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## **The Disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1918**

Practically from the moment of the dual state's establishment, the problem of integrity and loyalty of the armies of the Habsburg Monarchy in the event of a war on a European-scale or a profound internal crisis gave sleepless nights to Austro-Hungarian generals. Essentially, such fears were quite unfounded at the time, and based on fairly naïve beliefs about the potential enmity of multiple ethnic groups towards the multinational monarchy. The mostly German-speaking generals found it disturbing that the armed forces had lost their predominantly ethnic German make-up, failing to become a national army as in France or Germany. The territorial system of drafting recruits and dislocating their own armies raised concerns and some perceived a threat of the army being broken down into ethnic, "national" Hungarian, Czech, Croatian, and Polish formations, which could lead to its internal disintegration.

It must be mentioned here that independent attempts were made among the recruits to introduce their own national languages as the language of command. The problem concerned primarily Czechs, and to a lesser degree also the Hungarians, Poles, and Ruthenians. In the Lands of the Crown of Saint Stephen, this gained a political momentum and was promoted by the local opposition gathered around Ferenc Kossuth. Emperor Franz Joseph I finally made a decision, and in the army order issued on 16 September 1903 in Chłopy, he categorically opposed the attempts of nationalisation of individual constituents of the army beyond the framework agreed during the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867 and in the military act of 1868.<sup>1</sup>

1. W. Wagner, *Die k. (u.) k. Armee – Gliederung und Aufgabestellung*, in: *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, Bd. 5, *Die bewaffnete Macht*, Hg. A. Wandruszka,

The outbreak of the First World War did not confirm the earlier concerns. Mobilisation was conducted efficiently against the background of general pro-war enthusiasm and hopes for a quick and victorious end to the conflict.<sup>2</sup> The following months of the war proved the futility of these illusions. Despite the growing bitterness of the soldiers, the army generally fared well. The strongly publicised cases of the alleged mass defection of Czech soldiers from the infantry regiments Nos. 28 and 36 to the Russian side in 1915 were, to a great extent, an element of the propagandist game of the Supreme Command which was eager to mask its own blunders and failures by finding a scapegoat: a role played by the existing and potential Czech Russophiles. Later, between the two world wars, those events were additionally exploited and mythologised as an element that shaped the founding myth of Czechoslovakia.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth noting that the symptoms of a profound crisis in the army afflicted a range of states participating in the First World War. Attempted rebellions, mass dawdling and desertion, and even the initiation of insurgencies, took place in the armies of Russia (March–November 1917), France (April–June 1917), Italy (November 1917), and finally Germany (November 1918). Hoping for the Habsburg army free from similar developments would have been a far-reaching naïveté.

- P. Urbanitsch, Wien 1987, pp. 242–243, 485–490; J. Ch. Allmayer-Beck, *Die bewaffnete Macht in Staat und Gesellschaft*, in: *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, Bd. 5, *Die bewaffnete Macht*, Hg. A. Wandruszka, P. Urbanitsch, Wien 1987, pp. 91–94; J. Rydel, *W służbie cesarza i króla. Generałowie i admirałowie narodowości polskiej w siłach zbrojnych Austro-Węgier w latach 1868–1918*, Kraków 2001, pp. 81–85; in greater detail, see: J.Ch. Allmayer-Beck, E. Lessing, *Die k. (u.) k. Armee 1848–1918*, Wien 1974; I. Deák, *Der k. (u.) k. Offizier*, Wien 1991.
2. A. Wątor, *Narodowa Demokracja w Galicji do 1918 roku*, Szczecin 2002, pp. 303–304; M. Bobrzyński, *Wskrzeszenie państwa polskiego. Szkic historyczny*, vol. 1, Kraków 1920, pp. 22–23; Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Kriegsarchiv Wien (ÖStA/KA), Manuskripte (MS) Tg. no. 98, pp. 5–6; "Czas" 307, 308 (1914); A. Krasicki, *Dziennik z kampanii rosyjskiej 1914–1916*, Warszawa 1988, p. 25; W. Witos, *Moje wspomnienia*, Olsztyn 1981, p. 91; J. Pajewski, *Pierwsza wojna światowa 1914–1918*, Warszawa 1991, p. 389; J. Bator, *Wojna galicyjska*, Kraków 2005, pp. 40–41; ÖStA/KA Nachlässe und Sammlungen (NS), B/218 (1), p. 5.
  3. L. Duliček, *Czeski 18 pułk piechoty na wschodnim froncie w latach 1914–1915: z badań nad morale Czechów w armii austro-węgierskiej podczas I wojny światowej*, in: *Doświadczenia żołnierskie Wielkiej Wojny*, eds. M. Baczkowski, K. Ruszała, Kraków 2016, pp. 178–188, 196–197; for a more extensive treatment see: J. Fučík, *Osmadvacátníci. Spor o českého vojáka Velké války 1914–1918*, Praha 2006; R. Lein, *Pflichterfüllung oder Hochverrat? Die tschechischen Soldaten Österreich-Ungarns im ersten Weltkrieg*, Wien 2011.

