Victims' State
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Published by Oxford University Press

Hsia, Ke-Chin.
Victims' State: War and Welfare in Austria, 1868-1925.
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The Last-Ditch Effort to Save the Monarchy

The ministry of social welfare formally began operation at the start of 1918. Its Department 7 was tasked with manning the public-facing service desk to provide legal assistance or relevant information to disabled soldiers and their dependents. Seeing more and more visitors having “fallen into desperate situations,” the Department 7 officials felt they had to do something more than dispatching help seekers to the “right” places. After consulting their superiors, a small discretionary fund was made available. On 7 May, the officials began to give small amounts of cash to visitors who were obviously at the end of the road. These cash handouts were modest, usually between 10 and 40 kronen, and granted rather sparingly. The program marked the new ministry’s entry into “retail” welfare services.

Administering piecemeal public charity was out of character for a central agency. That this initiative came from ministerial bureaucrats themselves is even more striking, as the lasting image of Austrian officials has been by turns distant, inscrutable, arrogant, slow, temporizing, tormenting, incompetent, and, ultimately, bureaucratic. Department 7’s initiative certainly contrasted sharply with the image of Interior Ministry officials who, before 1918, were responsible for coordinating the civilian side of war victim services but often failed to respond to others’ inquiries and proposals. A very different sense of purpose and urgency was palpable.

Desperate war victims visiting the ministry for help meant that the old problem of information flow—between authorities, citizens, and service providers—persisted as material shortages worsened. As hundreds of thousands of POWs were returning from Russia and many disabled soldiers were released from medical treatment or job (re)training, information deficiencies aggravated an already serious subsistence crisis and compelled desperate citizens to go to the new welfare ministry for help. The officials there had to directly face not only the material void but also the information one. Though they did not proclaim that “information is the alpha and omega of our work” like the Russian Bolsheviks,
gathering and disseminating information was in fact a central part of their work for both practical and political reasons.

The self-initiated cash handouts exemplified the proactive approach of the Social Welfare officials. Individual cases were opportunities for the new ministry to build both capability and credibility in the bureaucratic jungle. Positioning itself as the advocate for the suffering citizens, the Social Welfare Ministry sought to create a sharper profile as the central agency that worked in the people’s interest, especially when it was not coterminous with that of the military. Such actions, moreover, suggested a counteroffensive from the civil administration to (re)claim the welfare field as its natural responsibility. By intervening on behalf of individual military welfare clients, the Social Welfare Ministry worked to demilitarize war welfare, one case at a time.

Emergency cash handouts could not solve the root problems. Similarly, the social offensive ultimately did not save the Monarchy, whose final fate was probably determined, more than anything, by the fortunes of its domineering Imperial German ally. The short career of the Imperial Social Welfare Ministry sheds light not only on the previously unrecognized last-gasp social offensive but also on an underdiscussed dimension of the Monarchy’s end. The last part of this chapter uses the case of procuring civilian clothes for disabled soldiers to show that the divided Imperial Austrian state apparatus, manifested in agency hoarding and rivalries, undermined its own last-ditch effort to survive the war on the home front.

A Ministerial Quest for Authority

Three weeks after issuing the key 5 March 1918 reform directive, officials from the Social Welfare Ministry made another move to further tighten the welfare administrative structure. They ordered all crownland Provincial Commissions for the Care of Homecoming Soldiers to stop writing directly to other ministries or central military offices, effective immediately. This new order was justified with seemingly practical reasons. Since other central agencies had been forwarding crownland requests to the Social Welfare Ministry anyway, the ministerial officials claimed that the common practice of direct communication between crownland agencies and ministerial or military authorities had resulted in too many unnecessary delays. Furthermore, crownland officials bypassing the Social Welfare Ministry also caused difficulties for the latter in gaining a precise picture of the current situation. The ministerial officials reminded their crownland counterparts that henceforth they were the exclusive channel through which crownland authorities ought to connect with Vienna.
The newcomer Social Ministry was not automatically treated as the top state welfare authority even by crownland welfare officials. The 27 March directive showed that they did not necessarily see themselves as part of a new welfare bureaucracy reporting exclusively to the new ministry. Acting in the interest of their crownlands and reporting to crownland governors who, in turn, reported to the Interior Ministry, they simply did what they used to do—communicate directly with any central state agencies as they saw fit. Moreover, the superior-subsidiary relationship between the Provincial Commissions and the Social Ministry was not expressly defined in the latter’s 1917 founding documents. The 27 March order was therefore an attempt to control the information flow for a larger purpose: creating a de facto hierarchical and exclusive link between the ministry and the Provincial Commissions and a centralized welfare administration stretching from the dedicated ministry in Vienna to the Invalid Office in each administrative district.

The second justification for the 27 March directive also painted a dim picture of the new ministry’s starting point: the blessings of the Reichsrat and the emperor and an ambitious agenda could not make up for lack of support (or even courtesy) from other ministries. As the Constitution Committee of the Reichsrat’s Lower House pointed out, the Social Welfare Ministry would be working in areas where “the state administration has not” intervened or claimed jurisdiction, or at least, “not in such a comprehensive way.” Even if the possibility of an uncooperative or downright obstructionist attitude from other agencies is discounted, the new ministry’s information hunger was evidence demonstrating that directly organizing welfare for disabled soldiers was novel to the Austrian central civil administration.

To break out of the information darkness, the Social Welfare officials needed precise, up-to-date aggregate statistics about current and potential beneficiaries as well as the resources needed and actually available. Unfortunately, these were not easily forthcoming. The patchwork system for the care of wounded and disabled soldiers led to a scattering of information. Most crucial data about the clients and their movements were either controlled by the military administration or in the hands of local welfare providers. And the Joint War Ministry was not eager to help. The Social Ministry should provide the printed case form as indicated in the 5 March 1918 directive free of charge to all territorial military commands, the Joint War Ministry somewhat indignantly demanded on 20 June, before those commands could pass the information to the relevant Provincial Commission about each soldier who was certified as disabled. The Interior Ministry, which before 1918 handled most disabled soldier-related
issues that fell within the state civil administration’s jurisdiction, had transferred many relevant documents to the Social Welfare Ministry. Yet it does not seem to have passed on enough actionable, up-to-date information. Making matters worse, no evidence suggests that the military offered up-to-date aggregate statistics to its civilian counterparts, either before or after the Social Ministry’s emergence.

Since the latest statistical overview available to the state civil administration was from 1916, officials of the Social Ministry were forced to initiate a new round of tallying, after rounding up available case files, to update the “big picture” themselves. This first effort generated the baseline statistics for war victim welfare policy making, until precise information for a much smaller Austria became available in 1924. As of 31 March 1918, there were 161,779 certified disabled soldiers of Imperial Austrian citizenship. Some 126,991 of them were in various kinds of medical facilities (94,613 were in hospitals and 32,378 were in convalescence facilities), and 34,788 were on file at their local authorities (i.e., released from military jurisdiction).

