Victims' State

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Conclusion

After more than two years of relying on a patchwork of antiquated laws, improvised institutions, voluntary contributors, and piecemeal reform-by-decree, 1917 became the watershed for Austrian war victim welfare. The Imperial Austrian state decided to salvage its legitimacy by expanding the welfare state. Until the First World War, war victim welfare in Austria was conceived of as a means to preempt street panhandling by veterans, reward loyal servants of the dynasty, and incentivize enlistment to replenish the strength of the armed forces. The implications of a universal service–based citizen army from the 1868 reform mostly failed to register. The social offensive on the home front represented a full break with this past. Older pillars of the war victim welfare field, such as philanthropic care, public charity funds, imperial paternalism, and improvised service providers, were seen as vastly inadequate for the task. If the Habsburg Monarchy was to survive, imperial officials knew that they needed radical reforms. The founding of the Social Welfare Ministry was an institutional embodiment of their new thinking. What happened after 1917 in welfare politics was to a significant degree a debate over the direction and control of the state’s welfare intervention.

The social offensive failed, and the Monarchy collapsed. When the military’s political influence evaporated in October 1918, the door to drastic reforms was finally wide open. The Revolution of 1918 ushered in a new political order as well as a new concept of state-citizen relations. Citizenship was thought of as inherently “social.” The state’s legitimacy originated not only in its democratic institutions, which embodied popular sovereignty, but also in the fulfilment of its social mission to ensure the economic security (to some, even economic equality) of its citizens. The state existed to express the will of these citizens and guarantee their rights, including those involving their living standards, through its services. In war victim welfare, the most important measure taken to realize this new conception was the Invalid Compensation Law of 1919. However, many of its elements were already in the Social Democrats’ 1917 proposal. The quick succession of administrative and institutional reforms undertaken in the first months of the Republic also reveals that the leading welfare officials, transitioning smoothly from the Monarchy to
the Austrian Republic, eagerly pursued what they had intended since 1917: the demilitarization, étatization, and expansion of welfare provision.

Analyzing war victim welfare over the 1917–1919/1921 continuum, it is not surprising that the first social minister of the Republic, Ferdinand Hanusch, boasted (incorrectly) of Austria being the first and most innovative among the major belligerents and successor states to furnish a new welfare system based on new conceptions of the state and entitlement citizenship. Postwar Austria had a group of welfare actors that had been ready to finally bring their ideas to fruition. The Revolution of 1918 not only brought a new force—war victims themselves—to the war victim welfare field, it also opened the door for the frustrated 1917/1918 reformers.

The Social Democrats and the Communists played critical roles in Austria’s speedy commitment to war victim welfare expansion after October 1918. The Social Democrats had the most comprehensive and democratic vision for war victim welfare. They also found welfare officials in the state apparatus ready to collaborate. This revolutionary alliance seized the moment—unquestionably out of necessity in the desperate early postwar months—to initiate swift and sweeping reforms. Legislating for a new and comprehensive war victim welfare system was what the Habsburg military did not accomplish, in spite of its express intention and extraordinary wartime power, and even with draft laws in existence both before and during the war. Where the military had failed, the alliance of the Social Democrats and the reform-minded ex-Habsburg officials succeeded in less than six months.

This was an unexpected success for the Austrian Social Democrats. In a revolution largely not of their own making, they were still in the proverbial driver’s seat to shape the overall new political order and the framework for social policy. They achieved some important social policies they had long desired and championed. A strong sense of mission and direction was definitely an important factor in their success. But so was their timely alliance making, not only with willing Social Ministry officials but also with the intended targets of the new policies. After learning that the party’s own efforts to attract war victims had been easily outpaced by war victims’ enthusiastic self-organization, the Social Democrats cultivated organized war victims as partners for the new Republic. This strategy, undertaken by Hanusch, his parliamentary colleagues, and his ministerial officials, secured a potentially volatile clientele for the Republic. It helped make war victim welfare a consensus issue in 1919 and facilitated the unanimous support for the Invalid Compensation Law.
The Social Democrats and organized war victims also had an unwitting and unwilling helper in their push for welfare state expansion: the Communists. Following the putsch attempts in Vienna and the real (albeit temporary) takeovers in Hungary and Bavaria in spring 1919, the threat of a Communist revolution seemed to be cresting. The Communists’ highly visible recruiting efforts targeting war victims only reinforced the impression best expressed by the powerful Viennese police president, Johannes Schober, in July 1919: unemployed people, invalids, and returning soldiers were “the groups especially susceptible to subversive influence because of their unfortunate material conditions.” War victims’ perceived susceptibility to Communist messages created the pressure of competitive bidding. Hanusch and his colleagues took advantage of this pressure, presenting the very expensive Invalid Compensation Law as both necessary and urgent. The Communist threat, real or perceived, became the strongest incentive for all who had a stake in the survival of the parliamentary democracy to support a policy that catapulted war victims to the status of the de facto and clear favorite wards—consuming more than 90 percent of the Social Ministry’s 1919/1920 budget—of the Republic, which in its first year was basically a relief organization. The Communists achieved only inconsequential success in recruiting war victims. But in doing so they unwittingly created compelling leverage both for war victims who were willing to work within the parliamentary democratic framework and for the Social Democrats and their allies who wanted to fortify that very same framework.

