Introduction

In late 1915, eighteen-year-old Erich Wolfgang Korngold wrote “Österreichischer Soldatenabschied” (Austrian Soldier’s Farewell) to benefit war relief charities. Inspired by the sad parting of soldiers and their loved ones, the song is sentimental but gently jaunty, the composer indicated; the simple lyrics, probably penned by Korngold himself, are optimistic. The soldier assures his beloved, “Do you believe every bullet strikes? / Do you think every bride grieves? / Up above lives the One who shields / the faithfully loved heart.” The soldier ends on a tender yet patriotic note: “So no tears, my girl! / Inspire me with your brave smile / to fight the foe with valor, / for the fatherland, and for you.”

In 1921, Korngold returned to the soldier’s farewell song. Revising its key and harmony but keeping the melody mostly unchanged, he asked poet Ernst Lothar for a new set of lyrics. The resulting “Gefaßter Abschied” (Serene Farewell), part of the song cycle Lieder des Abschieds (Farewell Songs, Op. 14), conveys a very different mood. In place of the original stanza were these lyrics: “Take these flowers that I picked, / red China roses and carnations— / cast off the sorrow that oppresses you; / the heart’s blossom cannot wither.” The end is even more revealing: “Then look again at last on the lovely linden, / beneath which no eye ever espied us. / Believe, trust that I shall find you again, / for he who smilingly sowed will reap!” The 1915 original expressed subdued optimism in the face of uncertainty. In “Gefaßter Abschied,” the departing person is dead. The parting is permanent. The loved one who remains is poignantly asked to accept the separation as final in this world. The serenity comes from resignation, not innocent faith.

When Korngold composed the first version in 1915, the Habsburg Monarchy had already suffered a permanent military loss of three-quarters of a million in what became the First World War. The scale of the casualties was so immense that it touched even the sheltered musical prodigy, who in 1916 was called to serve and assigned to a regimental musician’s post in Vienna. But there were still hopes that the war would end in Austria-Hungary’s favor and the sufferings be given redemptive meaning. The end of the Habsburg world was far beyond the imagination of the greatest majority of its citizens. By 1920, the empire was gone and
the catastrophic human losses a daunting reality. From a soldier’s farewell to the “Serene Farewell,” wishful wartime assurance gave way to postwar recognition of the certainty of loss and the uncertainty of one’s ability to cope. In the restrained but mournful 1921 revision, Korngold tried to come to terms with the war’s undeniable devastation by asking himself, and his contemporaries, to be comforted by the memories of those they had lost and to bear the battered world with fortitude.

Korngold’s reputation and connections spared him frontline duties and direct encounters with combat death or permanent disability.6 But millions of his fellow Habsburg citizens and subjects were not so fortunate. To them, the finality of the loss of a loved one or one’s own health was a daily reality. Moreover, death or loss of health concerned much more than personal grief; they were matters of life and death for the households who had lost their breadwinners. In the small postwar Austrian Republic alone, it was estimated that over half a million out of the roughly 6 million total population could qualify as benefit-eligible war victims—disabled veterans, widows, orphans, and other surviving dependents of dead soldiers and war service workers.7 For Austria-Hungary as a whole, the early postwar estimate was that a total of 1.2 million soldiers perished out of the 8 million servicemen and 100,000 servicewomen mobilized from a total population of 52 million.8 As a result, the subsistence of at least several million people in Central Europe was endangered, during and after the war, by the loss of one or more family members. To them, the finality of a loved one’s death was only the beginning of a difficult struggle for survival.

In the first year of war alone (August 1914 to July 1915), there were more than 900,000 wounded and 720,000 seriously ill soldiers from the Habsburg armed forces who had to be evacuated, in addition to more than 270,000 fallen and 830,000 taken prisoner.9 Even before a called-up citizen’s death or disability, his prolonged absence for war service was already a severe blow to his loved ones’ sustenance.10 The need to organize care and welfare provision was therefore both immense and urgent soon after the Monarchy’s 28 July 1914 declaration of war on Serbia. Finding the necessary material resources, manpower, and medical, legal, and organizational expertise became a massive mobilization effort that forced rapid expansion of both state commitments and voluntary societal participation. After 1916, when the long-term social and economic consequences and immediate political repercussions of death and disability became increasingly ominous, ambitious reforms were proposed and undertaken. These wartime and early postwar arrangements responded to immediate subsistence and political crises. Representing both the continuation of longer-term trends and
revolutionary changes, they shaped the dynamics of state-citizen interaction in Imperial Austria’s successor states.