Most disabled soldiers hailed from Bohemia (47,508; 29.4 percent), Galicia (39,958; 24.7 percent), Moravia (14,937; 9.2 percent), or Styria (9,234; 5.7 percent); and most of them were currently in Bohemia (29,378; 18.2 percent), Vienna (26,971; 16.7 percent), Moravia (18,692; 11.6 percent), or Galicia (13,283; 8.2 percent). The preponderance of Bohemians and Moravians among disabled soldiers gave additional weight to the feedback from crownland officials and military authorities in Bohemia. This also explained the frequent exchanges between Vienna and Prague and between Vienna and the Military Command at Leitmeritz/Litoměřice. An enterprising army captain, Karl Eger, who represented the Military Command on issues concerning disabled soldiers, became a frequent correspondent and favored informant about local experiences and reform recommendations in the process. Senior officials in the Social Ministry even considered hiring him away from the military.

Some long-term consequences of the war, which Emperor Karl alluded to in his 1 June 1917 Social Welfare Ministry founding note, could be projected most concretely from disabled soldiers’ ages and prewar occupations. The largest age groups were those born in 1890–1894 (27.1 percent), 1885–1889 (22.2 percent), 1880–1884 (16.9 percent), and after 1894 (16.2 percent). Most of the disabled had worked in the agricultural sector before their mobilization (38.1 percent), followed by those who worked in “clothing and cleaning” (5.8 percent), “food processing” (5.5 percent), and “steel and metal production” (4.8 percent). These
were men at the peak of their productivity. With the loss of these men’s income, the number of people who were affected—primarily their dependent family members—could be several times the disabled soldiers’ number.

Most disabled men had also worked in economic sectors directly related to producing living necessities. Especially in agriculture, the disabled soldiers might not be easily replaced unless the urban population could be persuaded to move to the countryside. If they could not be physically rehabilitated, the partial or total loss of their labor would be compounded by the additional costs of providing them with long-term care. Therefore, even though 161,779 disabled men, and several hundreds of thousands more wounded soldiers who would ultimately be classified as such, constituted only a small proportion of the 4 million men who had been mobilized in the Austrian half of the Monarchy, the fear of losing these men’s productive power was justified given their magnified effect on the economy, especially after factoring in the productivity loss due to the hundreds of thousands of war dead. In this context, the persistent interest in warrior homestead colonies as a long-term care solution appeared much more understandable.

The statistical compilation of March was still not satisfactory. In an internal memorandum from mid-September, the Second (Disabled Soldiers) Division of the Social Ministry expressed its strong desire to directly gather information about military welfare beneficiaries in the upcoming census. The officials conceded that census data might not be immediately useful. Still, they insisted that including questions in the census about war victim welfare benefits—what kind, what amount, and why eligible—would have its own merits, not the least of which was “to complement and verify” data reported by military or crownland agencies. Results from the census would encompass not only disabled soldiers but also widows and orphans of fallen soldiers, thereby offering more than the mere numbers reported by service providers. The census could also answer an important new question: occupational change as a result of war-related disabilities. The officials wanted to know how the war affected employment patterns and how much job (re)training for disabled soldiers played a role in the labor market.

The Second Division had good political reasons to worry about overreliance on the military or crownland agencies to gather data. Several important components of broader war welfare, such as disability pensions, dependent benefits, and the evaluation and certification of disability, were still under direct military control or influence. With the military leadership belatedly discovering its interest
in reforming war victim welfare in the second half of 1918, the Second Division officials assumed that the military was determined to play a leading role in the postwar welfare system and thus would be their main rival even after the war.

The supposed subsidiaries of the Social Ministry, the Provincial Commissions, posed another kind of challenge. Always under the shadow of the volatile crownland politics, nationalist quarrels, unsurprisingly, had already seeped into disabled soldiers’ welfare services in Bohemia. In June 1918, the German nationalists loudly criticized the Social Ministry’s centralizing reform, accusing it of promoting preferential treatment of (mainly Czech-speaking) disabled soldiers in Prague, procrastination, and repeated refusals to extend support to disabled men residing in “German Bohemia.” The German nationalists had been agitating for a separate German-Bohemian welfare authority. As crownland institutions were embroiled or even implicated in nationalist struggles, the Social Welfare Ministry was concerned that welfare statistics generated by crownland authorities might become fodder for political squabbles.

Having sources of information independent from the military and the Provincial Commissions was, therefore, a way for the Social Welfare officials to consolidate and protect their authority. As the power balance in the postwar field of disabled soldier welfare was still uncertain, data from the census would be an asset enabling the ministry to assert its expertise and thus supremacy in the long run.

The Social Welfare officials generated some tentative information about their clients early, but it proved more difficult to map the broader welfare landscape and survey major crownland welfare actors. Instructions for compiling a list of welfare providers in their respective jurisdictions were sent to the Provincial Commissions for the Care of Homecoming Soldiers on January 3, 1918. Some results came back in the same month or in February. But over the summer of 1918, Second Division chief Gasteiger had to ask the Feldkirch (Vorarlberg) chapter of the Austrian Silver Cross for the necessary information. As late as September, the planned overview of relevant welfare services in Imperial Austria was still not ready. The ambition and urgency of the ministerial policies were not matched by the pace of execution in the hungry and chaotic days of 1918.

Information about each (potential) citizen-beneficiary promised to equip the Social Welfare Ministry for both present and future interventions. Unlike the control-centered wartime censorship, the information aspects of the social offensive were intended to win the support of the citizenry through a transformed state that knew them—and could respond to them—much more intimately.

The censorship system was intended to interdict and suppress information; the
welfare intelligence machine, on the other hand, encouraged its growth and flow. But the unfolding of this ambitious intelligence state required time. Through most of its short existence, the Imperial Austrian Social Welfare Ministry never came close to reaching its goal.

An Advocate for Disabled Citizen-Soldiers

While operating mostly in the dark, the Social Welfare officials faced the difficult task of navigating the conflicting opinions and interests of multiple central agencies. It was even handcuffed, by design, in several of its main areas of interest. The Social Ministry was declared the state authority responsible for “the welfare of the war-damaged, especially follow-up treatment, job (re)training, occupational counseling, job placement, and their settlement” and “the welfare for the surviving dependents to the fallen, . . . especially the welfare of war widows and war orphans.” But in exercising its power in these areas, the ministry had to respect the jurisdiction of the new Ministry of National Health—originally planned to be part of the Social Welfare Ministry, according to Emperor Karl’s June 1917 note—over medical and public health issues. Likewise, the Social Welfare Ministry had to work with the Ministry of Public Works in the technical and vocational instruction that was essential in (re)training disabled men for civilian employment. The Agriculture Ministry was given power over any homestead colony project and was not hesitant about reminding the Social Welfare officials of its stake in war victim issues. The military also shielded many philanthropic funds or foundations—built with private donations designated for war victims—from the new ministry.

Complicating matters further, on the most important issue for the future of war victim welfare—designing and implementing the expected new comprehensive welfare law for disabled soldiers and surviving dependents—the Social Welfare Ministry was only to “cooperate,” not lead the process. The military administration was the real center of drafting this new law. Its interests had to be taken into account in any major war victim welfare initiative from the Social Welfare officials.

