

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 October 2014

Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Austria-Hungary)

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Since the end of World War One it has generally been accepted that the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy was primarily caused by friction among its ethnic groups. It has furthermore been alleged that this inter-ethnic conflict had a disastrous effect on the Austro-Hungarian army, weakening it till it collapsed in October 1918. Recent research, however, emphasizes that several other factors were equally responsible for the unfavourable political and military developments that brought about the decline of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

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Introduction

Since the end of World War One it has been alleged that the breakup of the Habsburg Monarchy was

mainly caused by quarrels between its [ethnic groups](#).^[1] Recent research, however, points out that several factors were equally responsible for the unfavourable military, political and social developments that finally tore apart both the Austro-Hungarian army and the Danube Monarchy in October and November 1918. These factors, such as economic turmoil, political unrest, war fatigue and seemingly arbitrary decisions by the state, affected both the soldiers on the front and the civilian population, weakening the Imperial and Royal Army (*kaiserlich und königliche Armee*, k.u.k.) in the field as well as at the home garrisons to the point that its collapse became unavoidable. This article examines the course of events that ultimately brought many of the Austro-Hungarian armed force's officers and soldiers, who for years had fought bravely for emperor and country, to break their oaths and either join the ranks of the Entente Powers or return to their home towns in autumn 1918 before the armistice had been signed.

The Pre-war Situation

Before the outbreak of World War One there existed an old saying in the Habsburg Monarchy:

“When Francis-Joseph mounts his horse to go to war, all the Empire's nationalities follow him.”^[2]

According to the saying, regardless of national strife, Austria-Hungary's ethnic groups would be loyal to the state during an armed conflict. In reality, however, the military leaders of the Danube Monarchy and the High Command of the Austro-Hungarian army (AOK) were uncertain if the country's nationalities – Germans, Magyars, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Croats, Serbs, Ukrainians, Slovenes, Romanians and Italians – would be willing to actually fight for their country.^[3] This permanent fear resulted from the fact that several of the Habsburg Monarchy's neighbouring states, above all Russia and Serbia, were putting great effort into propaganda aimed at the Habsburg Monarchy's Slavic citizens that promoted uniting all Slavs under the reign of the Russian tsar or the Serbian king.^[4] This program, which was especially well received among segments of Austria-Hungary's non-German and non-Magyar political elite, greatly worried the AOK, since the military authorities feared that given the popularity of the [pan-Slavic ideas](#), the deployment of troops of Slavic ethnicity in a war against [Russia](#) or [Serbia](#) could cause substantial problems or even a mutiny.^[5] This fear was not altogether unfounded, since during the mobilization of the k.u.k. army during the [Balkan Wars](#) a small number of Czech soldiers had protested against their deployment in the border region to Serbia.^[6] Additionally, the AOK distrusted the k.u.k. army's Italian soldiers.^[7] Despite being an ally of the Central Powers, Rome also spread [propaganda](#) aimed at Italians in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Against this background it is not surprising that the AOK feared that if the Habsburg Monarchy went to war against Serbia, Russia or Italy, some soldiers would refuse to follow orders or might even defect to the enemy during battle.

The Beginning of the War (1914)

These fears, however, appeared to be unfounded in July 1914 when Austria declared war on the

Entente Powers and mobilized its army. Contrary to expectations, large segments of the population rejoiced at the declaration of war and joined pro-war demonstrations in Vienna, Budapest, and other major cities in the Habsburg Monarchy.^[8] Among the working class and the peasants, however, the mood was not as bright, as they feared the immediate economic consequences of the war. Both peasants and working-class families relied mainly on the income earned by husbands and fathers or on their employment in agriculture; the upcoming conscription was thus of great concern. Nevertheless, the k.u.k. army was mobilized without any major trouble and its units were sent by train to the Russian and Serbian border. According to official records some minor incidents occurred in which soldiers expressed their unwillingness to fight. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the war the morale and fighting spirit of the k.u.k. army were at their best. Of course, not all soldiers shared the goals of their political and military leaders or were convinced they were fighting for the right cause, but nearly all of them, regardless of their nationality, were willing to do their duty. Consequently, no significant incidents of national strife among the soldiers or the civilian population were reported during this period.^[9]