A unique set of circumstances enabled the Republic to realize the aspiration for massive welfare expansion of the 1917/1918 imperial social offensive. Unlike in Weimar Germany, the thorough collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Imperial Army cleared the way for a complete rearrangement of the priorities of the state as well as the power constellation within it. State officials had been planning and implementing ambitious welfare state expansion since early 1918, and they had been waiting for the opportunity for even more aggressive reforms. The provinces were preoccupied with their own future and more than happy to let the Viennese worry about the policies and the funding for war victim welfare. The emergence of state-friendly organized war victims made it possible to quickly connect with and cultivate citizen-clients for the new Republic. Both elements of continuity (since 1917) and changes arising from the Revolution of 1918 supplied impetus, momentum, and urgency. With perfect timing, the key Invalid Compensation Law of 1919 emerged from the confluence of these factors.

The law formally redefined social citizenship in Austria. The Austrian state directly guaranteed all its citizens’ welfare in regards to war’s most direct
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damages: death and disability. Through the Invalid Employment Law of 1920, the new entitlement citizenship took a step further: certain categories of war-disabled citizens would be favored in the labor market as part of that broader guarantee. Although the austerity policies of 1922 and after forced many beneficiaries out of the system, the basic principles of the entitlement citizenship were never seriously under threat until the Anschluss of 1938 brought with it Nazi Germany’s racial welfare laws. When Austria was again on the losing side of the next world war, the two laws were revived after 1945 to serve the (Second) Republic’s state-defining moment a second time in a generation. The Invalid Compensation Law became the model for the War Victim Provision Law of 14 July 1949 (BGBl. 197/1949), which covered everyone from surviving war victims of the First World War to those who fought for Nazi Germany. It was a perfect welfare instrument to force Austrians of all stripes to see themselves as members of the same community of victims, substantiating the Allied-sanctioned official self-identification of Austria as the first victim of “Hitlerite aggression.” The basic structure and principles of the Invalid Employment Law, the first Austrian law to establish employers’ obligation to hire disabled men (veterans in this case), were adapted into the Invalid Placement Law of 1946 (BGBl. 163/1946), which extended the right to preferential employment to other disabled Austrian citizens certified mainly by the industrial accident insurance system. Through the 1946 Law, the 1920 Invalid Employment Law evolved into the basis for today’s comprehensive legal requirement to employ disabled persons and the latter’s claim to preferential treatment in the labor market. The Austrian response to the First World War, in this way, continues to shape welfare intervention and social citizenship in the twenty-first century.

From a long-term perspective, war victim welfare between 1868 and 1925 shows that war was a major and independent factor in the rise of the welfare state in Austria, rather than just magnifying the dynamics of class-based labor politics or gendered population politics. The introduction of universal military service for male citizens did not change the essentially conservative views about military disability or the provision for the disabled. The 1875 law was to incentivize citizens to become career servicemen and offered a guarantee, in the name of rewarding loyal service to the monarch and the state, for those who chose to serve. It was not a structural “grand bargain” between the citizenry and their war-waging state, with the former offering their militarily useful bodies in exchange for the latter’s expanded programs to guarantee or even promote their general welfare. Various social-legal reforms and especially occupation-based social insurance were introduced in the 1880s for some workers, out of both antisocialist and
party-political motives as well as genuine social reform impulses. While some see these as marking the beginning of social policy as a distinct and “necessary” field of central state responsibility, it took the confluence of post-1914 factors, all of them contingent consequences of war, to finally jump-start a second wave of major welfare state expansion during and after the First World War—not only for specific occupations, but for all citizens. Without underestimating the insights of biopolitical or labor-political perspectives, Victims’ State shows the need to confront war’s direct damage in the age of mass citizen armies, and specifically the devastation of the First World War, as a main motor driving a robust “thickening” of social citizenship and the long-term development of the welfare state in Austria. To appropriate Charles Tilly’s famous formula, the Austrian state made war, and war made the modern Austrian welfare state.

