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War Archives (Austria-Hungary)

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The War Archives (*Kriegsarchiv*), centre of the official historiography of the Imperial and Royal Army in the pre-war period, changed, during the First World War, into a repository for recent war records and a propaganda institution for the Austro-Hungarian armed forces. In addition, a special “Literary Group” (*Literarische Gruppe*) was founded, employing numerous notable writers. In 1916, the director of the War Archives was simultaneously the commander of the War Press Office (*Kriegspresssequartier*), the propaganda centre of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces.

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1. Introduction

The origins of the Austro-Hungarian War Archives (*Kriegsarchiv*) date back to the early 18th century.

In 1711, the “Aulic War Council Chancellery’s Archive” (*Hofkriegsrätliches Kanzlei-Archiv*) was established, but in 1801, the actual “Imperial-Royal War Archives” (*k. k. Kriegs-Archiv*) were founded. In the course of the 19th century, the *k. (u.) k. Kriegsarchiv* became the central repository for military records, and the centre for military historical research in the Habsburg Monarchy.

After the breakdown of the Habsburg Empire at the end of World War I (WWI), the *Kriegsarchiv* was separated from the military administration of the Austrian Republic and, in the Nazi era, became a subsidiary of the German military archives in Potsdam, near Berlin. In 1945, the various archive branches of the Austrian Federation were joined together in the Austrian State Archives (*Österreichisches Staatsarchiv*), with the *Kriegsarchiv* becoming one department of this new archival institution.

Today, the *Kriegsarchiv* has in its custody the archival records of the central military institutions, the territorial authorities, and the armies in the field of the Imperial and Royal Armed Forces. Additionally, it holds the archives of the Imperial and Royal Navy, as well as collections of maps, plans, pictures/photographs, and private papers. Its holdings amount to some fifty kilometres (roughly thirty miles) of files. Therefore, the Vienna War Archives are among the world’s most important military archives.

2. During the War

Two generals of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces acted as directors of the *Kriegsarchiv* during WWI. From 1901-1915, [Emil Woinovich von Belobreska \(1851–1927\)](#), a military historian and corresponding member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences directed the archive. From 1916-1925, [Maximilian Ritter von Hoen \(1867–1940\)](#), another military historian, directed the *Kriegsarchiv* and was also the commander of the [War Press Office](#) or *Kriegspressequartier* (KPQ) from August 1914 to March 1917.

With the outbreak of war, the *Kriegsarchiv* changed from a research centre for military history into a propaganda instrument and repository for recent mass records from the front areas. Over the course of the war, the archives’ personnel rose significantly: from thirty-seven in 1914 (before mobilization) to 417 in 1918. The majority of the increasing staff were busy with war bureaucracy and records management, only a few specialists focused on propaganda.

2.1. Increasing Quantities of Paper

War bureaucracy led to an enormous increase in records. Large quantities of files arrived at the archives in the Vienna *Stiftkaserne* at this time. In order to arrange and schedule them, a separate department for “New War Records” (*Neue Kriegsaktenabteilung*) was created. This department needed a lot of space to store and arrange the war records, while the valuable pre-war records had to be accommodated outside the building in two wooden huts in the barrack yard of the *Stiftkaserne*.

In addition, a “War Decorations Group” (*Belohnungsaktengruppe*) was established. By order of the staff of the commander-in-chief, millions of applications for war decorations (awarded to combatants) were deposited and scheduled in the *Kriegsarchiv*. After the war, reams of records were added once again, from the liquidating military authorities and commands. Therefore, of the fifty kilometres of files kept today, nearly half originate from WWI. Due to the enormous losses of the *Heeresarchiv* in Potsdam in 1945, the major part of the military archival heritage of the former Central Powers is in the custody of the *Kriegsarchiv*.

2.2. The *Literarische Gruppe*

At the outbreak of the war, the *Kriegsarchiv*'s academic projects were suspended. Instead of historical research, the archives were engaged in propaganda activities. For this purpose, the “Literary Group” (*Literarische Gruppe*) was established in autumn 1914. Chief of the *Literarische Gruppe* was Colonel [Alois Veltzé \(1864-1927\)](#), the vice director of the archives.