The euphoria, however, lasted only until the autumn of 1914 when the k.u.k. army suffered a number of defeats against Serbia^[10] and Russia^[11] and was forced to retreat along a wide front. Despite the fact that the military setbacks had been caused by the enemy's numerical superiority^[12] and the k.u.k. army's poor tactics, many commanders, forced to explain their misfortune in battle, resorted to their pre-war prejudices against the Slavs. Consequently, many openly blamed Czech, Slovene or Serb soldiers for defeat, complained about their lack of fighting spirit, and even alleged a possible collaboration between them and the enemy.^[13] Although these rumours were in most cases unfounded, they spread quickly within the armed forces and created a nervous atmosphere, especially within the AOK.

Disillusion (1914-15)

By December 1914 the fighting strength of the armed forces had deteriorated severely. Having already lost almost half its men and two-thirds of its officers,^[14] the k.u.k. army was a shadow of its former self. In addition to the losses of military personnel, the remaining soldiers suffered from the harsh weather conditions and a shortage of food and supplies, causing the strength and fighting spirit of many units to drop to an all-time low.^[15] The deterioration of morale within the k.u.k. army was, however, not only the result of the defeats Austria-Hungary had suffered, but was also due to the fact that the campaign against Russia did not resemble the pre-war vision of how an armed conflict would play out. In summer 1914, instead of fighting decisive battles as in the 18th and 19th century, the k.u.k. soldiers had marched over long distances on endless, dusty roads in eastern Galicia, always in pursuit or on the run from an enemy that remained unseen. They fought in large-scale battles, winning victories at high costs, only to be forced to retreat again owing to an enemy breakthrough in a neighbouring sector of the front. From autumn 1914 on they defended the Hungarian border in the

Carpathian Mountains, where frostbite, sickness and hunger soon took more lives than combat. These circumstances led to a radical change in soldiers' attitudes towards war, regardless of nationality. As it became clear that the war would take much longer than expected, many soldiers started looking beyond the patriotic propaganda and came to see the war not as a heroic adventure, but rather as a life-threatening disaster. This radical change is especially evident in the soldiers' diaries and personal correspondence; from autumn and winter 1914 on most men no longer wrote on patriotic topics, but instead openly expressed their fears or wrote about the hardships they were enduring.^[16] The AOK, fearing the impact of such news on the morale of the civilian population, tried to suppress such "unpatriotic" correspondence by establishing ensorship offices and sometimes even bringing the authors of such letters before military courts. However, due to the fact that wounded soldiers returning home also spread news about the situation at the front, this measure proved to be only partially successful.^[17]

The attitude of the civilian population towards the war also changed significantly in winter 1914/15 when the army, trying to compensate for the losses of personnel in autumn 1914, started to call up additional men for military duty. In contrast to the young men who had enlisted in summer 1914, most of the recruits drafted in spring 1915 were middle-aged men who had never before served in the army.^[18] They were angered not only by the fact that they had to go to war, but also because they worried that their families would struggle to survive on the minor aid payments soldiers' families received, or, if they were to die, would fall into poverty due to the minimal benefits issued to widows and orphans. The drafting of these men caused the first major murmurings of discontent among the population, and in some cases even started open protests against the war.^[19] Due to a lack of time, personnel and equipment, the unskilled recruits drafted in 1915 were not trained properly, creating further problems for the k.u.k. army. Consequently, the replacement platoons formed from the new recruits had an even lower fighting strength than most of the worn-out fighting battalions at the front.^[20]

