

CONCLUSION



Nazi Germany's occupation of rump Czechoslovakia in March 1939 ended the domestic efforts to build a new 'Czecho-Slovakia', as well as Western appeasement. Coming after the annexation of Austria, the map of Central Europe had been profoundly altered just twenty years after the Paris peace treaties. In Austria, the accession to Germany in 1938 was greeted with a mixture of great enthusiasm, widespread relief at the avoidance of war, passive acceptance, and – among committed opponents of National Socialism – despair and resignation.¹ In Czechoslovakia, the occupation opened the door to anti-fascist resistance, with foreign exiles holding up the legionnaire tradition as a successful example to follow. For the second time in their lives, Edvard Beneš and a handful of WWI legionnaires found themselves far from home, searching for allies in their fight for an independent Czechoslovakia. At a gathering of legionnaires in Chicago on 8 June 1939, Beneš referred to all Czechs, Slovaks and Ruthenes, as well as those Sudeten Germans in favour of democracy, as 'soldiers on the Czechoslovak front'.² Thus, citizens of Czechoslovakia and Austria living through the years 1938–1939 experienced the deferred aftermath of WWI, in which many German-speakers in the Bohemian lands and Austria felt a euphoria akin to victory, while Czechs tasted the bitterness of defeat. Slovaks, granted independence under German coercion, confronted a highly ambivalent situation located uneasily between the two.³

Nazi Germany's overturning of the border arrangements of 1918–1919 spoke to the sense of injustice felt by many in Austria but also in Czechoslovakia – mainly among the national minorities – about the peace treaties. In this sense, Schivelbusch's much discussed concept of 'cultures of defeat' (and its binary counterpart, 'cultures of victory') remains highly relevant to our two cases, although the actual impact and nature of defeat and victory cultures in this area of Central Europe requires careful evaluation.⁴ As this book emphasizes, it is too simplistic to reduce the actions of WWI veterans to just one – even if dominant – political

leaning or, more generally, to essentialize the national orientation of veterans in Austria or Czechoslovakia. Aside from the fact that many former combatants were not members of veterans organizations, the veterans landscape was highly heterogeneous in both countries and therefore it is necessary to pay attention to this variety. Veterans associations not only ranged 'politically from right to left',⁵ but also included politically indifferent or consciously non-political veterans organizations. Some of the associations focused on localities, regiments or specialist troop units, others reflected the immediate experience of the war, such as disability, captivity or, in the Czechoslovak case, resistance. Many of them were newly founded after 1918, while some were built on practices and structures established before 1914. Some veterans were in favour of the post-1918 settlement or at least respected it, some criticized it, while others seemingly did not care much about it. This fragmentation can be taken as symptomatic of the specific form of veterans landscapes prevalent in successor states of the Habsburg Monarchy, especially those with a democratic political system.⁶

Beyond these general observations, there are particular aspects of this comparative study that add important nuances and modifications to current discussion, including continuities across the 'dividing line' of 1918. To begin with, both countries faced similar socio-economic challenges in the period of transition from monarchy to republic, notwithstanding the fact that one country aligned itself with the victors while the other stood unmistakably as a defeated party. As in many other parts of Europe, the transition brought unrest, violence, political polarization and socio-economic crisis.⁷ The time-period between the demobilization of homecomers and their renewed enrolment in fighting units was often brief and, for some, non-existent. For the most part, paramilitary units or army formations were initially involved in fights over territory to secure borders, whether in Carinthia and Styria in the case of Austria, or in the Bohemian borderlands and Slovakia for Czechoslovakia.⁸ If it was more difficult in defeated Austria to motivate soldiers to fight again for a state with an uncertain future, the international situation and ceasefire stipulations in any case limited the possibility of military action (above all, against Italy or Czechoslovakia). By contrast, in victorious Czechoslovakia it was easier to mobilize returning legionnaires, Czechs and Slovaks from disbanding Austro-Hungarian regiments, and newly recruited volunteers to fight for an independent nation state on the basis of a widely shared belief in a better future.