Despite grave losses and occasional catastrophic defeats, the Austro-Hungarian army held relatively well until the end of 1917 for a number of reasons that frequently escape historians. The first and foremost was the defensive war against Russia, fought, to a large degree, in the territory of Galicia and Bukovina, temporarily (1914) in Upper Hungary, and later against the Italians – continuing in Trentino, South Tyrol, and Gorizia and Gradisca, then also briefly (1916) against Romania in the area of eastern Transylvania. A conflict of such a nature was obvious for most soldiers: the idea was to regain their homelands, their own homes and farms. To that effect, the Supreme Command exploited – both for the dislocation of their own armies and for propaganda purposes – the traditional antagonisms and stereotypes as well as the open animosity between Poles and Russians, between Tyrolians and southern Slavs and Italians, and also between Hungarians and Romanians. These actions helped to maintain the coherence of the army at least until mid-1917.<sup>4</sup>

The great political and military successes of the Central States included the termination of hostilities and ceasefire on the Eastern front (22 December 1917) and the victorious offensive at Caporetto (24–27 October 1917) on the Italian front, and meant that foreign armies were repulsed from the Austro-Hungarian territory. In such circumstances, the question that arose was: What are we fighting on for? In practice, the answer was given neither to the army nor to the public opinion of Austria-Hungary. Its formulation was all the more difficult as the supreme authorities of the dual monarchy were themselves unable to explain precisely the reasons why they sent millions of their own citizens into battle, which resulted from insufficient skills to formulate the purposes of the war in a manner convincing to their own subjects. The secret concepts of the Imperial Council that envisaged the establishment of some form of Polish statehood under Habsburg rule, the partial partitioning of Serbia by Bulgaria, the intensification of economic expansion in the Balkans, and the correction of borders at the expense of Montenegro and Romania, were clearly and grossly incapable of engaging people emotionally, even if they were made known to the public. The justification for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of soldiers could

4. T. Scheer, *Die Ringstraßenfront. Österreich-Ungarn, das Kriegsüberwachungsamt und der Ausnahmezustand während des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Wien 2010, pp. 168–194.

not be the capture of several passes in the Transylvanian Carpathians and of Mount Lovćen in Montenegro!<sup>5</sup>

The victories won in late 1917, primarily thanks to the dominant position of the German Empire, introduced a grave political problem that the state authorities were unable to unravel. Emperor Charles I was well aware that continuing the war made no sense and posed a threat to the very existence of the state. In 1917, he repeatedly attempted to conclude a separatist peace with the states of the Entente. His initiatives failed and he was no longer able to draw any positive conclusions. At the same time, the endeavours of various political groups criticising the way that the war had been conducted so far and demanding the conclusion of peace and profound state reforms were gaining strength in the parliament in Vienna convened on the Emperor's order.<sup>6</sup>

All the weaknesses of the state became apparent only in the winter of 1917/18. The skyrocketing prices of food, the general shortage of staple goods, and the emergence of the "black market" were a blow to a wide spectrum of urban communities. The blame for the situation was laid on the state authorities, the German ally, and local traders, profiteers and usurers, primarily Jews. The military action, focused on the Italian front, raised less and less emotion among the multinational population of the monarchy. The war lost the defensive and liberating character it had gained in the previous years, and became an entirely pointless aggression conducted in the territory of a neighbouring state. The news about Wilson's "Fourteen Points" was widely disseminated and made an impression that it was the states of the Entente, and not Austria-Hungary, that had a concrete vision of introducing a European order after the end of the war. Emperor Charles I might have won some short-lived trust in 1917 by alleviating internal policies, issuing an amnesty for political prisoners, limiting censorship, and reconvening the Parliament, but it had worn off by that time and, as a result, he lost much of his authority. The combination of these factors fostered the quick development of anti-war and anti-state moods in Austria-Hungary.

5. J. Pajewski, *Pierwsza wojna światowa...*, op. cit., pp. 93–97, 389.

6. T. Scheer, *Die Ringstraßenfront...*, op. cit., pp. 168–194; J. Gaul, *Posłowie polscy do Rady Państwa w Wiedniu wobec ruchu niepodległościowego w okresie zawieszono-go parlamentu (sierpień 1914 – maj 1917)*, "Studia Humanistyczno-Społeczne" 7 (2013), pp. 13–35.

In January 1918, a wave of riots, strikes, and demonstrations rolled over the entire monarchy to become known in history as "the January strikes" for reasons that were as much social as they were political. Most generally speaking, their fundamental slogan was the claim for "bread and peace."<sup>7</sup> They also strongly reverberated in the army, and primarily in the navy where a group of leftist sailors, mostly of Slav nationalities, attempted a rebellion in Kotor early in February 1918, which ended in total failure.<sup>8</sup>

In parallel, rebellions started in the ranks of the infantry regiments Nos. 22, 26, 53 and the Riflemen Regiment No. 36 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They resulted from problems with provisions, including reduction of the daily food rations to around 50% of the normal peacetime level. The soldiers, mostly southern Slavs, but also Hungarians, Ukrainians, Germans, and Poles, reacted by refusing to carry on with their duties, and later by making clearly political proposals, including a demand to conclude peace.<sup>9</sup>

Problems with food became one of the main reasons for the decay of many army units. In the spring of 1918, the supply of provisions to soldiers on the front was so poor that the increase in the soldiers' daily rations to half a kilogram of bread and 120g of meat — less than 60% of the peacetime ration — during the two weeks preceding the attack on the Piave was considered a great success.<sup>10</sup>

The rear troops were at the time consumed not so much by hunger, but by the more acute scarcity that pushed some to desertion and engendered increasing hostility towards the state among the majority of soldiers.