Even who would be involved in implementing specific war victim policies often remained an open question. The Provincial Commissions for the Care of Homecoming Soldiers were supposed to be the agencies for the civilian side of their implementation. In reality, they were sometimes bypassed. In early 1918, pressure from “patients themselves, their family members, and the Reichsrat” forced the Joint War Ministry to consider releasing certain soldier-patients—who
mostly suffered from tuberculosis and had little prospect of returning to front-line duties—to the care of their families or other dedicated civilian institutions. These men were still soldiers, and in order to devise a procedure for supervising and compensating them (with their regular soldier’s pay and the equivalent of their military room and board), the Joint War Ministry needed the civil administration’s cooperation. But instead of the Social Ministry, it was the Interior Ministry that was asked by the military to work out the details.\(^{31}\)

The agreement reached made these “farmed-out” soldier-patients similar to temporary wards of the Interior Ministry, to be monitored by the latter’s administrative apparatus. The Provincial Commissions would only be assisting agencies.\(^{32}\) To some extent, asking the Interior Ministry to execute this program was not a random decision; it had long been the country’s highest public health authority (until the new Health Ministry’s founding), and its political administration controlled the population registration, policing, and surveillance mechanisms. The Social Welfare Ministry’s administrative infrastructure, on the other hand, was still mostly on the drawing board. Such seemingly practical arrangements created one more bureaucratic interface with which the Social Welfare officials had to contend. The proliferation of official welfare actors did not stop when the new specialist ministry was created.

Presented as an ambitious response to the legitimacy crisis of the Monarchy, the continuation of the divided jurisdictions showed that the social offensive in practice was nevertheless a product of compromise. Faced with an existential crisis, ministerial officials and leading generals may have agreed that reforms were needed. But each felt that its established bureaucratic turf, resources, and influence should not be challenged. This frame of mind led to the overall strategy of “organization as solution,” emphasizing organizational rearrangements and better coordination within the existing institutional (and power) constellation to optimize administrative effectiveness and reach, not drastic or innovative policy about using power and resources—no matter how limited they were—beyond it.

As the Social Welfare officials painstakingly planned the welfare administrative infrastructure in the spring of 1918, a new commission was created on 20 April to coordinate the interested central agencies. The Inter-Ministerial Information Commission for War Invalid, Widow, and Orphan Welfare met once a month in the Joint War Ministry. Composed of representatives from the Joint War Ministry, the Joint Finance Ministry, the Austrian Ministry of Social Welfare, the Austrian Health Ministry, the Austrian Defense Ministry, the Hungarian Defense Ministry, the Hungarian Interior Ministry, and the Hungarian National War Welfare Office, the commission aimed to exchange information
and experiences about specific measures and prepare and evaluate proposals for
the future.\textsuperscript{33} The commission was a much-needed platform in interministerial
communication, but it was not an integrated strategy in war victim welfare.
Moreover, the heavy military presence and the fact that the Joint War Ministry
convened the commission underlined the strong military interest in continuing
leading, if not outright controlling, war welfare matters. The Social Welfare
Ministry had to carve out its niche under the military’s shadow.

In this complex bureaucratic tug-of-war, the newcomer Social Welfare Min-
istry consciously assumed the role of the advocate for disabled soldiers and pro-
tector of crownland welfare actors. It sought to establish the primacy of care and
welfare provision over military priorities by intervening in concrete cases and
using these cases to stake its claims on the institutional and policy level.

Who would pay for the expenses of treating, rehabilitating, and training se-
riously wounded and disabled soldiers? According to the 1915 division of labor
agreement, the military was responsible for each seriously wounded soldier’s treat-
ment and (re)training for up to a year.\textsuperscript{34} This principle was often exploited by the
military, alleged the Social Welfare Ministry in a March 1918 complaint to the
Austrian minister-president. Of the 90,000 “war-damaged” soldiers who received
treatment or training each month, the greatest majority would be transferred to
civilian jurisdiction at some point because their chances of returning to military
duties were very low. But because the manpower-hungry military was reluctant to
declare any wounded soldier disabled, these men often still lived in military bar-
racks beyond the one-year mark while receiving treatment and training organized
by civilian welfare agencies.\textsuperscript{35} The longer the military delayed the decision, the
more civilian authorities had to reimburse the military. This led to protests from
the Provincial Commissions, which could no longer afford the expenses. With
no solution in sight, the Social Welfare Ministry stepped in on 25 May 1918. It
promised to pay for disabled soldiers’ meals or rations taken in military establish-
ments while undergoing civilian institution-managed therapeutic sessions or job
training.\textsuperscript{36} The military may have won this particular round of the contest, but
the reasoning behind the ministry’s decision to cover the Provincial Commiss-
ions’ expenses should not be underestimated. Assuming the crownlands’ finan-
cial responsibility was a way to establish the new ministry’s position as both the
superior and the benefactor of the preexisting Provincial Commissions.

Similar interagency disputes over financial responsibility gave the new min-
istry many opportunities to stake its leadership claim in the contested welfare
field. In March 1918, a severe coal shortage forced the closing of a Bohemian
Red Cross hospital where two disabled soldiers, who were enrolled in a weaving
course, received room and board. Their 3 kronen per diem was too low to cover the expenses elsewhere. The Bohemian welfare officials asked the Ministry of Public Works, which was responsible for the overall supervision of job (re)training, to provide an additional stipend so the two men could finish the course. The Ministry of Public Works refused, arguing that within the one-year window it should be the military’s responsibility. The Bohemians then asked the Social Welfare Ministry to intervene. The Social Welfare officials gladly took up the case with their Public Works counterparts.37

The stability of a disabled man’s status was another arena where the new ministry publicly positioned itself as the defender of the people against the mercurial military. By 1917, the Habsburg Army was at its wits’ end trying to find warm bodies to make up for the mounting casualties. Already “8.42 of the 9.12 million men found fit for military service had been conscripted,” with the rest working in war industries. With 4 million draftees lost to death, captivity, or severe injury, there were very few military-age men left to call up beyond those already classified as unfit for service.38 The military authorities intensified their combing of the home front to identify possible candidates.39 Disabled men who had returned to civilian life were often easy targets.

The military’s strategy for filling its depleted ranks with reclassified and recalled disabled men upset the officials in charge of job placement services. In a January 1918 overview of its 1917 operation, the Karlsbad/Karlovy Vary (Bohemia) District Office of the War Invalid Job Placement Service, which was also the district’s general labor exchange, reported that it had only succeeded in finding employment for 57 disabled soldiers out of 184 applicants (from a pool of 133 available positions), as opposed to 6,387 successful cases out of 7,917 applicants (from a pool of 9,843 available positions) for general, nondisabled job seekers during the same period. The Karlsbad/Karlovy Vary officials attributed this drastic difference in success rates to the military’s repeated examinations of discharged disabled men to see if they could be called up again: “Many employers do not hire war invalids, because they fear that they will soon lose these men to conscription.”