These developments in war-related welfare politics are fundamental to the history of Habsburg Central Europe during the First World War and in the transition from the multiethnic Monarchy to the purportedly national successor states. They have been, however, mostly neglected in the histories of Imperial Austria (the western/Cisleithanian half of the Monarchy) and its successor states. In contrast to the Habsburg Monarchy’s ally (and later overlord), Imperial Germany—which has received ample and sophisticated analysis especially in light of the debates over the perceived failure of the Weimar welfare state and the rise of National Socialism— for decades there were only contemporary or near-contemporary accounts by officials publishing self-serving information about post-1918 experiences. More systematic studies of Imperial Austrian war victims and war welfare have gradually emerged over the last two decades. But with one exception, most of the valuable works focus on very specific aspects of wartime or postwar services. Or they are framed with an overall nation-state lens that inevitably assumes 1918 and the emergence of the new successor states was the natural point of departure for rigorous analysis. The successor nation-state frame of analysis is undeniably important. But it tends to marginalize key themes vitally relevant to postwar developments, such as the role of wartime experiences in debating and organizing welfare services, the continuity or change in the personnel and institutions, and especially the longer-term political dynamics of war victim welfare. The caesura of 1918 is thus assumed in spite of myriad imperial legacies and continuities.

Austrian Citizen-Soldiers and Welfare Provision

This book offers the first integrated account of Austria’s response to the needs of soldiers and their families when they faced the adverse consequences of soldiering from the nineteenth century to the early interwar years. It surveys the evolving legal and institutional context as well as the concrete actions taken by public and societal actors in confronting the massive losses in lives, health, and livelihoods, which still are largely unknown to historians of Central Europe and the First World War. It discusses what services were debated, deemed necessary, and delivered; what interventions were initiated and by whom; how they were organized; and what purposes they served. War victim welfare is analyzed as a field of interventions and engagements among multiple actors including public
authorities, semipublic agencies, voluntary organizations, and individual citizens (including war victims themselves). With diverse and sometimes incompatible aims, divergent priorities, and different resources and modes of operation, their attempts to meet overwhelming material, organizational, and administrative challenges in social provision during the war and after constantly reshaped war victim welfare. To describe and examine the field’s evolution and internal dynamics, in other words, is to observe and analyze how the war transformed Austrian social politics and political culture more generally.

Grasping such transformation requires beginning earlier than the usual watershed of 1918. The revolutions of 1918, though extremely important, were not all determining in the realm of social policy and welfare politics in post-Habsburg Central Europe. The year 1918 did not mark a complete break with the past, no matter how much successor-state nationalists claimed that to be the case.\(^{18}\) The Austrian Republic is especially illuminating in this regard. The experience of Vienna—representing first the imperial center and then a vulnerable successor state (and in the Peace Settlements of 1919, a “loser” of the First World War)—shows that the general thrust of wartime welfare policy making persisted and remained on course, even though the Austrian Revolution of 1918 altered the dynamics within the war victim welfare field. Wartime activities, interactions, and tensions set precedents and parameters that in turn shaped expectations for reform as well as visions for postwar developments. Composer Korngold’s reworking of his melancholic but patriotic song into a more profound expression of loss and sorrow is emblematic: 1918 was the key turning point, not the starting point. The postwar politics of welfare took place within a web of rules, institutions, practices, and assumptions that had been established before or during the war and then reshaped by wartime actions.