The Austro-Hungarian POWs released from Russian captivity in 1918 by the terms of the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had a great impact on the

7. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front. Militärassistentz, Wiederstand und Umsturz in der Donaumonarchie*, Bd. 1, Wien 1974, pp. 65–66.
8. J. Gozdawa-Gołębiowski, T. Wywerka Prekurat, *Pierwsza wojna światowa na morzu*, Warszawa 1994, pp. 452–453.
9. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 1, pp. 148–158.
10. J. Dąbrowski, *Wielka Wojna 1914–1918*, Kraków 1937, p. 905. In comparison, the peacetime daily ration consisted of 190g beef, 140g vegetables, 840g bread, and a serving of coffee or soup. It was criticised as too small. The "fortress ration" (reduced wartime ration) during the First World War amounted to 300g beef, 700g bread, 20g fat, a serving of soup with roux, and a portion of alcohol and tobacco, W. Wagner, *Die k.u.k. Armee-Gliederung und Aufgabestellung...*, op. cit., p. 597; F. Stuckheil, *Die strategische Rolle Przemysls auf dem östlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, "Militärwissenschaftliche und technische Mitteilungen" 55 (1924), p. 215; J. Ch. Allmayer-Beck, E. Lessing, *Die K. u. K. Armee 1848–1914*, München 1974, p. 139.

collapse of the army's morale. Altogether 665,000 former POWs returned by 21 October 1918, 80% of them in the first half of the year. Most of them had expected to live safely in Russian captivity to the end of the war and now had no desire whatsoever to be re-conscripted to the army and undergo the horror of serving in the front units again. Accusations of "Bolshevisation" levelled against them by various state authorities were, in most cases, false, and obscured the situation even further. However, it goes without saying that after a few years of captivity the sense of relationship of former prisoners of war to the Habsburg monarchy was strongly corroded. Initially, they were housed in a handful of stations, from which, after being granted short leaves, they were to return to their original regiments. Little wonder that a vast proportion of them tried to avoid redrafting for the army by simulating illness, ignoring commands, and hiding in the forests. During the course of a few weeks that behaviour gained mass popularity.<sup>11</sup>

The large-scale demise of the Austro-Hungarian army began in the late winter and early spring of 1918 with the following symptomatic behaviours:

- mass desertions and unauthorised extension of leave,
- simulation of illness,
- refusal to execute orders, especially to serve on the front line,
- attempts to start rebellions on political and social grounds.

The reaction of the authorities to these circumstances was hardly effective. Although 36,491 deserters, primarily former Russian prisoners of war, were arrested in Galicia alone in the first half of 1918, this did not help reintroduce discipline in the army at all. On the contrary, the cases of dawdling, disregarding orders, and spontaneous attacks on the officers surged dramatically.<sup>12</sup>

Strikes, demonstrations and riots in the cities of the monarchy became part of everyday reality in 1918. They instilled a sense of weakness

11. F. Forstner, *Twierdza Przemyśl*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 200–202; R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 1, p. 182; Bd. 2, pp. 21, 65–68, 90; *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg*, Hg. E. Glaise-Horstenau, Bd. VII, Wien 1938, pp. 43–44, 95–96, 556–557; J. Gaul, *Służby wywiadowczo-informacyjne Austro-Węgier wobec radykalnego ruchu niepodległościowego w Królestwie Polskim 1914–1918*, Warszawa 2006, p. 443.

12. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 1, p. 182; Bd. 2, pp. 21, 65–68, 90; *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg*, op. cit., Bd. VII, pp. 43–44, 95–96, 556–557.

and the absolute helplessness of the state administration, and finally undermined the authority of the monarchy. The deployment of special troops in the form of "assistance companies" (*Militärassistentz*) in the vulnerable areas was a belated response. These were carefully selected, minor units, conscripted in distant parts of the monarchy so that they were alien to the local population both linguistically and culturally. They were to play the role of military police sent to pacify anti-state behaviours. In this way, companies composed of Germans, Czechs, Romanians, Hungarians, and Ukrainians were deployed on the territory of Poland. The plans developed in late January 1918 included the deployment of 8,000 soldiers from these formations in Galicia as a particular demonstration of the total lack of trust by the state authorities towards not only the civilians, but also towards the military troops coming from the areas engulfed by social unrest.<sup>13</sup>

