions eased because of negotiations between the representatives of the protest movement and the government though the latter had not made any real concessions.¹⁰ In the meantime, the worker’s councils were entirely under the control of the Social Democrats who pursued a moderate course and intended to preserve the Monarchy from disintegration. Hence, some members of the Austrian political leadership approached the once disdained “Reds” and “informed insiders” started to characterize the imperial government as increasingly social democratic.¹¹

Mutineers and deserters

Notwithstanding such developments, high-ranking military officers were still convinced that the difficulties of social unrest could only be mastered with the uncompromising rigour of military discipline. Corresponding to their simplistic scorn of socialist attitudes, the Army’s

high command tended to fight against everything which seemed to them an exponent of the "October Regime" and Lenin's ideology. Former [prisoners of war](#) (POWs) who returned from [Russia](#) were therefore received with mistrust and even malevolence. Suspected to be "infected" with the "bacillus of Bolshevik ideas" former POWs had to endure relatively harsh treatment in special camps set up to supervise and educate military persons in a "patriotic sense."¹²

When repatriated soldiers then learned that their families had to endure disastrous living conditions, some of the former prisoners revolted against their new combat duties. Mutinies above all in Styria, Northern Bohemia, Southern Hungary and Serbia as well as the revolt of sailors in [Cattaro](#) ended with the execution of about 100 "rebels." Parliamentary critique emphasized correctly that these revolts were not caused by the immediate impact of the Russian revolution but rather destitution on the home front and military policy brought about the violent uprisings within the armed forces.¹³

Nevertheless strikes, civilian protest, or discontent and unrest among soldiers did not lead to the breakdown of the Dual monarchy. This correction also applies to the frequently mentioned problem of deserters, the so called "green cadres", which worried the authorities especially in the last months of the First World War. In fact figures in this respect were exaggerated. The estimated 100,000 to 250,000 soldiers unwilling to serve as troops of the Habsburg Empire cannot be verified. Official Investigations in August 1918 showed that in the reserve army nearly 50,000 military persons were missing. Of these, only about half the men were looked upon as deserters. The rest figured as leave personnel despite the fact that many of them were absent without permission.¹⁴

The Road to Collapse

All in all, conditions in Austria proved that neither a powerful organization nor a mass movement existed to overthrow the government or to transform basic social and economic structures. Nonconformist activities and open resistance emerged only when a war-weary and exhausted population suffering from food and fuel shortages was pushed to prepare for new military operations.¹⁵

Uprisings in [Germany](#) clearly followed this pattern and contributed to the [collapse of the monarchic order](#).¹⁶ But nothing comparable occurred in Austria-Hungary. The Habsburg reign disappeared because of the economic catastrophe caused by the war, the diminishing influence of the authorities and the increasing pressure of [nationalist](#) movements. While the myth of the Emperor and the loyalty to his rule began to vanish with the death of [Francis](#)

[Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#), oppositional circles had their “grand entrance.” The atmosphere was dominated by the will to bring an end to the war, as well as to the existing conditions in general, and there was simply no one who could prevent nationalist-separatist pressure groups abroad and in the provinces of the monarchy from taking the initiative.¹⁷

This was especially true when the latter were supported by the Allied powers. International decisions thus had a decisive impact on the events in autumn 1918. Until that time [France](#) and [Great Britain](#) hesitated to accept the disintegration of the Habsburg monarchy. Keeping the consequences of a collapse in mind both countries feared the creation of a political vacuum or an increase in German influence in the region. Only when Vienna became a helpless appendage of Berlin and the central authorities in Austria lost control did the Entente governments revise their opinions.¹⁸