While not underestimating the extent of political conflict, the clashes accompanying the first years of both states did not degenerate into repeated coup attempts or civil war, unlike in Germany or Hungary.⁹ Where challenges did come, as in Austria, it was predominantly left-wing veterans among the workers' and soldiers' councils that threatened the emerging new order, in their short-lived bid at a Bolshevik revolution. Similar attempts in Czechoslovakia, be it the rebellion of legionnaires in July 1919 or the general strike in December 1920, lacked

clear leadership and an alternative vision; they were suppressed by a combination of persuasion and force. Overall, therefore, the initial remobilization – or postponed demobilization – of soldiers was directed primarily at external enemies, and both republics confirmed their consolidation by 1921 at the latest.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the social reintegration of WWI returnees into their local environments was relatively successful. As Oswald Überegger has argued for Tyrol, it would be too simplistic to speak about a general ‘crisis of masculinity’ among the majority of homecomers or a ‘straight path into a spiral of brutalization caused by the war’.¹⁰ With the immediate crisis overcome, the respective governments faced the challenge of providing for veterans and reintegrating them into society through social policies. Both started from the common legislation inherited from the Habsburg Monarchy. Previous practices and ways of categorization continued to provide a template even after the introduction of new legislation. Indeed, the Czechoslovak legionnaire laws were a republican remaking of older Habsburg legislation. In terms of social attitudes and medical practices, we can also ascertain similarities across the two countries, such as in the sceptical treatment of war neuroses and declining sympathy for the lot of disabled veterans, regardless of which army they served in. Both states provided for ordinary ex-soldiers in a manner and on a scale unavailable before 1914 and the importance of these measures in stabilizing society in the early post-war years should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, neither of the two systems was able to cope satisfactorily with the demands placed on them over the long term and veterans’ demands for adequate benefits did not abate.

Away from these areas of overlap, a striking difference was the privileged position granted to Czechoslovak legionnaires, who corresponded to the politically determined ideal of heroic sacrifice for an independent Czechoslovakia. Their symbolic and enhanced material status runs like a thread through the interwar period. While the legionnaires themselves were politically deeply divided, taking their general story as a founding master narrative for the new state made it both exclusive and exclusionary. Czechs, far more than Slovaks, dominated the legionnaire movement, giving them a privileged position comparable to that of Serbs in Yugoslavia.¹¹ The legionnaire story left no meaningful space for ordinary Czech and Slovak veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army or veterans of national minorities. What is more, the different experience of war meant placing other veterans associations under suspicion as potential opponents of the state. Non-legionnaire veterans not only had to accept a less prestigious social position, but also to endure more state surveillance and narrower limits on their public activities. In practice, however, non-legionnaire veterans integrated themselves readily into state and society, despite lingering resentment about unequal treatment, which had the potential to be used against Czechoslovakia in the future.

Other points of differentiation are observable in Austria. Even if, initially, there was a similar or perhaps even stronger drive to deal with those deemed to

jeopardize the new political order, the results of government action were mixed. While the republic dealt quickly with the threat of a communist coup involving radicalized veterans, the lingering question of the 'old guard' remained unresolved as the campaign against ex-officers accused of mistreating soldiers soon fizzled out. In this sense, the inability to pin lasting responsibility on members of the old elite for the cruelty and suffering caused by the war (more than for the defeat itself) was part of the broader failure to create a convincing, unifying narrative about the war and the sacrifices it entailed. In political terms, this partly reflected uncertainty about Austria's economic viability and the question of national identity, but this should not be mistaken for longing for the old order. In 1918/19, ex-soldiers were not prepared to fight to save the Habsburg dynasty, and legitimists were very much 'on the fringes'.¹² Or, as John Boyer has recently argued, post-1918 Austria was not a 'republic without republicans'.¹³ Nevertheless, the difficulty in achieving a political consensus about the meaning of the war meant that there was no equivalent in Austria to the legionnaires as a paragon of citizenship. Rather, as Ke-Chin Hsia contends, Austrian Social Democracy initially sought to use disabled veterans as a form of 'negative valorization', through which 'the Republic proved its sense of social responsibility and capability in comparison to the failed predecessor or the allegedly irresponsible radical competitors'. In this sense, Hsia suggests, disabled veterans contributed to a 'form of negative nation building through conspicuous remedial welfare policies'.¹⁴ In comparison, therefore, the war victims' lobby in Austria took on a greater symbolic importance and was more forceful and coherently organized, partly thanks to the support of the Social Democrats, but also due to the actions of the war victims themselves.