Similar cases of disruptive military practices were numerous. Karl Koch had both of his lungs badly damaged in fighting and was only able to return to his old civilian job after a prolonged and difficult recovery. Certified as disabled, he was nonetheless reexamined by the military and declared fit to serve in noncombatant roles. Koch was then sent to District Command 39 and worked as a clerk in a “scribe company.” Koch’s case made it all the way up to the Social Welfare Ministry, where the officials chose his experience as the main exhibit in a general complaint lodged against the Joint War Ministry. In the welfare officials’ view,
the military’s relentless attempt to reclassify certified disabled men torpedoed welfare agencies’ efforts and greatly undermined the disabled men’s chances of landing and keeping jobs.\(^{41}\)

The military’s insatiable search for manpower also jeopardized rehabilitative welfare programs. In wartime Bohemia, licenses to operate cinemas were issued or extended on the condition that a portion of their profits be given to the Bohemian equivalent of the Provincial Commissions to fund its clothing provision, rent subsidies, business-founding grants, and other material assistance to disabled soldiers. This program was so successful that one Prague cinema operator, Rudolf Fries, contributed 25,000 kronen to the crownland agency in one year.\(^{42}\) But in May 1918, the cinema’s projector operator, infantryman Wladimir Wokoun, whose military “day job” was to work in the electrotechnical firm Otto Glückauf in Prague, received notification that he would be reassigned elsewhere. Not only would the cinema lose its projector operator, the decision also threatened the official training course on projector operation that Wokoun led in Rudolf Fries’s theater. The Bohemian agency pleaded the case with the Social Welfare Ministry.\(^{43}\) The Social Welfare officials intervened successfully on behalf of the Bohemians and the Joint War Ministry decided on 23 July that Wokoun could remain in the same Prague unit and be allowed to continue teaching the training course.\(^{44}\) The Wokoun case was a rare instance of the military softening its stance.

Reexamining certified disabled men for possible reclassification was not enough. Field army commanders clamored for a wholesale recalling or rehiring of permanently disabled men who allegedly could replace noncombatant military personnel, with the latter then available for frontline duties. This could also spare the disabled man the difficulty of finding regular employment in a deteriorating labor market. The field generals’ demand for such a drastic measure became so vociferous that the Chief of Replacement Services, Colonel General Samuel Hazai,\(^{45}\) declared on 22 February 1918 that he saw no good reasons for a mass recall of certified disabled men. Employing them in war-related industries and institutions would be irresponsible, he reasoned, because after the war these men would have to be laid off to make way for “healthy” veterans. They should have every opportunity to find more stable employment in the civilian sector before the end of the war. General Hazai added that many disabled men were not really fit for any military function and “some of them did not want to work at all.”\(^{46}\)

In less than five months, however, the military leadership reversed its position. The Habsburg armed forces were hemorrhaging men even without a major campaign because hunger, miserable material conditions, low morale, and political agitation led to a series of riots, mutinies, and desertions. The need for soldiers to
suppress mutinies and round up deserters—estimated in the hundreds of thousands—in the rear echelon areas took much manpower away from the front. Then another 142,550 men were lost in the disastrous Piave campaign in less than two weeks in June. The flood of bad news overran any long-term consideration for disabled men’s employment prospects that General Hazai had expressed.

In light of these developments, the Joint War Ministry suddenly developed an interest in finding employment for disabled veterans. If they were employed, more previously exempt men would be made redundant and thus available for frontline service. Using a Graz report on disabled veterans’ unemployment, the Joint War Ministry criticized other central agencies for not working hard to hire disabled men. It was an “extraordinary social danger” for the labor market to continue ignoring them; state authorities should set an example by facilitating and actually hiring the war-disabled men. Lamenting the “decreasing help and support from private and state-owned businesses” for disabled soldiers, the Joint War Ministry wanted the Social Welfare Ministry to pressure state-controlled enterprises to hire more disabled veterans.

The Joint War Ministry even had preferred job assignments for disabled men. In a May 1918 inspection report, military officials had only good words for the Salzburg War Invalid Cooperative Society, which “produced crates at a cost 80 percent cheaper than” its Viennese counterpart. Renting a workshop from a called-up carpenter and already planning to expand, the cooperative employed fifty disabled men, 90 percent of them not yet formally certified (i.e., still soldiers), and paid them on average 1 kronen per hour. Most of them earned around 70 kronen per week producing munitions crates. The net profit was to be shared by all the disabled men who worked there. The report strongly recommended the expansion of the Salzburg model in other cities. Indeed, employing not yet certified disabled men in this kind of cooperative setting was the best possible scenario for the military: not only procuring supplies at a much lower price, but also retaining full control over the great majority of these worker-soldiers. In the name of taking care of the disabled, these men’s productive power freed up “healthy” workers for the front.

The Joint War Ministry formally proposed calling up previously exempt employees in war industries and government offices and replacing them with discharged war-disabled men during the 2 July 1918 meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Information Commission. According to the Social Welfare Ministry representative at the meeting, “it was clear in the course of the discussion that the military administration’s and the Social Welfare Ministry’s standpoints do not converge—we should not assume a priori that the situation could have turned out
differently. . . . The military’s sole purpose is obviously to find as many previously exempt men as possible for military service, whereas the Social Welfare Ministry has to make sure that the war invalids who will substitute for the previously exempt men find genuine long-term employment in the industries, rather than merely temporary jobs.” Sensing that there was no immediate means to stop the military disguising its manpower grab as a welfare measure, the Social Welfare representative used an old bureaucratic tactic: he had to consult the Provincial Commissions before presenting his ministry’s view. To the Social Welfare officials’ relief, the Joint War Ministry representative, General von Zednik, promised that it would first implement the policy only for outside vendors doing business with the military and only after the Social Welfare Ministry agreed to it.52

If the Social Welfare officials could not stop the military’s scheming, they at least found some success in advocating for and defending war victims’ entitlement to welfare benefits from the military. Two months after the introduction of the March 1918 special subsidy for dependents of called-up soldiers, many disabled men and survivors of fallen soldiers had not received any payment. The law was a highly symbolic response to the massive strike wave across Austria in January 1918, and it was not surprising that the officials were dismayed by the delay, if not outright inaction, in its implementation.53 On 31 May, the Social Welfare Ministry ordered all Provincial Commissions to follow the guidelines that were published recently in its official bulletin.54

Unfortunately, the implementation of the special state subsidy was even slower than the officials thought in May. A disabled soldier’s mother, Marie Pirger, wrote in July to both Emperor Karl and the brand-new Invalid Office in Vienna asking for help.55 Frau Pirger desperately needed a permanent job to support herself and her disabled son. Furthermore, there had been no word about her special state subsidy application, filed two months earlier. The Invalid Office passed her petition onto the Social Welfare Ministry and reported that it had written to officials in the 17th District, where the Pirgers resided, to urge an expedited processing.56 Obviously, she was a deserving applicant left waiting too long and, in the local welfare officials’ view, needed the central agency’s attention.57

Around the time that the Social Welfare Ministry ordered the Provincial Commissions to work on the special state subsidy immediately, the Silesian Provincial Commission asked the Social Welfare Ministry to pressure the military authorities to pay the amended basic 1875 military pension to eligible men. Richard Hirsch, a veteran who was certified as having lost all earning ability (100 percent disabled) on 23 January 1918, had not received any of his military pension. Hirsch wrote to the pension office of the Second Corps to complain,
but nothing happened. His case was not an anomaly. There were more and more nonpayment cases, and military authorities often used the same excuse: “unaware of the fact that the beneficiary had moved.” In the Hirsch case, however, the Silesian officials said the beneficiary’s alleged change of address was definitely “not well-founded.” The Social Welfare Ministry informed the Silesians on 4 July that it would intervene on Hirsch’s behalf.58

Apparently some military officials had had enough of complaints like these from the Social Welfare Ministry or Reichsrat deputies. Using an earlier inquiry it had received, the Austrian Defense Ministry on 10 July vehemently denied that the military was responsible for missing payments. The Defense Ministry’s internal investigation determined that the most common reason for nonpayment was that the beneficiaries’ addresses were incorrect and thus the monthly installments were returned by the post office as “recipient unknown.” Either the disabled men failed to give exact addresses during the superarbitration process, or they moved after being certified, argued the Defense Ministry. Furthermore, some disabled men allegedly did not give sufficiently precise information, so pension offices had difficulty deciding who the true beneficiary was when several men shared the same name. The Defense Ministry concluded that “in almost all cases” the military was not at fault and warned that, if disabled men did not follow the instructions in the brochure given to them, problems would persist. The Defense Ministry defiantly added that “considering the huge volume of military welfare payment cases, these problems were isolated cases.”59 Welfare officials, they complained, were making a fuss about things they did not understand.