Against this backdrop, committees and parties of the peoples claimed the right of national self-determination, while [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#) himself accelerated the process of political disintegration with his manifesto for transforming the Austrian part of the Dual monarchy into a federation of nation states led by the house of Habsburg. In response, the people opposed the ruling dynasty and demanded full sovereignty. On 28 October 1918, an independent [Czechoslovak](#) state was proclaimed, while at the same time Polish members of the Viennese parliament declared the unification of Polish territories inside the crumbling Dual monarchy with the new Polish state. The next day, Croatia broke away from the old regime to make common cause with Serbians and Slovenes, who joined a nascent [Yugoslavia](#) on 31 October. Parallel to these developments, representatives of the German speaking territories within the Habsburg Empire promulgated their wish to form their own state separate from any authority of the existing government. Notwithstanding the fact that Charles was unwilling to renounce all his claims to the throne, the Emperor and King eventually had to accept that Austria and Hungary were separate republics on 12 and 16 November 1918. Viennese leadership favoured a union with Germany, while Budapest experimented with leftist, pro-soviet ideas during the next months, until an anti-Bolshevik kingdom came into being apart from the former dynasty.¹⁹

Notwithstanding these startling events, demands for a radical political and social reorientation as well as revolutionary ideals and behaviour patterns were not the causes but in many ways were the consequences of Austria-Hungary’s breakdown as an outcome of the First World War. From this point of view it seems advisable to point out that the resilience of the Habsburg state and its institutions may have been underestimated by past scholars who alleged the inevitability of the Empire’s demise.²⁰

Rupture

The collapse of the Habsburg monarchy produced a general feeling of insecurity and radicalism in Central Europe. When the front began to dissolve, retreating soldiers plundered depot facilities and appeared in the "*Hinterland*" wearing red cockades. Some officers risked violent attacks by marauders snatching the emblems of those who remained conspicuously loyal to their princely ex-commander-in-chief.²¹

In ever increasing numbers, people succumbed to the fascination of political upheaval. Soldiers' Councils were founded and the Workers' Councils had to include new leftist groups, among them the new Communist party financed and supported by Bolshevik emissaries. Together with foreign prisoners of war interned in Austria, soldiers returning from the frontlines and especially those from Russian captivity radicalized the situation. Families of military persons, disabled war veterans and a growing number of the unemployed joined the growing protest movement as well. Leftist circles sympathetic with anarchism, syndicalism, communism and Soviet power profited through an almost complete loss of centralized control.²²

Apart from the worsening supply position, the situation became even more precarious through the decisions of the victorious powers of the First World War and the conflicts between the successor states of the Habsburg monarchy. Hungary, in particular, incensed by the territorial demands of neighbouring countries and Allied commissions, reacted with "national Bolshevism" in the shape of a Soviet system dominated by a socialist-communist coalition.²³

When a few days later a "Soviet order" was also proclaimed in Munich, the infant Austrian Republic was immediately threatened by internal and external factors. Twice in the course of the first half of 1919, on 17 April and 15 June, protest movements instigated by local communists as well as "Hungarian emissaries" attempted a coup d'état in Vienna. When both failed and the Soviet republics in Bavaria and Hungary perished, it was evident that the most radical phase of the post-war era was over.²⁴

In spite of the existence of soldier's and worker's councils as well as discontent, demonstrations and riots in the capital, countryside and in provincial towns (especially in Graz, Leoben and Linz), Austria experienced a kind of conservative consolidation beginning in the 1920s. In retrospect, this development was determined primarily by two factors: Firstly, the Viennese leadership knew very well that the newly born state depended on the external relief campaigns of the anti-Soviet Entente and an internal compromise between the "red

centre” and the more or less anti-socialist provinces. Hence, there were no propitious preconditions for socialist experiments. Secondly, the “bourgeois” parties rejected the Russian example, and the powerful Social Democrats maintained a course against the Bolsheviks, while the communist party remained a small minority in the long run.²⁵

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the programme of the “Red October” and Lenin’s regime, Austrian developments since November 1918 can be described as a revolution: In a few months the political map of East Central Europe was redrawn. Against the backdrop of this rupture and reorganization, the young Austrian state saw a process of democratization with universal suffrage (also for women and in the provinces for local communities), sovereignty of the peoples and the elected parliament as well as the disappearance of feudal remnants and privileges of the aristocracy. Finally, the creation of an Austrian republic brought an end to the Habsburg dynasty.²⁶