The creeping decay of the k.u.k. army became evident in spring 1915, when two of its fighting units, the Infantry Regiments Nr. 28^[21] and 36^[22] collapsed at the Russian front during battle. Although in both cases the military setbacks had been caused by the deployment of untrained reserves in the first line and the numerical superiority of the enemy, the AOK soon decided that the soldiers of these two regiments, who were almost all Czech, had deserted during battle.^[23] Despite the fact that this theory was not supported by the course of events during battle and that similar mishaps had occurred in units consisting entirely of soldiers of German or Magyar nationality, the High Command dissolved both regiments due to "cowardice and treason in the face of the enemy".^[24] The affair was worsened by the fact that the government, having introduced press censorship at the outbreak of the war, only allowed vague reports about the situation at the front to be published, naturally leading to speculation. While German nationalists considered the dissolution of the Infantry Regiments 28 and 36 as proof that all Slavs were disloyal to the Habsburg Monarchy,^[25] Czech representatives protested against this allegation and even suspected that the incidents might have been staged in

order to discredit their people.^[26] Despite the fact that both regiments were later cleared of charges by military courts, the damage, especially to the reputation of the k.u.k. army's Slav soldiers, could not be undone.

The incident naturally stirred up old quarrels among ethnic groups in Austria-Hungary. The increasing bitterness was, however, not only due to the hardships resulting from the war, but also to the fact that the government had suspended the Austrian parliament in spring 1914,^[27] depriving the nationalities of their most important institution to discuss conflicts. Furthermore, the suspension of parliament and the passage of other severe restrictions by the government^[28] were strongly criticized by non-German and non-Magyar politicians who referred to these measures as the establishment of an almost-dictatorship. The conflict between the ethnic groups of the Habsburg Monarchy greatly helped nationalist politicians and representatives from Austro-Hungarian like [Edvard Beneš \(1884-1948\)](#), [Roman Dmowski \(1864-1939\)](#), [Tomáš G. Masaryk \(1850-1937\)](#) or [Milan R. Štefánik \(1880-1919\)](#). Having fled to London or Paris prior to or at the beginning of the war, they had been working to convince the Entente powers to grant their respective nationalities full independence after the war. The Entente Powers at first were doubtful about the aims of these men, having not yet decided on the war goals regarding Europe's political and territorial realignment after the war.^[29] The dissolution of the two Czech regiments and similar occurrences on the [Eastern Front](#) in spring 1915 was useful for the politicians in exile, since they managed to reinterpret them as acts of resistance committed by their co-nationals against Austria-Hungary. The Entente powers later allowed the establishment of Czech, Slovak and Polish volunteer units within their respective armies. The largest of them, the [Czechoslovak Legion](#) established in Russia, was a special case because it consisted mainly of former Austro-Hungarian soldiers who had been recruited in [prisoners of war \(POW\)](#) camps and had volunteered to fight for an independent Czech state.^[30] Although their number was relatively small (the legion consisted of 80,000 men at the end of the war while more than 1 million Czechs served in the k.u.k. army),^[31] from that time on at least some Austro-Hungarian soldiers fought against their own country.

Consolidation and Crisis (1915-1917)

The quarrels on the home front also impacted the k.u.k. army by breeding discord between soldiers of different nationalities and in some cases led to armed hostilities. However, the situation at the front was largely quiet until summer 1915, since the High Command managed to stabilize the supply situation, improved the training of the reserve units, and partly reorganized the army at the front.^[32] Furthermore, when Italy declared war on the Central Powers in May 1915,^[33] many predominantly Slav units were transferred to the [Italian front](#), where most of them fought without problems until the end of the war. This sudden change of attitude, however, was generally misinterpreted by the AOK, which believed that most of the Slav soldiers were only showing more courage at the Italian front because they were no longer fighting against Russians or Serbs.^[34] In addition, the authorities

overlooked the fact that even the Italians serving as k.u.k. soldiers, having been the subject of distrust and doubt before the war, performed well on the newly established front despite any linguistic, cultural or personal affiliations they may have had with the enemy. Nevertheless, most of them were withdrawn from the Italian front over time and transferred to units deployed at the Russian or Serbian front since the AOK still questioned their loyalty. The obvious conclusion that the boost in the morale of the k.u.k. army was actually due to organizational improvements, the stabilization of the frontlines after a successful counteroffensive in the east,^[35] and an antipathy on the part of many k.u.k. soldiers towards the Italians, was, nevertheless, generally ignored by the Austro-Hungarian military authorities.