By intervening repeatedly on behalf of disabled men, the military implied, welfare officials were encouraging the supposedly erroneous perception among disabled men that pension offices tended to delay payment. Disabled veteran Peter Dorotiak had not received his military welfare payment since August 1917. His 18 May 1918 complaint caught the attention of military officials. Instead of conceding that something was not in order, the Joint War Ministry officials decided to use Dorotiak’s case to vent their frustration at the disabled soldiers and their ministerial advocates. Again in July 1918, the Joint War Ministry officials told the Social Welfare Ministry that military authorities had done nothing wrong in the nonpayment cases. If beneficiaries did not immediately report address changes, they had no one but themselves to blame.60

The Social Welfare officials did not believe the military’s explanation of the missing payments. The Richard Hirsch case suggested that crownland welfare officials had by now seen the excuse often enough to anticipate this “change of address” response. The military’s criticism leveled against the disabled man and the
welfare bureaucracy in July, in fact, prompted the Social Welfare officials to teach crownland welfare officials ways to preempt the military’s standard refrain. Relaying the Joint War Ministry’s irate message about the Dorotiak case to Provincial Commissions on 31 July, the Social Welfare officials instructed the latter to inform all disabled men of the Joint War Ministry’s explanation. Should anyone plan to complain about nonpayment, the Social Welfare officials recommended, they should remember to “make it clear that no address change was made!”

The summer 1918 correspondence over missing payments showed that the Social Ministry’s aspiration to be the lead advocate for disabled men was increasingly acknowledged through bureaucratic routines. Nonpayment complaints were not necessarily routed through or endorsed by Social Welfare officials before reaching military authorities. But the irritated military’s attempts to stop the allegedly unjustified complaints were directed at the Social Welfare Ministry. Because of that, the military created an occasion for Social Welfare officials to orchestrate the preemptive tactic against the military’s standard excuse and strengthen their leadership claim in the welfare field. When on 16 July, Reichsrat Deputy Dr. Freißler inquired about the nonpayment problem, which was after all the military’s jurisdiction, he directed his questions to the Social Welfare Ministry. The lead war victim welfare official, Otto Gasteiger, then wrote on 10 August to warn the Defense Ministry about the issue’s political implications. The misery of individual disabled men and the stubborn complacency of the military generated a feedback loop on which the Social Welfare officials built their reputation as the official defender of citizen-soldiers against the military.

This political positioning led to occasional open subversion of the military’s authority. Max Klampfer was drafted into the 5th Dragoon Regiment in 1911. On 26 February 1915, while stationed in Ropa, Galicia, one of his hands was severely injured in a meat-grinding accident. He was evacuated to Vienna for treatment and then sent back to Marburg/Maribor (Lower Styria) in April. Assigned to train new recruits there, he tried to commit suicide and failed, but lost his eyesight on 20 June 1916. As a result of his self-inflicted injuries, Klampfer was released from military service on 17 February 1917 but without entitlement to military welfare benefits. He was married on 18 November 1917 to a factory worker, Maria Duvay. Local welfare officials suspected that Duvay married Klampfer because she thought he was war blinded and entitled to welfare payments. The new Mrs. Klampfer was reportedly very disappointed when she found out that her husband was not eligible for benefits. Since she did not earn enough as a seasonal stoker in the main post office of Graz to support both of
them, Klampfer, wearing his Karl Troop Cross, a medal marking the bearer’s “real”/deserving warrior status, panhandled on Graz streets.⁶⁴

The Styrian Provincial Commission for the Care of Homecoming Soldiers was very nervous at the public spectacle of a medal-wearing veteran, who appeared to have been blinded during his service to the fatherland, begging on the main streets of the crownland capital. In the Styrian Commission’s own words, the scene would “undermine the [commission’s] public image.” It requested that the Social Welfare Ministry secure long-term public assistance from the Joint War Ministry for “this truly needy person”—that is, to reclassify Klampfer as war disabled.⁶⁵ The Styrian officials were conscious of what was at stake: Klampfer’s panhandling would become a public indictment of the incompetence or, worse, heartlessness of state authorities.

In the Social Welfare officials’ view, the military had made a mistake that should be remedied. “Considering the fact that Klampfer severely injured his hand while fulfilling his military duties,” he “should be treated as a war-damaged person and receive [the Styrian Provincial Commission’s] care and services following the existing guidelines and rules.”⁶⁶ The ministerial officials ignored the military’s legally binding decision. Instead of the contestable (and disqualifying) self-inflicted blindness, they focused on the indisputable meat-grinding accident and reached their own eligibility decision. Civilian welfare officials had no power to make or change superarbitration rulings, but in this case the ministerial instructions to the crownland officials were a de facto overrule of the military decision in the area where civilian officials had jurisdiction. When the welfare bureaucracy’s standing in the eyes of citizens and, by implication, that of the social offensive and the legitimacy of the Habsburg state were at stake, the ministerial advocate was willing to enter the murky world of semilegality or even outright illegality.

The willingness among welfare officials to do more than the rules prescribed had been clearly detectable since 1917. In April of that year, the Tyrolean Provincial Commission asked the Interior Ministry to fund the expansion of a supplemental cash subsidy program for disabled men who were superarbitrated and earning wages from employment. It was the accepted practice for their employers to pay them only prorated wages according to their work ability. Unfortunately, the military disability benefits were often “not in the remotest way sufficient” to make up the difference. Tyrolean officials consequently felt “compelled to support [these disabled men] with an annual subsidy if [they were] to protect [their] credibility,” because the reduced wage “has depressed disabled men’s willingness to seek gainful employment,” and the lack of proper remedial measures would become “material for agitation of a serious nature.”⁶⁷
These were not empty words, as Tyrolean disabled soldiers had more openly expressed their frustrations since at least 1917. “When the requests for support were referred to other authorities, they often took it as an affront, responded with crude language, and emphasized that their service to the fatherland” was repaid with “insufficient allowance . . . [impossible] to make do with so little income under the current circumstances.”68 With the February Revolution in Russia and feared nationalist agitation in mind, welfare officials were very sensitive to any political implications of their work. They explicitly used the political concerns to justify new, bottom-up initiatives. The Klampfer decision in 1918 was part of a larger pattern of welfare officials’ bending (or seeking to change) rules, competing for resources, and fighting bureaucratic turf conflicts in the name of political necessity.