2.2.1. Staff Members of the *Literarische Gruppe*

Veltzé was successful in engaging Austro-Hungarian writers, among them: [Franz Karl Ginzkey \(1871-1963\)](#), [Rudolf Hans Bartsch \(1873-1952\)](#), [Franz Theodor Csokor \(1885-1969\)](#), Viktor Hueber, [Emil Kläger \(1880-1936\)](#), [Heinrich von Kralik \(1887-1965\)](#), [Hans Müller\(-Einigen\) \(1882-1950\)](#), [Alfred Polgár \(1873-1955\)](#), [Emil Alphons Reinhardt \(1889-1945\)](#), [Eduard Rieger \(1865-1938\)](#), [Rainer Maria Rilke \(1875-1926\)](#), [Felix Salten \(1869-1945\)](#), Leopold Schönthal, [Paul Stefan \(1879-1943\)](#), and [Stefan Zweig \(1881-1942\)](#).

Moreover, KPQ-members and employees of other bodies were engaged as authors of publications by the *Literarische Gruppe*, for example Alexander Elmer from the Ministry of War and [Hugo von Hofmannsthal \(1874–1929\)](#) from the War Welfare Office. Most of the writers and KPQ-members took the opportunity of offering their talent for war propaganda in order to avoid duty in the fire trench. The satirist [Karl Kraus \(1874-1936\)](#) made some sarcastic remarks about this.

2.2.2. Output of the *Literarische Gruppe*

Following a decree of the Ministry of War, the archives' *Literarische Gruppe* concentrated on war episodes from the front area and on common patriotic and social topics. Therefore, in contrast to the KPQ's work, which was primarily dedicated to daily [press](#) propaganda, the *Literarische Gruppe* produced representative publications with the aim of featuring the Royal and Imperial Army. They were of rather high literary value but of uncertain propagandistic efficiency.

The most important titles are:

- *Auf dem Felde der Ehre* [On the Field of Honor], 3 volumes, Vienna: Reister's Söhne, 1915

- *Aus der Werkstatt des Krieges* [Out of the Workshop of War], Vienna: Manz, 1916
- *Unsere Kämpfe im Süden* [Our Battles in the South], Vienna: Manz, 1917
- *Unsere Nordfront* [Our Northern Front], Vienna: Manz, 1916
- *Unsere Offiziere* [Our Officers], Vienna: Manz, 1915
- *Unsere Soldaten* [Our Soldiers], Vienna: Manz, 1915 and 1916
- *Unteilbar und Untrennbar* [Indivisible and Inseparable], Vienna: Verlag für vaterländische Literatur, 1917 and 1918
- *Unter Habsburgs Banner* [Under Habsburg's Banner], Berlin/Vienna: Ullstein, 1916

2.3. Centralising Photographic and Film Propaganda

During the first years of the war, photographic propaganda operated in a decentralised manner, in various institutions. In the *Kriegsarchiv*, a photo department (*Photo-Abteilung*) was established. Richard Ritter von Damaschka, reserve officer and amateur photographer, was chief of this department. In 1916, he composed a companion for war photographers and amateur photographers in the front area (*Leitfaden für Kriegsphotographen und Amateure im Felde*). However, in 1917 the entire official photographic propaganda service was centralised in the KPQ.

During the first years of the war, film propaganda was entirely coordinated by the *Kriegsarchiv*. The military historian [Karl Zitterhofer \(1874-1939\)](#) acted as film officer (*Filmreferent*). In May 1917, these matters were transferred to the KPQ's film section (*Filmstelle*).

2.4. Battlefield Guides

Although the war was still ongoing, Dr. [Karl Hans Strobl \(1877-1946\)](#), writer and member of the KPQ, initiated a project in order to create printed battlefield guides to facilitate visits to the most important former theatres of war. In May 1917, a corresponding working group (*Schlachtfeldführergruppe*) was established in the *Kriegsarchiv*, along with field offices in Bozen/Brixen, Görz, Brassó/Belgrade, Przemyśl and Villach. At the end of the war, fifteen battlefield guides were to be published in German and Hungarian.

The group did extensive exploratory work during the final years of the war, but due to the [breakdown of the Monarchy](#), the publication of the guides did not come about. The *Schlachtfeldführergruppe* was not an instrument of war propaganda but part of the new era of remembrance and recollection of war.

3. The Post-War Period

After the breakdown of the Monarchy, the *Kriegsarchiv* changed from a military to a civil institution, but remained an international, scientifically approved institution. General Hoen and his staff played an important role as WWI [historiographers](#), finding the transition from war propaganda to war historiography smooth. Numerous publications and manuscripts were compiled. Hoen himself left

behind a very valuable source on the history of the archives, the so-called *Hoen-Chronik*, covering the period 1914-1924. The most important of these post-war publications was edited by [Edmund Glaise-Horstenau \(1882–1946\)](#), Hoen's successor as director of the archives: *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914–1918*, Vienna: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1930-1938, a voluminous description of "Austria-Hungary's Last War 1914-1918", and a standard work today.

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