Tracing the origins of wartime and postwar welfare provision, this book charts a longer trajectory of state-citizen relations in Imperial Austria from before the introduction of universal male conscription in 1868. It examines whether the liberal reforms of the 1860s and specifically universal conscription, which ushered in a mass citizen army, signaled new conceptions about soldiers, citizenship, disability, and the state’s welfare imperative that underpinned the prewar and wartime military welfare. This new lens allows for a fresh way to approach the history of the late Monarchy without assuming the all-encompassing centrality of nationalist politics. It builds on the revisionist works over the last four decades that have convincingly undermined old narratives about the inevitable decline and fall of the allegedly anachronistic Monarchy.\(^{19}\) Beyond affirming the new consensus that nationalist politics was compatible with the continuing existence
and even vibrancy of the multiethnic Habsburg polity, it looks at other aspects of public life that may not have been permeated or framed primarily by nationalist mobilizations and rivalries. In these places, citizens could and often did have their needs addressed as citizens, not first and foremost as putative members of this or that nationality. And officials and civil society actors can be seen trying to save their fellow citizens and the multiethnic Monarchy. Welfare politics may be highly nationalist in some instances, but in others it opened a door to a less nationalist, even nonnationalist side of the changing political culture in Habsburg Central Europe.

Straddling the conventional historiographical divide of 1918 sheds new light on an underexamined aspect of the First World War in the Habsburg lands: organized benevolence and public provision of care. Rather than the suffering, privation, exploitation and their corollaries in social breakdown, economic collapse, and political revolts, this book looks at state and societal efforts that were war supporting and centripetal. In doing so, it bridges two potentially conflicting recent historiographies of the late Imperial Austria. The revisionist literature emphasizes the existence of a dynamic and mutually adapting state-civil society relationship and argues that the Habsburg polity was “neither absolutism nor anarchy” in its last decades. However, a much bleaker picture is painted by historians of the wartime society and politics of “domestic military imperialism.” They argue that the vengeful Habsburg military attempted to depoliticize Austria, destroy the civil administration’s constitutional and rule-of-law culture, relegate civil society to a subservient status, and monopolize material resources at the expense of the home front, in effect waging a war against its own civilian population.

In this scholarship, the previously active civil society seems to have been thoroughly deprived of its basis for effective public engagement. Shifting the focus to the war welfare field makes clear that civil society was to some extent still resourceful and resilient. The indispensable welfare activism especially shows that the prewar state-society dynamics—in the institutional political realm—continued in another sphere of action despite the military’s suppression attempts. With the casualties reaching millions, the war victim welfare field itself gained importance as a key arena of legitimate and permitted intervention in public affairs. At its core, war victim welfare was intensely political and had strong inclusive potentials even under the extreme circumstances of a totalizing war and a revolution.

The war compelled Imperial Austrian officials to undertake a desperate but ambitious welfare state building because the multinational Habsburg Monarchy, unlike other major belligerents, could not deploy nationalism to generate
a midconflict “second mobilization”; nor could it at least sustain what a French historian called “patriotic gloom” among the general population.²⁶ Their efforts to centralize, systematize, and expand welfare provision, despite ultimately failing to save the Monarchy, had significant postwar resonance. In the perilous landscape of postwar Central Europe, the Austrian Republic continued on the same étatist path despite the deep involvement of civil society actors in the war-time “public” welfare system. The Republic’s leaders sought to build legitimacy and a sense of purpose for the new polity by formally enshrining a robust entitlement citizenship through welfare legislation. The same general strategy was adopted in at least two other successor states, Czechoslovakia and Poland.²⁷ This state-centered welfare expansion was the culmination of the increasing importance of war-related social welfare for citizens in Habsburg Central Europe since 1868. The critically important path-dependency of policy choices and welfare state building across the 1918 divide therefore had a dual character: while democracy and welfare became the Republic’s primary justifying planks, its war victim welfare system followed and amplified the centralizing étatist tendencies that had already emerged under Imperial Austria’s social offensive on the home front. Civil society’s role in direct welfare delivery greatly diminished.