Over the summer of 1918, Social Welfare officials set their sights on a fundamental part of the military’s influence in overall welfare provision: the Military Invalid Superarbitration Commission. The commission determined the degree of each wounded soldier’s loss of earning ability in his prior civilian occupation and thus his entitlement to and the amount and/or kind of welfare benefits. The Social Welfare officials wanted to use the argument that “the issue of the loss of civilian earning ability has no military consequence, but belongs solely to the sphere of civilian economic life” in order to break the military’s monopoly over this pivotal link in state welfare provision.69 Receiving support in the 3 September 1918 meeting of the Inter-Ministerial Information Commission for War Invalid, Widow, and Orphan Welfare, the Social Welfare Ministry proposed to reform the superarbitration process by allowing the chronically ill (mostly suffering tuberculosis or heart diseases) or disabled soldier to appeal the military panel’s decision about his fitness to serve or his degree of disability and by adding civilian experts, both to examine the man in question and in the panel’s decision making.

The representatives from the Joint War Ministry immediately objected. They superciliously claimed that a formal right of appeal was simply unacceptable, as redress could be sought through the Joint War Ministry. And they insisted that any civilian expert on the Superarbitration Commission could only be in a nonvoting capacity. More importantly, if the physical examination, on which the Superarbitration Commission’s decision was based, was to be conducted by civilian doctors, the military demanded that it must be done in the presence of the full Superarbitration Commission, even if that meant a much longer process.70

The Social Welfare officials were determined to hold their ground. They were confident that the military’s demand to limit the influence of civilian experts
was a “direct contradiction of what the broader public desires.” Indeed, at the beginning of October 1918, the Czech Socialists in the Reichsrat made almost the exact same demands to add civilians—experts and physicians—to Superarbitration Commissions and to establish an appeal mechanism for disabled soldiers. The Social Welfare Ministry could reasonably expect support for its proposal from other Reichsrat factions as well.

A major confrontation between the military and the Social Welfare Ministry over the superarbitration mechanism and, more generally, the character of war welfare—whether citizen and society oriented or serving military exigencies—loomed. However, the Bohemian Lands declared independence, and the Habsburg Monarchy effectively collapsed before the next monthly Inter-Ministerial Information Commission could take place. The demilitarization of war welfare would not happen under the watch of an *Imperial* Austrian Social Welfare Ministry.

**The Emperor Had No Clothes**

When Austrian male citizens reported for active duty between 1914 and 1918, they had to surrender the civilian clothes they wore to local reserve units. It was understood that once they were discharged from military service, they were to receive what they had deposited with the reserve unit. The vicissitudes of the war made this rule difficult to follow, as an official report from September 1918 stated that “a loss of around one million pieces of clothes is confirmed.” The men whose clothes could not be found would be entitled to fair compensation. But largely due to the military administrators’ hardline attitude, many disabled soldiers did not receive adequate replacements or even compensation. These cases revealed how the Austrian authorities, in the midst of a social offensive, ultimately failed to respond to the deepening crisis.

On 1 February 1918, the Austrian Social Democrats’ *Arbeiter-Zeitung* published an exposé of the ill-treatment of twenty-two-year-old Corporal Rechter. A landowner’s son from Bukovina, he volunteered to serve with the Ukrainian Legion in April 1915. In July of the same year, he was injured on the front and lost most functions in his right arm. As a result, he was superarbitrated and sent home. In January 1916 he was reexamined, declared fit for “light duties,” and recalled to serve as an attendant in a Cracow hospital. In March, Rechter’s status was upgraded to “fit for guard duties”; he was sent to a military school, which further upgraded him to “fit for front service.” After training, he was reassigned to a mountain regiment, sent to the Italian front in November 1916, promoted
to corporal, and suffered a severe nervous disorder fighting in the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo (August-September 1917). Receiving treatment for incessant bodily trembling and tuberculosis in Cracow, Rechter recovered somewhat. With the support of a leading physician and her colleagues in the hospital, he was granted a superarbitration hearing on 25 January 1918. The panel decided that he should be discharged from military service. At this point, he had lost both of his parents. His father had died in fighting in June 1916, and his mother had—according to the newspaper—been “kidnapped” to Kiev by the invading Russians, where she died in an epidemic hospital. The family’s estate was also devastated.75

Rechter’s second superarbitration, unfortunately, was only the beginning of more ordeals. On 27 January, his Cracow unit sent him to Vienna, because he asked for civilian clothes and it was not possible to retrieve his own clothes deposited in Czernowitz. Military officials told him that the War Invalid Job Placement Service in Vienna would be able to help. But the Job Placement officials told Rechter that he was not a Lower Austrian resident and therefore was not eligible for their services. He was then referred to a refugee service center but was told that the center’s contract with the Interior Ministry did not allow it to serve him, either. A visit to the Joint War Ministry’s War Welfare Office did not yield an encouraging result; Rechter was told to wait two more weeks, when the clothes he needed would be sent from Cracow. Given 10 kronen and a rations card, he was sent to the War Welfare Office’s Schwarzenbergstrasse branch. Again the trip came up empty—the branch demanded an authorization from the War Invalid Job Placement Service in order to release its stock of civilian clothes. Being sent from one agency to another, Rechter was stuck in Vienna, with no place to stay nor enough money to support himself.76

Scandalized by the “brainless” handling of Rechter’s case, the officials at the Ministry of Social Welfare investigated the clothing situation for disabled soldiers and whether the newspaper’s account was credible. The Central Welfare Office for War Refugees reported back on 15 February 1918; clothing items were issued to discharged soldiers who qualified for state refugee service—that is, those who hailed from the declared war zones—and passed a means test. Disabled men leaving the military but not qualified for such provision would be referred to the regular Clothing Office. On the same day, the Interior Ministry added that refugee service agencies—under its jurisdiction—were never supposed to provide clothes to discharged soldiers if the latter did not originate from one of the war zones. But the military and other civilian authorities continued to send unqualified veterans to refugee service centers. The Interior Ministry, in fact, demanded the Social Welfare Ministry clothe those discharged
men who were in urgent need of civilian garments. The Lower Austrian government’s Clothing Office, on the other hand, adamantly pointed the finger at the military. No civilian authorities denied there were problems. But no agency stepped up to take the responsibility or volunteer to fill the gap.

The Social Welfare Ministry’s investigation then turned to the military. On 28 February, it claimed to have learned, during its short existence, about a series of cases where disabled men received neither their own deposited clothes nor substitutes from their district reserve units when discharged. The Defense Ministry responded in mid-April by sending the Social Welfare Ministry copies of its previously unknown and unshared mid-March 1918 rules governing the provision of civilian clothes to discharged disabled soldiers. The Defense Ministry’s preferred solution continued to be returning deposited civilian clothes to their owners. The burden of arranging the return, however, ought to fall on the medical institutions where disabled men stayed for follow-up treatment before their discharge. If a soldier’s clothes were lost or in unusable condition, his reserve unit should provide him with a military uniform properly converted for civilian use and used shoes; or the disabled soldier could request monetary compensation. It is worth noting that this set of clothes-provisioning rules also regulated the procedure by which previously distributed civilian clothes or converted uniforms would be retrieved. The rules reflected the military’s defensive attitude; they implied that many who could not find their own clothes or proper replacements had no one but themselves to blame or that the men preferred military uniforms as a more effective panhandling prop.