A wave of spontaneous rebellions in the army grew in parallel to the civilian unrest. Having temporarily subsided in the early spring of 1918, the situation flared up in April. The intensification was caused by the POWs returning from Russian captivity. Riots and acts of marauding broke out in many crown lands of the monarchy. In Galicia, the heroes were the Polish and Ukrainian soldiers from the infantry regiments Nos. 9 and 40 – in Żurawica and in Sambor – and later of the Riflemen Regiment No. 33 in Kraków and the Infantry Regiment No. 55 in Bielsko. Similar developments took place in Bohemia and Moravia, Upper Hungary, Styria, and Croatia. Again, the primary reason behind the disturbances was the insufficient supply of bread, followed by the reluctance to serve in the army as such, and especially to return to the front. The situation with supplies in certain units was becoming dramatic, for example the daily ration of bread in the Reserve Battalion of the Infantry Regiment No. 17 in Judenburg was first lowered to 420g a day, then to 350g, and eventually to only 250g. On 9 May 1918, when soldiers were issued only 50g of bread per person, a rebellion of rank-and-file soldiers and non-commissioned officers (a total of 1,181 soldiers) broke out, and was joined by local civilians. The riots culminated in acts of violence towards the officers and the plundering of warehouses, railway

13. The deployment of the anti-riot assistance troops in Galicia: Biała – 500 soldiers, Chrzanów – 1,000, Kraków – 1,000, Nowy Sącz – 500, Tarnów – 500, Przemyśl – 500, Sanok – 500, Drohobycz – 1,500, Lviv – 1,500, Stryi – 500; R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 1, pp. 251–252; CPAHU, Fond 146, Description 4, Case 5258, pp. 59–67; Fond 146, Description 4, Case 5197, p. 38.

station, and public utility facilities. Seven people were killed. The state authorities lost control over the rebelling city for five days. After order was reintroduced, seven leaders were executed and 679 others received other sentences. Similar rebellion attempts ended in sentencing the instigators to death. They were later executed in nearby Murau, where the Field Riflemen Battalion No. 7 was stationed, and in Radkersburg where the Infantry Regiment No. 97 was quartered. In all these cases the instigators were Slovenians who were joined by their German and Italian brothers-in-arms.<sup>14</sup>

The quenching of the anti-war demonstration of soldiers from the Riflemen Regiment No. 7 in Rumburk (Bohemia) was especially brutal. The deployment of German-speaking soldiers from the *Salzburg* Infantry Regiment No. 59 for that purpose automatically led to the transformation of an internal army conflict of an economic character with a criminal and political undercurrent, into an eruption of hostilities between nationalities, which was the worst augury for the future of the state. In turn, the rebellion of the Hungarian and German soldiers from the Infantry Regiment No. 6 in Pecs in Hungary resulted in bloodshed during a skirmish with the intervening assistance troops: it left the assistance companies with 14 officers and soldiers dead and 21 wounded, while the rebels lost nine. Many insurgents later left the city and went into hiding in rural areas.<sup>15</sup>

Unrest in the rear formations intensified when news reached them of the start of an offensive against the Italians on the river Piave, which was immediately reported by the press.<sup>16</sup> Reservists and fresh conscripts were not eager to become "cannon fodder" and attempted to delay their departure to the front. Violent riots started in many cities: the one at Kraków railway station on 16 June 1918 was caused by the soldiers of the local Riflemen Regiment No. 16 being loaded into the carriages at the point of bayonets of the assistance companies from the *Viennese* Infantry Regiment No. 4. A brawl broke out between the soldiers, starting with an exchange of nationalist insults before proceeding to stone-throwing at German-speaking

14. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 1, pp. 291–308, 324–356.

15. Rumburk saw the sentencing of 24 rebels to death, 10 of whom were put before a firing squad, another 623 were punished otherwise or tried. A monument to those executed was raised in independent Czechoslovakia in 1932, see: J. Fiala, *Rumburská vzpoura*, Praha 1953; R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Fron...*, op. cit., Bd. 1, pp. 357–383.

16. "Czas" 255 (1918).



soldiers. In response, the Viennese regiment's infantry opened fire, heavily wounding a number of Galician soldiers as a result. It was only then that the train with the reserve troops departed from Kraków.<sup>17</sup>

The General Headquarters issued information about the course of the battle on the Piave (15–22 June 1918) saying that "the Czech and Polish-Ruthenian battalions proved their mettle with their brave behaviour, and that the months of the enemy's daily attempts to induce them to commit treason and villainy were fruitless and thwarted," which was a proof of the highest command's fears concerning the troops' attitude, rather than of the extreme heroism of the soldiers themselves.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, cases of defection behind the enemy lines did take place at the time, as mentioned by the minister of national defence at the secret session of the Imperial Council on 23 July 1918.<sup>19</sup> The heavy defeat suffered in that failed offensive made a shattering impression on the entire state as it reinforced the conviction of an imminent defeat and their own army's inability to deal a decisive blow to the enemy.<sup>20</sup> At that moment, the Habsburg armies lost all initiative on the Italian front and were passively awaiting further political developments. That failure accelerated the breakdown of discipline, especially in the rear formations.<sup>21</sup>

As one could venture to claim, it was then that the mental and ideological breakup between the vast majority of soldiers and the Habsburg monarchy occurred. Formally, the state structures still operated, the armed forces still existed, and the line of the front was sustained, but the departure of the military, especially the reservists, fresh conscripts, and reserve officers, from Austria-Hungary was gaining momentum. These were the groups that most strongly contested the state of affairs as well as the very fact of the dual state's continuation.