Nonetheless, the revolution of 1918 did usher in a significant change: war victims themselves became a major welfare actor. The empowerment of welfare clients went hand in hand with the expansion of the Austrian state’s purview and the reconceptualization of its basic missions and functions. The claimant-citizens demanded a participatory but strongly interventionist welfare state that centralized and nationalized service provision. War victim welfare became at once a source of political legitimacy and part of the substantive content of the new democracy.

These specific Austrian experiences with war victim welfare add wrinkles to the comparative historical study of disabled veterans. A recent historiographical survey observes that disabled veterans often formed a privileged group, in sharp contrast to disabled civilians’ usual experiences of marginalization and discrimination, because of their close relations and symbolic importance to the modern state. Their obvious sacrifices were key to the making of national identity, and they were often valorized and rewarded as the living model of ideal citizenship and national loyalty.²⁸ But in Austria, favoring disabled veterans was motivated first by the imperial state’s desperate search for a nonnationalist avenue to prove its relevance and legitimacy, and then the rump, for many “stop-gap,” Republic competing for a significant constituency. War disabilities were not a symbol of the state’s martial glory or patriotic integration but of the previous regime’s
crimes and/or failure. The Austrian disabled veterans were therefore used more for negative valorization or justification through remediation, where the Republic proved its sense of social responsibility and capability in comparison to the failed predecessor or the allegedly irresponsible radical competitors. After all, they fought for the defunct multiethnic Monarchy, not the purportedly national Republic. The post-1918 experiences of Austrian disabled veterans may be better understood as a form of negative nation building through conspicuous remedial welfare policies. Their history is similar to that of other “losers,” such as Weimar Germany. But without the continuity in the state for which they sacrificed, their symbolic meanings and salience were rather ambivalent.

Austria, the Warfare-Welfare Nexus, and Contingent State Building

The historiography of the European welfare state began with a focus on attempts to address the structural insecurities brought about by industrialization and the consequent dynamics of class-based politics. Women’s history and gender analysis, with themes such as visions of gender order, maternalist ideals, and women’s activism, offer the more recent interpretations of the growth of state intervention and social policy making in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. As historians of women increasingly address the First World War’s ambiguous legacies for women’s citizenship, the new insights highlight the existence and importance of a warfare-welfare nexus—which has been discussed almost exclusively in the context of the Second World War—being also a World War I and interwar European phenomenon. Their research sheds light on the changing expectations of and contestations over the state’s role in safeguarding, regulating, and promoting the welfare (and, as a corollary, specific behaviors) of its population, especially when it addressed, or redressed, the consequences of the First World War.

Building on this shift to see the First World War as the central generative event for welfare expansion, this work on war victim welfare in Imperial and republican Austria develops a line of inquiry that sees war victim welfare as a “herald of the welfare state.” This has been examined in the cases of the British, French, and German welfare states and social citizenship during and after the First World War, whereas this book helps establish an explicit warfare-welfare nexus from the often-neglected Austrian perspective. The first chapters show that the introduction of compulsory military service for all adult males in 1868 changed the relationship between the Austrian state and its arms-bearing
citizens and their families. But its broader welfare implications were not fully appreciated by contemporaries. The military welfare system of 1875, for example, was still designed for professional soldiers and based on archaic understandings of disability, family, and the nature of military service. The warfare-welfare corollary of arms-bearing male citizenship and, by extension, the welfare system for the great majority of Imperial Austrian citizens through their male relatives, was only gradually and partially institutionalized.

The scale of mobilization and losses in the First World War activated the potent but mostly latent logic of the more robust modern social citizenship entailed by universal military service. Once a man had been mobilized and/or wounded, he and his dependents would be entitled to the state’s provision. The wartime system was still hierarchical and reflected a closed corporate culture that the Habsburg armed forces refused to relinquish. But in the last two war years, especially when the Austrian Republic sought to secure its political legitimacy, the new welfare legislation formally and explicitly established state provision of welfare to the war-affected population as a right endowed by (soldiering) citizenship. Provision was no longer a form of institutionalized poor relief or the grace of the monarch/state. Suffering from mass soldiering helped build modern social citizenship.