These rules were a surprise. On 6 May the Social Welfare Ministry alerted all Provincial Commissions for the Care of Returning Soldiers of their existence. The Social Welfare officials may not have been able to get to the bottom of the alleged abuses, but they at least could discover the precious information about how things were supposed to work. It was very likely that their inquiry forced the military administration to clearly spell out the rules for the first time, for the Joint War Ministry issued this same set of mid-March 1918 rules, titled “Clothing the War Invalids,” to all regional military commands and disabled soldier welfare agencies in Austria, Hungary, and Bosnia-Herzegovina only on 29 May, perhaps for the first time. The Joint War Ministry emphasized that issuing clothing converted from used military uniforms and used shoes or, when even these were in short supply, issuing uniforms stripped of all military markings, should be done as a lease to the recipients, so that they had something to wear on their way home. Unless their deposited clothes proved to have been lost or decayed beyond repair on the military’s watch, all the issued substitute
clothing should be returned to the military’s inventory in due time. Only the absolutely destitute, with local authorities’ documented support, could keep the clothing for good as a last resort.⁸⁴

Echoing the nineteenth-century antipanhandling intention, the Joint War Ministry urged the Social Welfare Ministry to come up with a “stricter law against begging” because of reports of “increasing vagrancy.” One of the Social Welfare officials must have been flabbergasted to read this, since he jotted a big question mark next to the request.⁸⁵ This obsessive drive to control even already converted/altered uniforms testifies to both the severity of the material shortage and the military administration’s tendency to hoard material resources. This had serious consequences for the social offensive.

On 2 May 1918, the Salzburg Provincial Commission’s president reported to the Social Welfare Ministry that “day by day the number of war invalids and other war-damaged persons who come to the Commission to ask for clothes, underwear, and shoes continues to rise.” The majority of them were men who had been certified as disabled and discharged recently, but whose deposited civilian clothes were lost. “The substitute uniforms [they received] according to the applicable military rules are in absolutely horrible condition.”⁸⁶ He added in another report two days later, “The war invalids were afraid to go out in these clothes, let alone making their appearance presentable in order to find jobs.”⁸⁷

The Salzburg officials felt that they could not “just sit back and ignore these cases” because they were the military administration’s responsibility. There were more than 1,200 disabled soldiers with legal domicile in Salzburg as of 31 March 1918.⁸⁸ All of them would soon come under the Salzburg Commission’s watch. However, the commission had neither clothing stocks nor enough money to meet these people’s “absolutely urgent” needs: new suits cost 300 kronen apiece and used ones 150 kronen; the total cost of any purchase would just be prohibitive. Worse still, underwear and shoes were no longer available for purchase locally.⁸⁹

Desperately trying to find something for the disabled men who had nothing but rags on their backs, the Salzburg officials’ first idea was to give some disabled men youth-sized clothes. Recalling that the War Assistance Bureau of the Social Welfare Ministry had announced the availability of 7,000 youth-sized, mixed cotton-paper suits for distribution at cost on 18 March, the Salzburg Commission president asked the Social Welfare Ministry to advance 6,000 to 8,000 kronen so that his commission could obtain at least 60 to 100 youth suits and some underwear and headwear items.⁹⁰ The second idea was to take needed clothing items from the Regional Refugee Garment Depot (serving war refugees in Salzburg and Tyrol). Since the refugee service in the region had been winding down,
and such quantities of ready supplies were rare, it would be the best solution. He asked the Social Welfare Ministry to persuade the Interior Ministry, which controlled the depot, to release 500 suits, 400 coats, 800 shirts, 1,000 pairs of socks, 400 caps, and 500 pairs of shoes to the commission.91

Neither of these attempts yielded much, in spite of the Social Welfare Ministry’s strong endorsement. The Salzburg Youth Welfare Agency refused to relinquish its suit stocks, saying that by regulation they could only be used for youth welfare purposes. Then the Interior Ministry denied the request to share the stocks of the Salzburg Refugee Garment Depot. Though the depot was being dissolved, the Interior Ministry insisted that it was not in a position to give out any clothing for nonrefugee service uses before all current programs were discontinued.92

Recognizing the Salzburgers’ search was fruitless, on 25 June the Social Welfare Ministry turned to the Assistance Campaign of the War Welfare Office, a private donations–funded charity controlled by the Joint War Ministry.93 They thought the fact that the Social Welfare minister being the board chairman of the Assistance Campaign might help.94 Since the Assistance Campaign had at least 2,000 pairs of shoes in stock, the Social Welfare Ministry requested at least 200 pairs,95 as well as usable underwear and other clothing items, to be sent to Salzburg, with the Salzburg Commission paying the cost. The Social Welfare officials also made their displeasure known to their Interior Ministry colleagues by extolling the more collaborative Imperial German example.96

The difficulties that Salzburg’s disabled soldiers and welfare officials encountered were not isolated. A report from the Carinthian Provincial Commission around the same time reads like an exact copy of the Salzburg saga. As early as 15 April 1918, the Carinthian Commission asked the Social Welfare Ministry to help secure clothing supplies from the Joint War Ministry. On 5 June, the Carinthians followed with the observation that “what the war invalid received from the reserve units are bad and unfit clothes. The compensation for the missing deposited civilian clothes is set so low that the war invalid cannot buy anything at the current market price.” The lack of civilian clothes “has unleashed significant discontent and bitterness among destitute and poor war invalids.”97

Disturbingly, the military administration was indeed enforcing its ruthless clothes-retrieval policy. Those “superarbitrated disabled soldiers who are still in the follow-up treatment and job (re)training stages had to relinquish their military uniforms and wear their own civilian clothes in the hospital or working in the training workshop” before being formally discharged. Although technically still under military jurisdiction, the military had effectively disowned
these soldiers symbolically and materially by taking away their uniforms without providing anything for them to wear. The commission had tried, unsuccessfully, to acquire better-quality used military uniforms for those in job (re)training; the military administration just repeated that there was no such surplus available. The frustrated Carinthian officials concluded that “the Joint War Ministry seems to want to do nothing about [the clothing problem].”

Just like their Salzburg counterparts, the Carinthians wanted the Social Welfare Ministry to directly negotiate with the war economy authorities who controlled the distribution of fabrics, leather, and shoemaking materials, so as to circumvent the unhelpful military. On 1 August the Social Welfare Ministry used the Carinthian appeal to pressure the Assistance Campaign and reminded the latter that it was still waiting for the Assistance Campaign’s response to the original 25 June request. The Carinthian appeal was also enlisted in another bid to persuade the Interior Ministry to open the Salzburg Garment Depot.

The Social Welfare officials’ frustration could hardly be contained as this point. In a 1 August memorandum to the General Commissariat for War and Transitional Economy, they reminded the latter that the Social Welfare Ministry was behind the Assistance Campaign in the latter’s request for supplies, for those would be used to clothe provincial disabled veterans. Then the Social Welfare officials wrote, “procuring civilian clothes for superarbitrated and destitute war invalids, in the aftermath of repeated failures of the responsible military authorities, has now become an utmost urgent (matter) that cannot suffer (tolerate) any (more) delay.” In a rare moment of candor that was later thinly disguised, the Social Welfare officials put the blame squarely on the hoarding military.