The Italian front, however, soon brought new difficulties and hardships for the k.u.k. army. Contrary to the plains of eastern Galicia on the Russian front, where in summer 1915 both sides were deadlocked in trench warfare and were ultimately forced to cut back their military activities, South Tyrol, the Dolomites and the Isonzo Valley soon became the venue of large-scale battles in high-mountain terrain. Most of the average k.u.k. soldiers, especially those coming from the Hungarian plains, found it difficult to adapt to the living conditions in this new theatre of war where water had to be carried up to the outposts on the hilltops and where, especially during the winter, more men were killed by avalanches or rock fall than by enemy fire. But even those units more accustomed to mountain warfare suffered heavy losses in the bitter combat that took place in the trenches along the Italian front. The form of fighting practiced here bore almost no resemblance to the training the soldiers had received in their home garrisons, especially since the mountainous terrain made conventional large-scale attacks on well fortified enemy positions virtually impossible. Both sides soon started to search for alternative ways to break the stalemate, introducing the latest achievements in the field of military tactics and technology to this theatre of war. Soon the soldiers on the Italian front were deploying heavy artillery and spigot mortars, even in previously inaccessible parts of the front, quickly increasing the death toll. Later, both sides switched to advanced battle tactics, such as deploying specialized assault troops or sapping the enemy's strong points in the mountains. However, despite inflicting heavy casualties on each other, none of these weapons or tactics managed to turn the tide. In the end, mountain warfare continued in most parts of the Italian front until October 1918.

During the war, the state-controlled media began to focus on the k.u.k. soldiers fighting on the Italian front, presenting them as outstanding heroes defending the fatherland under extreme conditions. This portrayal overemphasized the comparable dangers of the Italian front, since the living and fighting conditions in Russia and Serbia were just as miserable as in any part of the Italian front, especially during the winter. Nevertheless, the image of the heroic mountain troopers defending the Habsburg Monarchy against its historic archenemy was imprinted in the public's memory and, as a consequence, also in post-war historiography. Against this backdrop it is evident why the Italian front continues to play such a key role in the remembrance of the First World War and in the collective memory of modern-day Austria as well as other successor states of the Habsburg monarchy.^[36]

The situation on the Russian and Italian fronts remained essentially unchanged until mid-1916, while at the same time tension was growing within the civilian population. In addition to the tense relations among ethnic groups, supplies became increasingly scarce, causing more people to suffer from malnutrition.^[37] The lack of food was due not only to the blockade imposed on the Central Powers by the Entente, but also to the decline of agricultural production in Austria-Hungary and [Germany](#) - a consequence of farmers and workmen having been drafted into the army and their positions taken over by women and adolescents who could not provide the workforce necessary to keep production at the pre-war level.^[38] Moreover, many families had no income apart from their husbands' or fathers' pay as soldiers and could not afford the rising prices for groceries and other essential goods. Families whose provider had either been killed or taken POW received only minimal benefits and often became impoverished.^[39] These problems soon became evident to the soldiers in correspondence with families or when they returned home on leave. Consequently, the men were put in an emotional dilemma: Should they stay at the front to do their duty and leave their families to their fate or should they desert the army and return home? Many soldiers chose the latter alternative, causing the number of deserters to grow slowly from mid-1916 on.

The AOK and many members of the Austro-Hungarian General Staff, however, suspected that the desertions were not caused by the men's familial situations, but by reckless nationalist politicians who had poisoned the minds – especially of the Slavic soldiers – in order to weaken the k.u.k. army. Their fears seemed to be confirmed in June 1916 when Russia launched a large-scale offensive against the positions of the Central Powers, forcing them to retreat and taking more than 380,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers captive.^[40] This time the situation for the AOK was even more difficult than in 1914 because the German army, which had also been affected by the Russian offensive, demanded an explanation. The fact that the Russians had used advanced battle tactics^[41] was well known to the AOK, but since Austria-Hungary's military leaders had not been able to handle the situation properly,^[42] it was once again easier for the High Command to pass on the blame. Consequently, the AOK again stressed the theory that the passive attitude of the k.u.k. army's Slavic soldiers had allowed the enemy to win.^[43] This strategy not only damaged the reputation of the k.u.k. army within the German general staff, but also benefitted the anti-Habsburg activists in London and Paris, who could explain these incidents to the Entente Powers as demonstrations of their co-nationals' resistance to Austria-Hungary.