This war route to robust social citizenship adds a new historical approach to Austria (Cisleithanian and republican) as a European welfare state. In terms of systematic public measures counteracting events threatening individuals’ or families’ subsistence (“social contingencies” such as sickness, old age, or unemployment), research on compulsory social insurance and labor protection is well established because they have been pillars of the post-1945 Austrian welfare state. Prompted by the rise of class society and mass politics—and promoted first by conservative reformers following the Bismarckian model in the 1880s—social insurance nonetheless had only limited coverage in the early twentieth century due to sector-specific legislations and eligibility. In 1900, less than 19 percent of the Austrian (Cisleithanian) labor force was covered by compulsory health insurance, introduced in 1888. The importance of municipal-communal poor relief and social assistance, complementing those run by religious and private charities, was similarly limited. In Imperial Austria, such programs were tied to one’s legal domicile in a specific community (Domizil; Heimatzuständigkeit), which was established through birth, marriage (for women), or holding public office. The impossibility before and then difficulty after 1896 for most migrants to establish legal domicile in the locale where they actually lived and worked meant that many citizens, even long-term residents, were not eligible
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for public assistance. In fact, they, the “aliens (Fremden),” outnumbered “locals (Einheimischen)” in several crownlands and in all major cities, according to the 1890 census. Compulsory social insurance and municipal social services were expanding, but ultimately they constituted only relatively small safety nets.

In this context, universal military service—and later the military’s ferocious manpower needs during the First World War—had the unintended consequence of creating a strong imperative for broad, state citizenship–based entitlement, not only for citizen-soldiers but also the soldiers’ dependents. War victim welfare, among other immediate postwar welfare legislation, was the most prominent and purest form of this war-induced welfare state building in Austria. By reconstructing the history of war victim welfare, this book offers an alternative history of the Austrian welfare state.

It is tempting to hold up this story as yet another instance of the pan-European maturation of the governmental state and biopolitics. Indeed, the need to exert state power in providing for war victims was always justified, among other rationales, by the preservation of the collective’s productive power and the enhancement of its economic future. This was indeed a point of extraordinary consensus: Austrian officials and politicians of all stripes—imperial and republican, conservative and socialist and nationalist—invoked it. The clear intent of the 1917 social offensive to transform Imperial Austria into a welfare commonwealth, the Social Democrats’ ambition of using war victim welfare as stepping-stone to an extensive welfare state, and the wartime étatization of welfare and care provision (with the eager participation of nonstate actors and clients) all seemed to suggest a triumphant advance of the governmental state in the Habsburg realm.

By focusing on the dynamics on the ground, however, this book demonstrates that the overall transformation of the Austrian state and citizenship was the result of cumulative and complex interactions among different welfare actors (including citizen-beneficiaries) and disparate sociopolitical forces and events. The local causal links as well as contingent events played essential roles. The war’s disastrous impact on individual lives had to be cushioned, if not really overcome, on the home front. Preserving and shaping future human material/soldier-workers, a hallmark of the governmental state, may be less important for many welfare actors. In Austria, some officials’ long-term professional aspirations for welfare state building, the postwar ambitions of various political parties, and especially the necessary short-term emergency responses to the subsistence crisis came together to create the proverbial perfect storm that catalyzed the 1917–1919/1920 continuum of welfare étatization and expansion. In a polity not known for utopian visions, it is difficult to pinpoint any Bolshevik-style
blueprint or guiding ideology to “cultivate the masses” and refashion society in the midst of war-induced chaos. Establishing a more efficient way of life for the benefit of both the individual and the collective was on the minds of some Austrian welfare actors, but even that was often out of necessity and improvisation. Contingent, short-term needs were as important to the wartime and postwar transformation of the Austrian state and overall political culture as were long-term structural trends, if not more so.

The Austrian state was neither an inert and inscrutably Kafkaesque entity nor a straightforward agent of avant-garde biopolitics. This book undertakes two concrete tasks to paint a more complete picture of the longue durée of the Austrian welfare state in particular and the Austrian state in general.