While both countries displayed continuities with the pre-1914 structure of MVAs, this was a more seamless process in Austria than Czechoslovakia, because – especially after the end of the Grand Coalition – the traditional veterans groups did not lie open to suspicion of sympathizing with the 'wrong side' in the war. In addition, the other major difference was the significant role played by ex-POWs. In Austria, these veterans formed a cohesive and, for the most part, unified movement in a way that simply did not occur in Czechoslovakia.

In examining these differences more closely, we can identify an interesting dynamic with regard to two key cadres among veterans. Throughout the period, legionnaires in Czechoslovakia – originally seen as 'traitors' under Austria-Hungary – occupied a central position as model citizens in public representations and the collective memory of WWI. Some of them also manned high posts in the military, the state administration or politics, as occurred in Poland and in Yugoslavia (albeit in different ways in the latter case).¹⁵ By contrast, ex-officers in the Austrian Republic, as representatives of the fallen imperial elite, over time re-asserted themselves, playing a significant role at the leadership level of paramilitary organizations, as sponsors of veterans' activities, and in the main

POW association, BEÖK. In effect, they became an inverse mirror image of the legionnaires, though with a more distant relationship to their new state. From a symbolic and rhetorical point of view, Czechoslovak legionnaires and Austrian ex-officers stood in opposition to one another, engaged almost in a virtual, cross-border duel over the meaning of the war. As in Hungary and Germany, ex-officers in Austria formed the core of those who resented defeat and its consequences; in Czechoslovakia they were pushed to the margins of public life, while not being deprived of their social benefits.¹⁶

Reflecting these cleavages and the frequently tense relationships between the two states after 1918, there is relatively little evidence of direct transnational cooperation between Austrian and Czechoslovak veterans at the level of local associations. The one notable exception here is the cross-border cooperation that took place between German-speaking POW organizations in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany and other regions within the League of German POWs from 1928 onwards. However, where such cooperation happened, it occurred very much despite the state rather than with its support.

Notwithstanding the distance and tensions at the national level, some associations of Austrian and Czechoslovak veterans joined the drive 'to achieve a lasting peace and to promote a political international system which regulated non-armed state conflicts'.¹⁷ The respective capital cities, Vienna and Prague, hosted international conferences organized by the leading international veterans organizations. The Czechoslovak involvement in FIDAC and CIAMAC, and the Austrian engagement in CIAMAC, point to strengths and weaknesses of both these movements and problematize the history of these bodies from the perspective of small member states.¹⁸ FIDAC – dominated by the former Allied Powers – failed to provide an adequate platform for reconciling narratives of victory and defeat, despite the attempts made at the Luxembourg congresses. This created a void that was filled by the fascist-controlled CIP in the 1930s. Moreover, the fact that representation of victorious Czechoslovakia was confined to a fractious section of the legionnaire movement in the 1920s showed the limits both of FIDAC's internal structure and the capacity of the fragmented veterans landscape to speak for Czechoslovakia. By contrast, both Austrian and Czechoslovak associations of war victims had a voice in these debates and cooperated with each other within CIAMAC, thereby demonstrating the variety of political engagement among veterans. This organization was more successful in bringing the former victors and defeated of the war together when they focused on the social needs of war victims. However, when discussion turned to political topics, here too, divisions came to the fore.