However, the prime goal of the Social Democrats, the establishment of a socialist republic, in which all citizens would be able to participate and exert their influence, could not be brought about.²⁷ Apart from some reforms the attitude of all other parties and the provisions of the [peace treaty of Saint-Germain](#) made concepts of an extensive socialist state obsolete in 1920. This period “witnessed not only the resignation of the first coalition government; it also marked the end of the Austrian revolution”, stated Wolfgang Maderthaner, director of the Austrian state archives and one of the experts for the history of labour movement.²⁸

On the other hand, the revolution appeared unfinished because of many unsolved problems that arose from the decay and downfall of the monarchy and the incidents from late 1918 to the early 1920s. Among the most important were: the ideological gap between political camps; the growth of anti-Semitism together with anti-Socialist resentments and anti-Bolshevist feelings; the tragic crisis of national identity fostering Pan-Germanism and foreshadowing the *Anschluss*, the integration of Austria in the Third Reich in 1938.²⁹ Thus, it makes sense to revisit the events of November 1918 and the following turmoil that left deep and painful scars – which sometimes even last to the present.³⁰

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Notes

1. Leidinger, Hannes/Moritz, Verena: Gefangenschaft, Revolution, Heimkehr. Die

- Bedeutung der Kriegsgefangenenproblematik für die Geschichte des Kommunismus in Mittel- und Osteuropa 1917-1920, Vienna, Cologne, Weimar 2003, p. 120. ↑
2. See, among many others: Moritz, Verena/Leidinger, Hannes: Die Russische Revolution, Vienna, Cologne, Weimar 2011. ↑
 3. Stadler, Karl R.: Die Gründung der Republik, in: Weinzierl, Erika/Skalnik, Kurt (eds.): Österreich 1918-1938. Geschichte der Ersten Republik. Vol. 1. Graz, Vienna, Cologne 1983, p. 74; Bruckmüller, Ernst: Sozialgeschichte Österreichs. Vienna, Munich 1985, p. 463; Leidinger, Hannes/Moritz, Verena: Die Republik Österreich 1918/2008. Überblick, Zwischenbilanz, Neubewertung, Vienna 2008, p. 217. ↑
 4. Stadler, Die Gründung der Republik 1983, p. 73. ↑
 5. Hanisch, Ernst: Der große Illusionist. Otto Bauer (1881-1938), Vienna, Cologne, Weimar 2011, pp. 144 and 146f-147. ↑
 6. Bauer, Otto: Die österreichische Revolution, in: Otto Bauer Werkausgabe, Vienna 1976, II, pp. 629, 637, 642, 652 and 657. ↑
 7. Moritz, Verena/Leidinger, Hannes: Zwischen Nutzen und Bedrohung. Die russischen Kriegsgefangenen in Österreich 1914-1921, Bonn 2005, pp. 175-177 and 180. It should be mentioned that the situation in Austria deteriorated particularly due to its dependency on supplies of grain from Hungary and other nations. For further details about the dire circumstances in Austria, especially in comparison with Germany, see chapters 14, 15 and 16 in: Stevenson, David: 1914-1918. Der Erste Weltkrieg, Mannheim 2010, pp. 382-550. ↑
 8. Ibid., p. 22.; Loewenfeld-Russ, Hans: Die Regelung der Volksernährung im Krieg, Vienna, New Haven 1926, p. 60; Landwehr von Pragenau, Ottokar: Hunger. Die Erschöpfungsjahre der Mittelmächte 1917/18, Zurich, Leipzig, Vienna 1931. ↑
 9. Rauchensteiner, Manfred: Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie, Vienna, Cologne, Weimar 2013, pp. 905f; Leidinger, Hannes/Moritz, Verena: Der Erster Weltkrieg, Vienna, Cologne, Weimar 2011, p. 65. ↑
 10. Leidinger/Moritz, Der Erster Weltkrieg 2011, p. 65. ↑
 11. Hautmann, Hans: Geschichte der Rätebewegung in Österreich 1918-1924, Vienna, Zurich 1987, pp. 205-208. ↑
 12. Leidinger/Moritz, Gefangenschaft, Revolution, Heimkehr 2003, pp. 453-472. ↑
 13. Ibid., pp. 473-485; Plaschka, Richard G./Haselsteiner, Horst/Suppan, Arnold: Innere Front. Militärassistenten, Widerstand und Umsturz in der Donaumonarchie. 2 Vols, Vienna 1974, especially vol. 1; Plaschka, Richard G.: Matrosen, Offiziere, Rebellen. Krisenkonfrontationen zur See 1900-1918, Vienna/Cologne/Graz 1984; Frei, Bruno: Die Matrosen von Cattaro, Vienna 1963. ↑
 14. Leidinger/Moritz, Gefangenschaft, Revolution, Heimkehr 2003, 485f.; Plaschka/Haselsteiner/Suppan, Innere Front 1984, Vol. 1, p. 70. ↑