Nevertheless, the k.u.k. army did not yet show any severe signs of corruption. Given the numerous problems as well as the political and social unrest on the home front, the question arises of how the military authorities actually managed to keep Austria-Hungary's armed forces together. On the one hand the stability of the army was guaranteed by the threat and use of brute force. Every actual or even alleged violation of the military code of conduct could bring a soldier in front of a military court, which often sentenced defendants to death just to set an example for the remaining troops.^[44] Moreover, the authorities usually stopped all payments to the families of those soldiers who had gone missing or been taken prisoner by the enemy if they suspected that they had deserted or

willingly gone into captivity. Given the fact that most of the families relied on these payments for simple survival, many soldiers had no choice than to stay at the front even if they were afraid or fed up with the war. On the other hand, however, the army was also held together by the comradeship among the soldiers and sometimes even the good relations between the soldiers and their immediate superiors. If an officer or NCO treated his troops with respect and managed to communicate with them in their own language (a case of special importance in the multi-ethnic k.u.k. army), it was more likely that they would trust him and would be willing to follow his orders even in difficult situations. Furthermore, the role that comradeship between the soldiers themselves played should not be underestimated. Even if their commanders were incompetent and the situation hopeless, many soldiers decided to continue fighting so as not to abandon or betray their fellow comrades. Although such thoughts hardly show up even in personal accounts, it is believed that the comradeship and the attachment of the soldiers to their units were more important for keeping the army together than the oath soldiers had sworn to the emperor. Since most of the k.u.k. army's units consisted of soldiers belonging to at least two ethnic groups, it seems that national issues at the most played a minor role in this context.

The Turning Point (1917)

The AOK once again began to blame its Slavic soldiers for military setbacks when the Russian Kerenskii Offensive caused severe losses to the k.u.k. army in July 1917.^[45] This time, however, the situation was even more difficult because only a month before, in June 1917, [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#) had re-opened the Austrian parliament.^[46] This step, originally intended as a way to mend the relationships among Austria-Hungary's ethnic groups, quickly turned into a disaster because it finally gave the representatives of the nationalities the chance to bring up all the disputes that had been glossed over for two years.^[47] The international press paid close attention to the fierce quarrel within Austrian society,^[48] publishing articles on the national conflict raging within the Habsburg Monarchy. The Entente Powers observed the development closely, but were still not ready to make a decision regarding the future of the Danube Monarchy.^[49] However, since the Austro-Hungarian government had been forced to strengthen its ties with Germany, the number of Entente politicians who pleaded for the dissolution of Austria-Hungary in order to end the war was growing.

The first country to withdraw from the war, however, was Russia. Shaken by two [revolutions](#) and an on-going [civil war](#), Russia signed a [peace treaty](#) with the Central Powers in March 1918.^[50] This treaty was not only a great relief to the Austro-Hungarian and German general staffs, which could now concentrate all reserves on the fronts against Italy and [France](#), but also gave the soldiers a morale boost. The end of the war finally seemed to be within reach. The men put high hopes in the special treaties signed between the newly established Ukrainian state and the Central Powers, which were supposed to guarantee the delivery of large amounts of food to Austria-Hungary and Germany.^[51] The signing of the peace treaty also started a large-scale prisoner exchange between

Russia and the Central Powers and allowed thousands of former Austro-Hungarian soldiers to return home after years of captivity. Most of the men expected to be released from the army in order to do more useful work in agriculture or industry. However, since the army's reserves were nearly exhausted, most of the men were ordered to return to their respective home garrisons in order to be sent back to the front. As could be expected, this decision enraged the former prisoners who had already risked their lives for their fatherland. Consequently, the AOK was soon confronted not only with dramatically increasing desertion figures, but also with open revolts and mutinies that quickly spread to a number of garrison towns such as Rumburg (Bohemia/Czech Republic, May 1918), Judenburg (Styria/Austria, May 1918) and Kragujevac (Serbia, June 1918).^[52] Having already faced what appeared to be a communist revolt of seamen based on k.u.k. naval units stationed in the bay of Cattaro (Dalmatia/Montenegro) in February 1918,^[53] the High Command jumped to the conclusion that these mutinies had also been triggered by nationalist and communist propaganda. Consequently, while the uprisings were crushed with brute force, no further steps were taken to improve the situation of the returnees.