By the early 1930s, however, it became clear that efforts to reach agreement between the former opposing sides in the war were stalling. This created an opportunity for the revisionist powers, led by Nazi Germany, to utilize the new international veterans organization, CIP, for the furtherance of its foreign policy

goals. While preaching peace and justice, it prepared the ground for a thorough revision of the international order, which meant a threat to their national sovereignty for both Austria and Czechoslovakia. In the latter instance, CIP put the existing hierarchy of veterans under pressure when it invoked the idea of equality of all veterans, regardless of which army they had served in during the war. In doing so, it provided a new pole of attraction for Austrian veterans and German-speaking veterans in Czechoslovakia sympathetic to the idea of closer ties with Germany.

Accompanying these developments, a process of veterans' remobilization occurred in Austria and Czechoslovakia, as elsewhere in Europe.¹⁹ Common to both countries was the attempt to create greater unity among veterans organizations and to use them for military defence, yet the degree of success and the outcomes diverged substantially. The Czechoslovak government faced considerable difficulties in view of the fragmented veterans landscape. Significantly, attempts by the politically marginal Czech fascist groups to appeal to disillusioned veterans made few inroads, even in the late 1930s.²⁰ Of greater, more urgent concern was the remobilization of the mass of former Austro-Hungarian soldiers, where the government confronted the results of its policy since 1918. The privileging of those categorized as having actively contributed to national victory – the legionnaires and 1918/19 volunteers – nurtured resentments among other veterans. Although a degree of unification was achieved, it only included Czech veterans and came (too) late in the day, in autumn 1938. In the meantime, the Sudeten German Party had succeeded in creating a unified organization of nationalist veterans, the Sudeten German Soldiers Union, by now openly revisionist. Interestingly, this, too, was not a straightforward process, taking until April 1938 to reach fruition, and differences were maintained between originally independent veterans movements under the unified surface.

In Austria, official measures to remobilize veterans began in earnest with the advent of the dictatorship in 1933, but these were in many respects foreshadowed by the polarization of politics following the Schattendorf trial of 1927. The confrontation there between the FKV and the Social Democratic *Schutzbund* directly involved war veterans, and cooperation subsequently ensued between some veterans groups (such as the FKV) and anti-Marxist paramilitaries in the *Heimwehr*. To an extent, therefore, government moves to centralize Austrian veterans and integrate them into the VF constituted a formalization of already evident trends. Both Engelbert Dollfuß and Kurt Schuschnigg traded politically on their status as war veterans, and the ideological framework for the regime fostered a narrative of heroic sacrifice in the war, the notion that the army had been 'undefeated' on the field of battle, and Habsburg revivalism. Although the centralization of veterans was not unproblematic and some groups retained autonomy, in practice the consolidation of veterans took place around a conservative, anti-Marxist core, due also to the dissolution or marginalization of organizations not in line with

official policy. In contrast to democratic Czechoslovakia, therefore, the Austrian dictatorship was able to force through an authoritarian, patriotic remobilization with comparatively greater success.²¹

At the same time, the reasons for this development require precise analysis in the light of Ángel Alcalde's admonition about over-simplifying the relationship between veterans and right-wing politics.²² Firstly, if we distinguish between different forms of right-wing movements and dictatorships, then the Austrian regime can be characterized as containing elements of fascism in terms of ideology, political influences, symbolism and organization, while remaining an essentially Catholic-conservative authoritarian, backwards-looking dictatorship, which sought to distance itself from German National Socialism and lacked a revisionist or imperialist foreign policy. Crucially, it had not been carried to power by a fascist movement, and in this sense constituted a hybrid, 'para-fascist' system perhaps most akin to the Franco dictatorship in Spain, even if it borrowed overtly from Italian fascism.²³ The remobilization of veterans was therefore as much a propaganda strategy to widen the regime's mass support, and – compared to Czechoslovakia – only secondarily a policy for the reinforcement of military defence.²⁴