15. Moritz, Verena/Leidinger, Hannes: Die Nacht des Kirpitschnikow. Eine andere Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs, Munich 2008, pp. 239-240; Leidinger/Moritz, Der Erste Weltkrieg 2011, pp. 68-69. ↑
16. Ibid. ↑
17. Leidinger/Moritz, Der Erste Weltkrieg 2011, pp. 67-68. ↑
18. Ibid. On the British and French position concerning the disintegration of Austria-Hungary see: Bradley, John: Die Tschechoslowakische Legion und die Haltung der Alliierten zur Auflösung der Habsburgermonarchie, in: Plaschka, Richard/Mack, Karlheinz (eds.): Die Auflösung des Habsburgerreiches. Zusammenbruch und Neuorientierung im Donaauraum, Vienna 1970, p. 207 ↑
19. Leidinger/Moritz, Gefangenschaft, Revolution, Heimkehr 2003, pp. 510-512. ↑
20. Boyer, John W.: Boundaries and Transitions in Modern Austrian History, in: Bischof, Günter/Plasser, Fritz/Berger, Peter (eds.): From Empire to Republic. Post-World War I Austria, New Orleans/Innsbruck 2010, p. 13. ↑
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22. Leidinger/Moritz, Gefangenschaft, Revolution, Heimkehr 2003, pp. 556, 570 and 582; Maderthaler, Wolfgang: Utopian Perspectives and Political Restraint: The Austrian Revolution in the Context of Central European Conflicts, in: Bischof, et al: From Empire to Republic 2010, p. 54-56. ↑
23. Maderthaler, Utopian Perspectives and Political Restraint 2010, p. 58; Leidinger/Moritz, Gefangenschaft, Revolution, Heimkehr 2003, pp. 613-619; Leidinger, Hannes: "...von vornherein provisorischer Natur": Rätebewegung und Kommunismus in Österreich 1918-1924, in: Karner, Stefan/Mikoletzky, Lorenz (eds.): Österreich. 90 Jahre Republik. Beitragsband der Ausstellung im Parlament, Innsbruck, Vienna, Bozen 2008, pp. 93-96.; Botz, Gerhard: Gewalt in der Politik, Attentate, Zusammenstöße, Putschversuche, Unruhen in Österreich 1918-1938. Munich 1983, pp. 64-70; Hautmann, Hans: Anfänge der linksradikalen Bewegung und der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschösterreichs 1916-1919. Diss. Vienna 1968, pp. 116-121. ↑
24. Maderthaler, Utopian Perspectives and Political Restraint 2010, pp. 60-61. ↑
25. Leidinger, "...von vornherein provisorischer Natur" 2008, pp. 96-97. ↑
26. Hanisch, Der große Illusionist 2011, pp. 144-145. See also the contributions of Wilhelm Brauner and Birgitta Bader-Zaar in: Karner, Stefan/Mikoletzky, Lorenz (eds.): Österreich. 90 Jahre Republik. Beitragsband der Ausstellung im Parlament. Innsbruck, Vienna, Bozen 2008, pp. 15-23. ↑
27. Hanisch, Der große Illusionist, p. 147. ↑
28. Maderthaler, Utopian Perspectives and Political Restraint 2010, p. 64. ↑

29. Hanisch, Der große Illusionist 2011, p. 143. ↑
30. Ibid., 147; Boyer, Boundaries and Transitions 2010, p. 19. ↑

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