The flurry of requests, appeals, and lobbying seemed to finally result in some good news. On 8 August, the Assistance Campaign declared that they could provide a fraction of what was needed in Salzburg: 100 pairs of leather shoes with wooden soles. This was only half of the 200 pairs the ministry had requested back on 25 June, which in turn was a major reduction from the original Salzburg request of 500 pairs. The Assistance Campaign explained that, because of serious material shortages, it received almost no twine to make suits, and its own request for fabric supplies was referred from one agency to another, to no avail. “Unfortunately we have had to leave our invalids without civilian clothes.” The campaign even asked the Social Welfare Ministry to help it obtain more materials.

Successful or not, the Social Welfare Ministry’s modus operandi in the days of severe material shortages was to engineer complicated, multiagency solutions. Before the intervention on behalf of the Salzburgers, the Social Welfare officials had asked the Commerce Ministry on 20 June to provide raw materials and
clothes to the Assistance Campaign, which, with the backing of with the Emperor and King Karl Welfare Fund (Kaiser u. König Karl Fürsorgefonds), was hoping at the time to replicate its Viennese clothes-distribution operation in the province. It also lobbied the War Economy Commissariat on the campaign’s behalf. The Assistance Campaign then reciprocated on 8 August by promising to partially fulfill the ministry’s 25 June request on behalf of the Salzburgers. In this chain of requests and responses, the Assistance Campaign benefited from better access to precious materials from the war economy authorities, thanks to the Social Welfare officials’ backing. Then it repaid the latter by addressing the call for help from the Social Welfare Ministry’s provincial protégés.

But all these complex dealings produced little immediate result for needy disabled men. There was a big gap between the intention of providing fabric to a charity organization and distributing wearable clothes to discharged disabled soldiers in the crownlands. Upstream promises—like the one from the Commerce Ministry on 19 August that 2,000 meters of wool fabric, 25,000 meters of half-paper fabric, and a similar amount of paper fabric would be allocated to the Assistance Campaign—were simply too far away. It was no surprise that the Salzburg Commission made another urgent request on 27 August. Anticipating the cold days not far ahead, it emphasized that the real help would be proper clothes and shoes ready to wear. So far, after great effort, the commission could only procure paper-based fabrics that were not warm enough for mountainous Salzburg.103

Winter was an imminent threat. Procuring proper clothes became a matter of life or death, not merely a problem of making discharged disabled soldiers employable. On 5 September, the Salzburg Commission again urged immediate delivery of promised materials before winter’s arrival. If ready-made clothes were not available, the commission could organize disabled veterans who were trained tailors whenever raw material was available. All they needed from the Commerce Ministry was 500 meters of appropriate fabrics to make 100 shirts and 100 pairs of underpants, as well as enough cotton supplies to make 100 pairs of winter socks.104

However, the most promising prospective supply line to Salzburg was soon cut off. On 24 September, the Assistance Campaign reported that because of its futile appeals to the Commerce Ministry and the Chamber of Trades, it had to “shut down clothes provision for 14 days.” After clothing 344 war invalids in July and 200 in August, the Assistance Campaign in turn had to turn to the Emperor and King Karl Fund to see if it could scrape together something.105

Surprisingly, the military changed its position of relentless hoarding near the end of September, just as it became enthusiastic in finding employment for
disabled veterans. General Intendant Rainer of the Joint War Ministry’s 13th Department, presumably after repeated requests, finally agreed to release 8,000 meters of wool cloth, along with lining materials, twine, and buttons from its Brünn/Brno (Moravia) depot, in addition to another 100 pairs of leather shoes. These supplies would conceivably answer the repeated calls from Salzburg. Somewhat shocked, the Assistance Campaign leaders admitted that it was the first time the military administration had made a contribution to its services for disabled soldiers. So surprised—and grateful—were the campaign leaders that they solemnly reminded the Social Welfare officials to formally thank the Joint War Ministry for that first-ever contribution.106

Agency Hoarding and the Incomplete Social Offensive

To a significant extent, the Social Welfare officials’ earliest work was the work of information: its collection, management, and distribution.107 It was the way to overcome the new ministry’s latecomer disadvantage, but it also served to make the war welfare field and potential clients legible and hence more open to state actions. The real welfare services, though, had to be delivered, despite a difficult institutional setting and under the severe constraint of general material shortages. Lacking control of material resources to directly and instantly address disabled men’s needs, the Social Welfare officials did favors or lent help to other agencies and accumulated bureaucratic clout and goodwill. They worked to translate these bureaucratic “credits” into tangible resources for the programs and services under their watch.

In parallel with and complementary to these interagency dealings, the Social Welfare Ministry’s strong advocate-defender role on behalf of individual disabled men and the Provincial Commissions succeeded in establishing itself as the authority others turned to when facing the powerful military. When the military demanded that the ministry discourage what it saw as unfair and unfounded complaints, it showed that the new ministry was becoming a leader in the ongoing civil-military struggle. This advocate-defender role nonetheless revealed a sad reality: the advocate-defender could talk, appeal, negotiate, and even admonish. But direct relief often had to rely on other hoarding stakeholders, since the ministry itself had little to offer in actual material relief.

In a concrete way, the Salzburg clothing saga highlighted the growing insistence among many state agencies on hoarding material resources and jealously protecting their own bureaucratic turf. Facing the uncharted waters of exhausting but indefinite fighting—or the very likely but extremely unpleasant outcome
of either victory by the Entente Powers or permanent domination by Imperial Germany—it was clear that the Habsburg Monarchy would not survive in its old form. Aware of how fundamentally the war had changed the basic terms of politics, some Christian Social and Social Democrat leaders had reached the point of "thinking the unthinkable, imagining a state without a supranational Dynasty and a nation without a multinational state." When it was hard to foresee the future, the material resources at hand were among the few remaining solid things people had to hold on to. They were precious political capital with which to position themselves for the inevitable power realignment.

At the moment when resources needed to be marshaled and used most efficiently and effectively, the hoarding mentality made officials even less flexible about the uses of scarce but still available resources at disposal. Agency hoarding, mainly but not limited to military authorities, became an insurmountable obstacle to official welfare provision, even though the latter might have given the Monarchy a chance by containing popular discontent. State agencies stopped working as a coherent whole and behaved like small fiefdoms single-mindedly concerned with their own individual interests. This disastrous vicious circle—the more urgently welfare provisioning was needed, the lower the willingness to collaborate and make it possible—suggested that the social offensive, no matter what potential it might have, was paralyzed not only by the material shortages but also by an internal breakdown of the Imperial Austrian state. The self-destructive behavior of the state apparatus at the most pivotal moment stacked the odds too high for the social offensive.

In the end, those disabled Salzburg veterans did not appear to receive the urgently needed winter clothes in time. The disintegration of the Monarchy and the field army between early October and early November 1918 brought back even more disabled soldiers who were not adequately provided for. The Salzburg provincial government, in a 7 December telegraph, was still asking the State Office (Ministry) of Social Welfare for help in securing 490 sets of clothes from the same Refugee Depot of the State Office (Ministry) of the Interior. This was a repeat of the May 1918 scene, featuring the same cast of agency actors—with mostly the same central state and provincial officials—and following the same script. The only new twist was that two days later, on 9 December, the Salzburg government added new categories of clients—war widows and orphans—in an appeal for Vienna’s intervention. The provisioning crisis worsened for the successor Republic, which seemed to show that the social offensive was an exercise in futility. But at this moment of despair, a new force in welfare politics emerged and strengthened the social turn of the Austrian state initiated under the Monarchy.