Secondly, although the Austrian veterans landscape contained considerable variety, and numerous ex-soldiers did not join MVAs, there existed a preponderance of conservative, anti-Marxist veterans organizations by the 1930s. This constituted a response to political developments since the end of the war, but also reflected the basic impetus of the veterans movement in the Austrian territories since the pre-1914 period, based on the mobilization of the petty bourgeoisie and peasantry in a conservative-patriotic key.²⁵ While connections certainly existed between the radical right and war veterans, in no sense was there a systematic organizational overlap. Amongst paramilitaries in the proto-fascist *Heimwehr* or in the ranks of the Austrian National Socialist movement, it was overwhelmingly a younger generation involved from around 1930 onwards, as was true elsewhere in Central and East-Central Europe.²⁶ Nevertheless, former officers played a crucial role at the leadership level in such organizations, whether or not they later identified with the post-1938 regime (e.g. Robert Ritter von Greim from the Tyrolean branch of the *Freikorps Oberland* and Hanns Albin Rauter of the Styrian *Heimwehr*) or maintained a strong allegiance to the Austrian dictatorship and rejected involvement with the Nazis (e.g. Ernst Rüdiger Starhemberg). Lastly, independent of political preference, many Austrian veterans had no love lost for the collapsed monarchy, but still mourned what they saw as the national defeat of 1918. If this sentiment was – again – voiced most strongly by nationalist ex-officers, it could be found in milder form across the political spectrum (the Social Democrat and disabled veterans' spokesman, Maximilian Brandeis, being a good example).

Ultimately, in the case of Austria, veterans may not have sought to redeem national humiliation and defeat through another war, but by the 1930s the

momentum had shifted towards an official policy of glorifying the previous war. In Austria, this did not involve a fusion of 'national revolutionary and conservative veteran icons into a single iconographic symbol' at the level of government policy, because the latter remained distinct from radical German-Nationalist discourse.²⁷ Nonetheless, a powerful alternative narrative had not emerged in the interwar republic, which – for Boyer – 'lacked a civil elite and even an electorate that understood the need to protect the non-partisan constitutional structures . . . and not manipulate them to advance extreme ideological dreams'.²⁸ After 1933/34 the original constitutional structures were, in any case, dismantled in favour of dictatorship.

In Czechoslovakia, by contrast, an official heroic narrative based on anti-Habsburg resistance and revolution had accompanied the birth of the republic, but could not fully resonate across a society, which – in addition to its many social and ethnic cleavages – was also divided by the defeat and victory. Although a substantial proportion of veterans among the country's German minority had, by 1938, embraced national revisionism, the far more numerous Czech and Slovak veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army accepted the mid-1930s remobilization in the cause of national defence and – in effect – preservation of the victory of 1918. Nevertheless, the legionnaire narrative was bound up with the 'idea of the Czechoslovak state', which only 'had a unifying and mobilizing effect on the Czechs' and 'failed to address the Slovaks and the minorities in the multinational interwar Czechoslovakia'.²⁹

Ultimately, therefore, neither 'victorious Czechoslovakia' nor 'vanquished Austria' developed a politically and nationally consensual narrative about the war, although – as we have shown – this occurred for different reasons in each case. Within the specific context of Central Europe, this problematic situation was not unusual, because – as Maciej Górny suggests – another 'war-related tradition' proved dominant, namely that of 'independence and border wars'.³⁰ In practice, 'uprooting' or a sense of displacement was a phenomenon that characterized the experience of many war veterans in all the European empires, but the consequences varied spatially. Whereas minorities or 'subalterns' in the British and French empires dealt with this experience in their home territories in Africa, the Indian subcontinent or Asia, in the 'shatter-zones' of the multinational Habsburg Monarchy the consequences played out directly in regions across which new borders had been drawn within Europe.³¹ Nonetheless, social tensions and political conflicts deriving from the war, the symbolic role of veterans and their social and economic status were contained within the domestic political arena, so long as international stability was maintained. State politicization of veterans and the radicalization of a minority of organized veterans in the 1930s thus contributed to the growing fragility of a European system that was increasingly distanced from an isolationist United States and threatened by a – vastly more powerful – 'new imperialism', chiefly represented by Nazi Germany.³² By reopening the question

of borders, aggressive external forces and groups of internal sympathizers ensured that the majority of veterans in Austria and Czechoslovakia would not transcend the legacy of WWI.