The first is to map the Austrian war victim welfare field and analyze the dynamics therein, from before the introduction of (theoretical) universal military service for adult males to the mid-1920s. By establishing the fundamentals of war victim (and other wartime) welfare provision, this book examines larger political and social issues that were embodied or represented in the war welfare field. In doing so, it shows how and why the Austrian state, in both the imperial and the republican versions, became self-consciously “social” in the age of mass politics and mass conscription.

The second is to establish the key role of war victim welfare in the formation of modern Austrian citizenship and statehood. This book looks at how welfare provision contributed to the changing “content” of citizenship and, more broadly, how war preparation, the waging of war, and the war’s consequences shaped Austrian social citizenship. These issues are not unique to Imperial Austria and its successor states but part of the broader histories of modern European state-building and of citizenship. War created its own set of consequences and responses by pulling in many other social and political structural factors, and detailed historical inquiry reveals how these factors mixed with the unpredictable and the contingent. The Austrian story shows that the historical sociologist Charles Tilly’s famous thesis about European state-building, “war made the state, and the state made war,” can be adapted to inform analysis of the rise of the modern European welfare state.

This book, then, provides a fine-grained case study to further de-exoticize Habsburg Central Europe. Without denying the importance of nationalist politics for the period, this history of welfare and citizenship argues for the need to examine Habsburg Austria as another evolving modern state. Like its Western European contemporaries, it faced both the usual and extraordinary challenges
along with but also from its own citizens, who in turn were adapting to the changing world by asserting their own understandings of modern citizenship. This book is based on close reading of sources generated or received by state welfare authorities and their affiliates, parliamentary records, and an array of contemporary publications by different welfare actors, especially war victims themselves, in order to focus on the people—state officials, civil society activists, and citizen-clients alike—who shaped the evolving war welfare field. Seemingly dry institutional developments, tedious bureaucratic regulations and correspondences, and the minute everyday operations of the state were in fact forms of these people’s ideas, actions, and engagements. Treating these sometimes very mundane records with the same care we would give to deciphering intellectual texts is sometimes the only way to gain any glimpse into the world these people inhabited. While war victims’ own voices appear as much as possible, these were often the words of literate activists who created records or those chosen by officials or activists to make their own points.

The term “war victims” is used as an aggregate term for disabled veterans, widows and orphans of dead soldiers, and other surviving dependents (e.g., siblings, parents, grandparents), even though the present-day German-language equivalent, Kriegsopfer, did not begin to replace the cumbersome expression “war-damaged person (Kriegbeschädigter) and surviving dependent (Kriegshinterbliebene)” until the mid-1920s. The growing popularity of the term Kriegsopfer, which took advantage of the German word Opfer’s double meanings of “victim” and “offering (sacrifice),” was itself part of the difficult search for a stable post-Habsburg Austrian identity. “ Disabled soldiers,” “ disabled veterans,” “ disabled men,” and occasionally “ severely/seriously wounded men” are used depending on the context in which they appear, because these men’s formal legal status changed over time and some terms are considered archaic or insensitive today. However, to convey the “feel” and the connotations of contemporary usages, terms such as “war-damaged persons,” “ war cripples (Kriegskrüppel),” and “ war invalids (Kriegsinvaliden)” are retained when quoting directly from the sources.

“ Austria” and “ Austrian” in this book refer to the Cisleithanian, non-Royal Hungarian half of the Habsburg Monarchy and, later, the successor Austrian Republic. “ Imperial Austria” and “ Habsburg Austria” refer to the pre-November 1918 polity. “ Habsburg Monarchy” indicates Austria-Hungary as a whole or the joint institutions. The geographic subject or unit of analysis here may seem to be inconsistent, for in the first four chapters of the book it is Imperial Austria,
while in the remaining three it is a much smaller successor state, the Austrian Republic. This shift, however, brings an important analytical advantage: tracing continuities and changes in the field of war victim welfare across the 1918 divide in a specific context that was at once similar to and different from those of other successor states. Hence the findings and conclusions do not claim to be representative of the entire former Habsburg Central Europe; they are building blocks toward a more comparative and comprehensive assessment of the impact of the First World War in East Central Europe that remains to be undertaken.