The Collapse

From mid-1918 on the Austro-Hungarian army was visibly falling apart. The last offensives of the Central Powers against France^[54] and Italy^[55] in the spring and summer of 1918 had failed, destroying the last hopes of achieving a decisive military victory and causing the morale of the German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers to decline rapidly. Moreover, in summer 1918 neither soldiers nor civilians were able to satisfy their basic needs.^[56] A growing number of soldiers decided to desert the army in order to return to their families or to hide in the hinterland to avoid the front. Consequently, the High Command had to withdraw more and more troops from the front in order to search for deserters (up to 230,000 in summer 1918) or to take action against the rising number of strikes and demonstrations of starving workers in the provinces of the Habsburg monarchy.^[57] At the same time, Austria-Hungary, having unsuccessfully tried to negotiate a separate peace, was forced to further strengthen its ties with Germany.^[58] That step finally made the Entente conclude that it was necessary to destroy Austria-Hungary in order to end the war. Consequently, [Great Britain](#), France and the [United States](#) officially recognized the national committees formed by the anti-Habsburg activists in exile, allowing them to form provisional governments and promising them the independence of their peoples' respective territories after the war.^[59]

This news spread quickly within the Habsburg monarchy and created an inner conflict for many civilians and soldiers: Should they stay loyal to a country that was losing the war or should they join the ranks of the political forces that demanded the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy? The Austro-Hungarian government recognized this critical situation but was no longer able to interfere. Emperor Charles I's Manifesto, published in October 1918, which granted all the nationalities full sovereignty within the boundaries of the Austrian state, was a last ditch effort to save the country.^[60]

This manifesto, however, was generally interpreted to mean that the Emperor had allowed the ethnic groups of the Habsburg Monarchy to choose their own paths. Consequently, by the end of October the Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians and Southern Slavs had declared their independence, leaving the emperor without a state to rule.^[61] This splintering had a disastrous effect on the k.u.k. army. Most of the soldiers, even Germans and Magyars, were no longer willing to fight for a state that had ceased to exist and left their units to return home.^[62] This process of disintegration quickly spread within the armed forces and brought about its total collapse by the armistice of 11 November 1918.

Conclusion

Contrary to the conclusions drawn in older historiography, it is evident that the national question was only one of many factors that contributed to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian army and the Habsburg Monarchy in November 1918. It can be argued that national strife weakened the front and interior to the point that even the military authorities were no longer able to keep the diverging forces at bay. However, we have to keep in mind that a great number of the national and political conflicts that erupted during the First World War were deliberately fuelled or artificially created by nationalist politicians to serve their own interests. The average Austro-Hungarian soldier remained for the most part unaffected by the political quarrels and propaganda until the end of the war. However, they became embittered over time due to the harsh conditions they and their families endured until they were neither able nor willing to keep fighting any longer. The unfavourable economic and social situation during the war, largely brought about by the Austro-Hungarian military and civilian authorities' incompetence, greatly contributed to this process.

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Notes

1. ↑ See for example: Bardolff, Carl: Soldat im alten Österreich. Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben, Jena 1938; Glaise-Horstenau, Edmund: Die Katastrophe. Die Zertrümmerung Österreich-Ungarns und das Werden der Nachfolgestaaten, Zürich et. al. 1929; Beneš, Edvard: Der Aufstand der Nationen. Der Weltkrieg und die Tschechoslowakische Revolution, Berlin 1928.
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9. † See for example: Státní ústřední archiv [Central State Archives](ed.): Sborník Dokumentů k Vnitřnímu vývoji v Českých Zemích za 1. Světové Války 1914-1918 [Proceedings of documents on the internal development of the Czech Lands during the First World War 1914-1918], Vol. 1, Prague 1993, pp. 31-32, 92-93, 95-97; Rauchensteiner, Tod 1994, pp. 104–106.
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Citation

Lein, Richard: Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Austria-Hungary) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10003**.

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