Notes

1. Evan Bukey, *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era, 1938–1945* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 25–42; Kurt Bauer, *Die dunklen Jahre: Politik und Alltag im nationalsozialistischen Österreich 1938–1945* (Frankfurt a.M., 2017), 21–114.
2. Edvard Beneš, *Šest let exilu a druhé světové války: Řeči, projevy a dokumenty z r. 1939–45*, 7th ed. (Prague, 1947), 58.
3. Stanislav J. Kirschbaum, *A History of Slovakia: The Struggle for Survival* (New York, 1995), 181–94.
4. Eichenberg and Newman, 'Introduction: The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism', 11.
5. Horne, 'Beyond Cultures of Victory', 211–12.
6. Cornwall and Newman, *Sacrifice and Rebirth*.
7. Gerwarth and Horne, *War in Peace*.
8. Walleczek-Fritz, 'Staying Mobilized'; Konrád and Kučera, *Paths out of the Apocalypse*.
9. Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*, 118–67.
10. Überegger, *Erinnerungskriege*, 193.
11. Newman, *Yugoslavia*.
12. Christopher Brennan, "'Hoch den Kaiser!' The Legitimist Cause in Early Postwar Austria', in *Postwar Continuity and New Challenges in Central Europe, 1918–1923*, eds Tomasz Pudłocki and Kamil Ruszała (New York, 2022), 114–72.
13. Boyer, *Austria, 1867–1955*, 663.
14. Hsia, *Victims' State*, 7.
15. Eichenberg, *Kämpfen für Frieden*; Newman, *Yugoslavia*; Jarzabek, *Legionisci i inni*.
16. Gerwarth, 'The Continuum of Violence'.
17. Eichenberg and Newman, 'Introduction: The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism', 4.
18. Compare Samuël Kruizinga, 'Introduction', in *The Politics of Smallness in Modern Europe: Size, Identity and International Relations since 1800*, ed. id. (London, 2022), 1–14.
19. Alcalde, *War Veterans and Fascism*, 197–273; Newman, *Yugoslavia*, 213–40.
20. Jakub Drábik, 'The History of Czech Fascism: A Reappraisal', in *Beyond the Fascist Century: Essays in Honour of Roger Griffin*, eds. Constantin Iordachai and Aristotle Kallis (Basingstoke, 2020), 177–94.
21. Tólos, *Das Austrofaschistische Herrschaftssystem*, 147–206.
22. Alcalde, *War Veterans and Fascism*, 274–75.
23. Compare Tólos, *Das Austrofaschistische Herrschaftssystem*, 551–86; Aristotle Kallis, 'Working Across Bounded Entities: Fascism, "Para-Fascism", and Ideational Mobilities in Interwar Europe', in *Beyond the Fascist Century*, eds. Iordachai and Kallis, 73–99.
24. See also Alcalde, *War Veterans and Fascism*, 227.
25. Cole, *Military Culture*; compare Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven, 1980); Marilyn Coetzee, *The German Army League: Popular Nationalism in Wilhelmine Germany* (New York, 1990).
26. Maciej Górny, 'Where Did the Postwar Politics of Memory Lead To?', in *Postwar Continuity*, eds Pudłocki and Ruszała, 103–13, here 107.
27. Compare Alcalde, *War Veterans and Fascism*, 227.

28. Boyer, *Austria, 1867–1955*, 663.
29. Milada Polišínská, 'Diplomacy and National Identity of Czechoslovakia in the Interwar Period: Appropriation, Thematization, Institutionalization and Sustainability', in *Postwar Continuity*, eds Pudłocki and Ruszała, 65–78, here 74.
30. Górny, 'Where Did the Postwar Politics of Memory Lead To?', 103.
31. Ulrike von Hirschhausen and Jörn Leonhard, *Empires: Eine Globalgeschichte 1780–1920* (Munich, 2023), 565–70.
32. Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of the Global Order* (London, 2014), 511–18.