In view of the multiethnic nature and various nationalist mobilizations of Imperial Austria in its last decades, the term “national” is avoided when referring to the level of the Imperial Austrian state or of the Monarchy as a whole. The Habsburg and Austrian experiences serve as a reminder that the state or even a country was not always national. When there is no common English name for a specific place, the name found in the sources and its current name are both given.

This book mentions the payment amounts of pensions, living allowances, and other assistance provided. Because of severe material shortages (and thus the black market), price controls, and high inflation rates during the First World War and the early postwar years, the real values of these payments fluctuated drastically. Therefore the numbers are intended primarily to illustrate the changes in nominal values in comparison to previous provisions.

The chapters of this book can be grouped into three parts, though chronological overlaps are inevitable where particular themes are examined. The first two chapters cover the period up to the end of Imperial Austria, charting the major developments in veteran and war victim policies, laws, and administrative structures. Chapter 1 traces the emergence of state welfare for soldiers and their families back to the late eighteenth century and discusses the changes and continuities brought about by universal military service, introduced in 1868, as part of the broader liberal reforms of the 1860s and 1870s. The general attitude toward veterans and the legal-administrative understanding of military disability serve as guides here, highlighting the fact that the military and political leaders of the time may not have fully realized how fundamental were the changes they helped usher in. Chapter 2 follows the evolution of the legal and institutional infrastructure for war victim welfare from 1875 to 1918. It analyzes the Imperial Austrian state’s slow reconceptualization of its obligations to soldiers—citizens serving in a mass conscription army—and their dependents before 1914. The outbreak of the war in 1914 quickly exposed the prewar designs’ inadequacy, and a patchwork of improvised measures constituted the wartime welfare provision. Among the proposed long-term solutions, the military leadership’s interest
in the so-called warrior homestead colonies (*Kriegerheimstätte*) receives special attention here. This idea exemplified the growing significance of war victim welfare as not only a means of immediate crisis management but also the screen to project broader political visions.

The emergence of the Social Welfare Ministry in 1917 and 1918 marked Imperial Austria’s commitment to a social offensive on the home front. The second part of this book focuses on this general strategy to confront domestic social dislocations and, more importantly, to rebuild the imperial state’s legitimacy in a time of suffering and deprivation. Chapter 3 examines the Social Ministry’s ambitious organizational reform in the disabled soldier welfare system. Welfare state building in this regard was at once a reassertion of the civilian central administration’s authority vis-à-vis the military, an attempt to build its capacities, and a mission to salvage the Monarchy’s credibility. At the same time, the hoped-for new comprehensive war victim legislation had become a site where competing visions for postwar society were formulated once parliamentary politics was revived in mid-1917. Chapter 4 then looks into more concrete aspects of Social Ministry officials’ direct welfare intervention. Working consciously as the lead advocates for war victims vis-à-vis the military and other ministries, the new central welfare officials sought to build a comprehensive information regime as well as “retail” welfare services. Bureaucratic turf conflicts and severe material shortages, however, foiled their efforts. The state agencies’ hoarding of resources in 1918 added a further layer of scarcity to the shortages already wreaking havoc on the home front. Seen in this light, the effective end of a more or less coherent Imperial Austrian state already had arrived by the summer of 1918, with the social offensive just one of its victims.

The final part is devoted to post-Habsburg Austrian war victim politics, from the revolutionary days to the mid-1920s. Welfare state building in a revolutionary context is the main theme of chapters 5 and 6. War victims seized the opportunity and became one of the driving forces behind the unfolding events as the subjects, rather than the objects, of welfare politics. Transformed from an abstract population/administrative category into a formidable social movement outside the milieu-party (*Lager*) structures, war victims, chapter 5 argues, formed a “partnership of the weak” with the republican state in the early months of the Austrian Revolution. This partnership gave organized war victims the right to participate in important policy making and decision making processes. But it also constrained and moderated their activism and political potentials. Chapter 6 charts the emergence of the cornerstone war victim welfare legislation, the Invalid Compensation Law of 25 April 1919 (Invalidenentschädigungsgesetz,
StGBl. 245/1919) in the wake of the welfare agencies’ double nationalization in the German-Austrian revolution. The relatively smooth transition of the state welfare apparatus as well as the rapid legislative process make it clear that war victim welfare was an undisputedly urgent matter of political legitimacy for the Republic. The wave of Communist revolutions and aggressive agitation in Central Europe in 1918 and 1919 became an immediate and compelling impetus for all mainstream political forces to come to a consensus to preempt the Austrian Communists’ appeal to war victims. The resulting new law promised a comprehensive, participatory war victim welfare system and enshrined a robust rights-based social citizenship.