More riots instigated by Galician soldiers followed the battle on the Piave. Again, it was the soldiers of the Kraków Riflemen Regiment No. 16, who started riots in Wörgl in Tyrol on 2 July: this time they ended without bloodshed. Local military rebellions also occurred in other cities of the Gov-

17. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 2, pp. 65–68.

18. "Czas" 257 (1918).

19. *Abgeordnetenhaus des Reichsrats: Stenographische Protokolle geheime Sitzungen Juli 1918*, p. 15, <https://www.parlament.gv.at> (15.10.2018).

20. *Ibidem*, pp. 75–79.

21. *Österreich-Ungarns...*, op. cit., Bd. VII, pp. 235–300; see: P. Fiala, *Die letzte Offensive Altösterreichs. Führungsprobleme und Führerverantwortlichkeit bei der österreichisch-ungarischen Offensive in Venetien, Juni 1918*, Boppard am Rhein 1967.

ernorate of Lublin: in Lublin, Kielce, Zamość, Kraśnik, and Piotrków. On 18 July, another rebellion attempt caused by the reluctance to go to the front was recorded in Kraków; this time it was caused by the soldiers of the *Styrian Rifleman Regiment No. 33*. Analogous disturbances took place in September 1918 in Nowy Sącz, involving the infantry from the *Przemyśl Regiment No. 10*. Fire was exchanged during the attempt to control the rebellion, with one officer being wounded in the fray. More conflicts with the soldiers of that regiment followed as they were being transported, at the train stations in Tarnów and Kraków. Eventually, after disarming all the soldiers and arresting nine who were suspected of instigation, the transport finally left Galicia. The recurring riots and insurgency attempts clearly proved the absolute collapse in morale of the Galician troops who were formed from conscripts and reserve personnel from the latest draft, and the general reluctance to jeopardise their own lives for the sake of the foreign interests of the monarchy.<sup>22</sup>

The rank-and-file soldiers sent to the front were in no way attached to the Imperial and Royal military traditions and had no sense of unity with other soldiers of the multinational state. They were to become the main disruptive element in the Imperial and Royal (k.u.k.) Army.<sup>23</sup> The headcounts in military units were moreover rapidly diminishing due to unauthorised extensions of leave by the soldiers, some of whom never returned to their regiments and went into hiding. At least 4,653 such cases were recorded in August 1918 in the *Przemyśl Infantry Regiment No. 10*, 1,402 in the *Rzeszów Infantry Regiment No. 40*, and 1,515 in the *Jaroslów Infantry Regiment No. 90*.<sup>24</sup> The vast extent of desertion led to the introduction of courts martial for soldiers from reserve battalions, including the *Kraków Infantry Regiment No. 13* (in Olomouc), the *Nowy Sącz Infantry Regiment No. 20* (in Tarnów) and the *Tarnów Infantry Regiment 57* (in Przerów).<sup>25</sup>

In September 1918, military authorities estimated the number of army deserters to be around 230,000 soldiers, including 40,000 troops from Galicia,

22. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 2, pp. 65–68, 90.
23. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 1, pp. 206–207, 299–301, Bd. 2, pp. 65–68, 90; H. Kerchnawe, *Die Zusammenbruch der österr.-Ungar. Wehrmacht im Herbst 1918*, München 1921, pp. 164–166.
24. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 2, p. 70.
25. Absolute death penalty (firing squad or hanging) was introduced there, however, knowing the scale of desertion, its application is highly doubtful, CPAHU, Fond 146, Description 4, Case 5258, p. 232.

70,000 from Croatia-Slavonia, 60,000 from Hungary, 20,000 from the Bohemian lands, and around 40,000 from the Alpine lands.<sup>26</sup> The relatively low number of Czech deserters is striking, thereby rebuffing the popular opinions about the disloyalty of the soldiers from these crown lands of the state. In turn, the high numbers of Hungarian, Croatian, and interestingly, Alpine German deserters, must have been a major shock for the state authorities.

Countermeasures brought no significant results. For example, in May 1918, bands of armed Galician deserters known as the Green Cadres (aka "Green Guards" or "Green Brigades") controlled the area of the primeval Niepołomice Forest and attacked trains on the Kraków-Tarnów line, especially around Bochnia. A smaller scale attack on railway installations was launched in Oświęcim. The number of attacks was significant enough for the commanders of the Kraków corps to deploy two battalions from the Infantry Regiment No. 4 and the Riflemen Regiment No. 6 along the Dzierżycie-Kraków-Tarnów railway line to protect the transports. That was to no avail, as several hundred soldiers deserted from the reserve battalion of the *Kraków* Riflemen Regiment No. 16 at the same time, and found shelter in Niepołomice Forest. To fight the "Green Cadre," an assault squad of the Infantry Division No. 25 was brought specially for this purpose from Lviv. The great roundups of deserters conducted in the summer of 1918 in Western Galicia brought meagre results. Only 1013 deserters and 42 former POWs in hiding were caught. Another region of Galicia that was to a great extent controlled by deserters was the area of Roztocze and the lower run of the San river. The military authorities estimated that there were over 40,000 deserters of Polish or Ukrainian nationality hiding in Galicia towards the end of the summer of 1918. They relied on the support of their families and wider ranks of civilians, which the military reports described with certain exaggeration. They were to be countered by 45 assistance companies brought in from Vienna, Budapest, Graz, and Prague, among others, whose task was to protect main railway lines and key cities of Galicia. The situation at the time was so inflamed that civil wars started at certain locations, with the assistance troops pillaging, persecuting local populations in search of deserters, and engaging in skirmishes with armed marauders. The problem was addressed by deputy Herman Lieberman at a secret session of the Austrian Imperial Council on 23 July. He quoted a handful of specific examples of

26. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 2, p. 101.

abuse committed by the troops in Galicia, and compared the brutal operations of assistance troops against deserters and civilians supporting them in Galicia to the atrocities of the Huns who once used to plunder the defenceless provinces of Rome.<sup>27</sup>

The dramatic drop in the headcount of the troops in the autumn of 1918 resulted from multiple factors. The Austro-Hungarian commissariat found it increasingly hard to feed the soldiers, for which reason the military authorities of different levels in fact tolerated the unauthorised extension of leaves by some rank-and-file soldiers, while granting long-term leaves to many commissioned and non-commissioned officers, apparently losing faith in the maintaining of the army. A large group of soldiers took to the hospitals, some of them clearly simulating illnesses. Such ostensible internal corrosion of the army did not appear to have caused excessive panic in the high command, as the number of the front line soldiers seemed to be sufficient to maintain the defence lines in the Alps and Veneto.<sup>28</sup>

The final dissolution of military formations occurred in October 1918. It was the aftermath of the unexpected, after all, internal breakup of the monarchy, aggravated by the manifesto of Emperor Charles of 16 October on transforming Austria-Hungary into a federal state co-governed by the National Councils of individual ethnic groups. That belated political act contributed to the absolute destabilisation of the state. The demands of the Hungarian National Council of 24 October to evacuate its soldiers from the Italian fronts and occupied Ukraine, and the declarations of the national councils of 28 and 29 October on the establishment of Czechoslovakia and the state of southern Slavs, in practice terminated the existence of a multinational monarchy. After their proclamation, successive military units refused to obey orders to go to the front, arguing that the national councils and the newly established governments of the individual national groups

27. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 2, pp. 89–94; *Abgeordnetenhaus des Reichsrats...*, op. cit., pp. 82–84; P. Szlanta, "Pod gasnącą gwiazdą Habsburgów". Doświadczenie frontu wschodniego polskich żołnierzy c.k. armii, in: *Front wschodni I wojny światowej. Studia z dziejów militarnych i polityczno-społecznych*, eds. M. Baczkowski, K. Ruszała, Kraków 2013, pp. 89–91.

28. In some corps of the army, infantry battalions were on average down to 330 soldiers, that is barely above 30% of the desired level, and that on the eve of major battles, *Österreich-Ungarns...*, op. cit., Bd. 7, Beilage 32. *Letzte Kriegsgliederung der öst.-ung. und der dem k. u. k. AOK unterstellten deutschen Streitkräfte am 15. Oktober 1918*, p. 19.

refused allegiance to the government in Vienna. These political changes were immediately exploited by soldiers who did not want to continue the war, proving clearly that their ideology had broken away from that of the monarchy much earlier. These actions finally broke the cohesion of the Austro-Hungarian armies. In such circumstances, the offensive at Vittorio Veneto, which the Italians started on 24 October, led to a quick break-up of the imperial-royal army and the fall of the imperial power.<sup>29</sup>

From the perspective of the integrity of Austria-Hungary, the rebellion of the troops fighting on the front came at the worst possible moment. The government in Vienna entertained the illusion that a major enemy's attack would not start in the autumn of 1918. The war was lost, and one could only count on a fairly advantageous peace combined with a thorough internal transformation of the monarchy. That, however, required an army as a bargaining chip in the planned peace negotiations and as a factor stabilising the political and social tensions within the state. Instead, the garrisons far away from the front were totally demoralised, and attempts to send them to combat the bands often failed.<sup>30</sup> In turn, the line troops faced the necessity of repelling the massive Italian offensive.

The first symptoms of marauding were recorded among the front line troops on 19 October, even before the main fighting started. Several days later, on 23 October, a large-scale rebellion began in the Hungarian and Croatian regiments, followed by the Czech and Slovene ones. First and foremost, it was the units sent to patch up the "holes" on the line of the front and to conduct the planned counter-attacks who refused to participate in fights. Gossip, hearsay, and also partially true information about the development of national states on the wreckage of the still-existing monarchy reached the trenches. More and more soldiers publicly claimed that the war had been over after the manifesto of Emperor Charles I of 16 October, and refused to participate in any further fighting.<sup>31</sup>

29. M. Dąbrowski, *Wielka Wojna 1914–1918*, Kraków 1937, pp. 962–964. More on the decline of the state and its army – see: E. Glaise v. Horstenau, *Die Katastrophe. Die Zertrümmung Österreich-Ungarns und das Werden der Nachfolgestaaten*, Zürich–Leipzig–Wien 1929; H. Kerchnawe, *Die Zusammenbruch der österr.-ungar. Wehrmacht...*, op. cit.; M. Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers*, Wien 1993; M. Zgórnjak, *1914–1918. Studia i szkice z dziejów I wojny światowej*, Kraków 1987, pp. 260–263.