While endowing rights and setting norms, the law also created unintended incentives to fracture the war victim movement. Chapter 7 first reconstructs the constant tension within the war victim movement in 1919 and 1920. It then discusses the decline of the early postwar war victim welfare politics built around the Invalid Compensation Law and its companion piece, the Invalid Employment Law of 1 October 1920 (Invalidenbeschäftigungs gesetz, StGBl. 459/1920), as the deepening financial and fiscal crisis forced a retrenchment of state commitments starting in 1922. The 1924 reforms, engineered by the Christian Socials in the climate of imposed austerity, further depoliticized welfare administration by transforming it into a supposedly more “neutral,” bureaucratically controlled apparatus. Organized war victims’ institutional influence declined in tandem with the consolidation of the milieu parties’ stranglehold on public life in interwar Austria.

In spite of the mixed picture in the mid-1920s, the conclusion contends that war victim welfare in early republican Austria was a qualified success story. It was the culmination of both the long-term evolution of the Austrian citizenship and wartime and revolutionary crisis management. War victim welfare’s contribution to political and social stabilization actually led to its loss of importance. But the social citizenship it helped define has remained, even as the First Republic emerged from the postwar consensus and entered a new world of polarized politics, street-marching militias, and growing doubts about parliamentary democracy after the mid-1920s.59

Prodigy-turned-veteran composer Korngold reworked the hopeful soldier’s farewell of 1915 into a darker contemplation on the aftermath of death just as his new opera Die tote Stadt (The Dead City, Op. 12, composed between 1916 and 1920) achieved sensational success in Europe and the United States. Die tote Stadt centers on the themes of the loss of the beloved and its suffocating commemoration. After an extended and very Freudian dream sequence, Paul,
the protagonist of the expressionist opera, comes to realize that his incessant remembrance and relic-filled cult of his wife is not only futile but also perilous:

A dream has dashed my dream to earth,
A dream of crude realities has killed
The dream of fantasy and sweet deception.
Such dreams are sent us by our dead
If we live too much with and in them.
How far should we give way to grief,
How far dare we, without disaster?
Harrowing conflict of the heart!

Paul then promises his visiting friend that he will leave Bruges, the dead city. He locks the door leading to his late wife’s room and walks off with a last, parting glance at it. The suggested possibility of moving on from deeply felt loss captured the mood of the time. The opera’s ambiguously positive ending, after the protagonist’s internal struggle and emotional turmoil, contributed to Die tote Stadt becoming an instant success. Korngold gave the immediate postwar audience something they wanted: a glimmer of hope amidst the uncertainty of the future.

To many Austrian war victims, such sublimated and prolonged coming to terms with the heartbreaking past was both an impractical dream and an unaffordable luxury. They had to carry out the hard work of dealing with the war’s traumatic consequences, and their efforts were not entirely in vain. Historians of Austria’s and Central Europe’s wartime and early interwar experiences have much to gain from a perspective that does not assume the Austrofascist (1934–1938) and National Socialist (1933/1938–1945) dictatorships as the inevitable vanishing points of their narratives. The emerging war victim movement, the participatory new welfare system, and a more robust social citizenship, though of complicated origins and constrained resources, embodied determination, initiative, and democratic aspirations. While the sorrow in “Gefaßter Abschied” is sincere and undeniable, Die tote Stadt’s case for hope was not mere wishful thinking.