30. "Czas" 485 (1918).

31. *Österreich-Ungarns...*, op. cit., Bd. VII, pp. 591–592.

The rebellion of a large part of the Austro-Hungarian army on the Italian front was the last nail in the coffin of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Italian offensive surprised its army at a time of the deepest internal crisis. Some front detachments stalwartly resisted the enemy, but others refused to participate in further hostilities, primarily the planned counter-attacks over Isonzo. The progress of Italian armies contributed to the internal decomposition of the Habsburg army. The leaders of the mutiny against the war were South Slavonian and Hungarian soldiers, gradually joined by Czechs, Romanians, Poles, Ukrainians, and finally some of the German troops. The slogans about establishing their own national states were mingled with anti-war slogans: all of this was an excuse for the general eagerness to return to their family homes. The Habsburg monarchy had lost its authority earlier, and was now generally viewed as a factor favouring the prolonging of the much hated war.<sup>32</sup>

The most radical moods among the Polish troops spread in the *Tarnów* Infantry Regiment No. 57 whose soldiers refused to participate in further fight against the Italians, arguing that Poland had just declared independence. Their example was followed by other units composed of Slavs, and also the infantry regiments Nos. 77 and 103, partially composed of Poles. The rebellion of the Infantry Regiment No. 57 contributed to the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian armies stationed on the Isonzo, and the way to Trieste was cleared for the Italians. In other areas, some Austro-Hungarian soldiers opposed the orders to have their units transported from Ukraine to Serbia, which first resulted in demoralisation and then in the breakdown of those regiments. Some troops from the Balkans already refused to obey orders on 21 October at Turnu-Severin, however, they remained a part of the army and withdrew together with it beyond the Danube.<sup>33</sup>

An overwhelming number of rank-and-file soldiers dropped their weapons immediately upon arrival at their homelands, and returned to their family homes. Some officers tried to keep the soldiers in the ranks, yet

32. Edited by general Edmund von Glaise-Horstenau, the unfortunate order of 23 October 1918 by Emperor Charles I to the army demanding unconditional resistance against the enemy certainly contributed to the final discrediting of the monarchy among the soldiers, *Österreich-Ungarns...*, op. cit., Bd. VII, pp. 590–591.
33. *Österreich-Ungarns...*, op. cit., Bd. VII, pp. 755, 757, 776, 780; M. Baczkowski, *Szarży podobnej dawno nie widziały dzieje! Ułani galicyjscy 1778–1918*, Kraków 2011, pp. 189–191; H. Kerchnawe, *Die Zusammenbruch...*, op. cit., pp. 97, 102–103.

generally their efforts ended in a fiasco. "No force could, at the time, prevent people who had served for a long time at war from returning to their wives, children, farms or work. They did not obey the order and immediately left the ranks, bringing others behind them."<sup>34</sup>

As a result, even the troops returning from the front in close ranks and with weapons in hand ceased to exist in but a few days. War fatigue and the desire for peace were incomparably stronger than the eagerness to serve in armies under national flags.<sup>35</sup> The wave of robberies and raids accompanying the "wild demobilisation," perpetrated by soldiers, deserters, peasants, and the dregs of the society in cities, additionally contributed to the collapse of both civilian and military state administration.<sup>36</sup>

The goal shared by the majority of soldiers in late October and early November 1918 was to return home, whether in an organised manner or through "wild demoralisation." That was also true for the soldiers within the monarchy, even those who served in "assistance" battalions and heard the news of the independence proclamations of successive national states that arose of the wreckage of the Habsburg monarchy. The situation was much easier in the Czech, Polish, and Ukrainian regiments as they had developed underground organisations, composed mostly of reserve officers, already in the summer of 1918. Their aim was to wait for an opportune moment to reject the yoke of the superior power of Vienna and transform the imperial-royal regiments into national armies.<sup>37</sup> The breakup of those units at the rear meant that the government in Vienna had no means left to enforce order, in effect losing control over the entire state.

The liquidation of Austro-Hungarian military contingents within the monarchy was not especially difficult. It required appropriate agreements at the local level and, for the most part, providing foreign-speaking soldiers with railway transport. In such circumstances the Austrian and Hungarian generals, even those who were convinced about the need to fight to the end

34. Z. Lasocki, *Wspomnienia szefa administracji PKL i KRz*, Kraków 1931, p. 34.

35. M. Olejnik, *Dzieje 16. pułku piechoty w II Rzeczypospolitej*, in: *16. Pułk Piechoty Ziemi Tarnowskiej*, Tarnów 2007, pp. 142–143; M. Klimecki, *Polsko-ukraińska wojna o Lwów i Galicję Wschodnią 1918–1919*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 106–108, 112; M. Kozłowski, *Między Sanem a Zbruczem. Walki o Lwów i Galicję Wschodnią 1918–1919*, Kraków 1990, pp. 124–125; P. Szlanta, "Pod gasnącą gwiazdą Habsburgów"..., op. cit., pp. 92–93.

36. CPAHU, Fond 211, Description 1, Case 22, pp. 1–4.

37. R. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A. Suppan, *Innere Front...*, op. cit., Bd. 2, pp. 123–136.

and retain the integrity of the state, were left without an army and could do nothing but leave for home. The will and strength to maintain a multinational monarchy grew thin at that critical moment in history.<sup>38</sup>

Was the rebellion and disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian army in 1918 the main factor behind the dissolution of the monarchy ruling by the Danube? Such a claim would be spectacular, albeit extremely risky, as the reasons for the fall of the monarchy were far more complicated and multi-faceted. Nevertheless, the model of behaviour of hundreds of thousands of Austro-Hungarian soldiers throughout 1918 strongly contributed to undermining the authority of the state and consequently to its fall at the major historical turning point of October and November 1918. Significantly, it was precisely at that time that the Austro-Hungarian soldiers became the most destructive factor in the monarchy, which, to a significant degree, led to an immediate and near bloodless demise of the state. Therefore, it seems unquestionable that the anti-war and anti-Habsburg attitude of hundreds of thousands of soldiers of the Imperial and Royal Army in the summer and autumn of 1918 influenced the development of the new political order in Europe more strongly than the public assertions of politicians of the disintegrating Imperial and Royal state, or the nebulous political concepts of the states of the Entente.

38. M. Olejnik, *Dzieje...*, op. cit., pp. 142–143; M. Klimecki, *Polsko-ukraińska wojna...*, op. cit., pp. 106–108, 112; M. Kozłowski, *Między Sanem a Zbruczem...*, op. cit., pp. 124–125; P. Szlanta, "Pod gasnącą gwiazdą Habsburgów"..., op. cit., pp. 92–93; *Österreich-Ungarns...*, op. cit., Bd. VII, pp. 755, 757, 776, 780; M. Baczkowski, *Szarży podobnej dawno nie widziały dzieje...*, op. cit., pp. 189–191; A. Hlawaty, *Dzieje 6 Pułku Ułanów Kaniowskich*, Londyn 1973, p. 45; R. Żaba, *Wspomnienia z lat ubiegłych (od 1864 do 1937)*, Kraków 2009, pp. 325–326.



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# Abstract

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*The Disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1918*

**Keywords:**

First World War,  
Austro-Hungarian  
army, military  
rebellions

The internal disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian army in 1918 was one of the chief causes of not only the defeat of the Habsburg monarchy in the First World War but also of the breakup of the dual state. That long-term process began in the winter of 1917/18 with the shortages in supplies for the soldiers. Its dynamics was strongly boosted by the return of prisoners of war from Russian captivity by virtue of the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March–October 1918), and the defeat suffered on the Piave (July 1918). The number of instances of marauding and local rebellions in the rear ranks started growing in the spring of 1918, resulting in the breakdown of discipline and a huge wave of desertions in the summer of that year. The response of the authorities was poor due to the fear of a civil revolution or a rebellion stimulated by the national context in the event of a brutal use of force. The weakened army limited its activity on the front, passively awaiting the signing of a peace treaty. The last phase of the demise came in October 1918 and resulted from the lack of faith in a quick conclusion of the conflict combined with the hopes of rank-and-file soldiers for the establishment of national states on the wreckage of Austria-Hungary, which was to result in immediate termination of hostilities. In such circumstances, the beginning of the Italian offensive at Vittorio Veneto led to a series of rebellions among the line troops. This caused the collapse of the front, the unauthorised return of entire corps to their homes, the signing of the Armistice of Villa Giusti by the declining monarchy and the capitulation on the Italian terms.

# Abstrakt

Michał Baczkowski

*Rozkład armii austro-węgierskiej w 1918 r.*

Rozpad armii austro-węgierskiej w końcowej fazie I wojny światowej wynikał ze splotu kilku czynników. Były to: kryzys aprowizacyjny dotyczący nie tylko ludność cywilną, lecz także żołnierzy; brak wiary w zwycięstwo, spotęgowany klęską podczas ofensywy nad Piave na froncie włoskim (czerwiec 1918); powrót jeńców z niewoli rosyjskiej (marzec-październik 1918) w znacznej mierze zrewoltowanych i zanarchizowanych i wreszcie wzrost nastrojów partykularnych wśród różnych grup etnicznych. Przejawami rozkładu wojska były: masowe dezercje i samowolne przedłużanie urlopów, symulowanie chorób, odmowa wykonywania rozkazów, a w szczególności pełnienia służby frontowej, próby wszczęcia buntu o podłożu politycznym i socjalnym.

Władze austro-węgierskie nie potrafiły przeciwstawić się tym tendencjom, licząc na dotrwanie państwa do chwili zawieszenia broni. Włoska ofensywa pod Vittoria Veneto (od 24.10.1918.) w połączeniu z równoczesnym załamaniem się cywilnych struktur władzy państwowej, doprowadziły do błyskawicznego rozkładu armii.

**Słowa kluczowe:**

I wojna światowa,  
armia austro-  
węgierska, bunt  
wojskowe