After charting the social turn of the Austrian state as a result of the Great War, why the immediate postwar reform dynamics in welfare politics petered out between 1922 and 1925 demands explanation. The most straightforward answer is that many of the elements in the confluence that made the welfare-political dynamics possible in the first place had been weakened or lost by 1922. The war victim–friendly Social Democrats no longer controlled the central government after mid-1920 and were in the parliamentary minority until the demise of democracy in 1933. The immediate threat of a Communist revolution subsided significantly after 1920. The political parties had become more confident and hardened their respective ideological positions. Then the fiscal obligations Austria assumed in exchange for international bailout bore down with such overwhelming force—endorsed by the League of Nations—that they altered the overall dynamics and course of domestic politics. It is more fitting, however, for a book about war victim welfare to end with a closer look at war victims themselves—and specifically, at their rise and decline as an independent welfare and political actor to be reckoned with.

“With their healthy brethren, invalids helped build the Republic,” declared the president of the Vienna Provincial Association since the early 1920s, Maximilian Brandeisz, on the tenth anniversary of the Zentralverband’s founding. He did not exaggerate. War victims were the poster children for the old regime’s failed war and misrule and therefore had the potential to become either the showcase of the Republic’s superiority and raison d’être or the pawns in a Bolshevik-style radical takeover. Due to their undisputed suffering, their visible losses, and various political forces’ reifying attempts to draw on their political potential, war victims became, at least for a period of time, a social group with significant political weight.
To some extent, their leverage was a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more a political force believed that war victims would be a powerful aid to its opponents, the more powerful the war victims indeed became. The majority of war victims chose to align themselves firmly with the Republic and contribute to its stabilization. The Communists did not attract many war victims, even if war victims were very visible in two attempted putsches in spring 1919. Police president Schober’s concern notwithstanding, leading war victim activists from the Zentralverband, for their part, advocated a moderate, sober, and pragmatic approach to defending war victims’ interests. They came out hard against what they saw as irresponsible and immoral Communist actions. They also chose to blame local communities or district officials for alleged mismanagement or suspicious decisions, accusing those officials of engaging in treasonous behavior by privileging “bigwigs”; but they spared the Republic per se and its central government when the radical Left’s recruiting efforts went into high gear. They preached solidarity and hard work on the part of war victims (“rallying to the organization!”) despite obvious disappointment and frustration.

War victims complained about the ungrateful state and society and repeatedly threatened to withdraw their support for the government. Ultimately, though, they remained loyal to the parliamentary democratic Republic. Discontent and frustration with the new welfare system, especially with the pace of its rollout and the less than satisfying benefits, did not explode into mass disillusionment. War victims sometimes protested. But more often they stoically accepted what they were offered. In forging a partnership with the state, they had become stakeholders in the new system. Rocking the boat too much was no longer a real option for them.

Given the fact that war victims had successfully inserted themselves into general policy making and individual benefits decision-making processes in 1919, what happened to the assertive and confident war victim movement in 1922? Why were they powerless to stop the government’s relentless new policy to reduce their presence in these processes, cut their benefits, or even push them out of the welfare system and into the harsh world of “independence”?

The Invalid Compensation Law not only set benefits for war victims but also established new rules of the game, which had significant intended and unintended consequences. It was a law that organized war victims wanted. They contributed to its drafting and passage. It did have the intended effect of ensuring a minimum of support for war victims and their right to participate in decision making. Most war victims accepted, perhaps grudgingly, the law’s prescribed benefits and roles, which were more effective as a gesture of responsibility and
solidarity from the new Austrian polity than they were in providing sufficient material support. After the Invalid Compensation Law became a reality, as the organized war victims had demanded, the drive and sense of purpose that had sustained their initial activism and assertiveness began to wane.

This led to an unintended consequence: the routinization and bureaucratization of welfare politics. Once in place, the law prescribed a framework and a set of rules that all welfare actors had to follow. What emerged was a rather technical field whose nuances only a few experts, whether working for the state or for the large war victim groups, could grasp. The ardor of the revolutionary months and the passionate politicking on behalf of a just and “social” democracy were replaced by a complicated, tedious, and exhausting process conducted in impenetrable legal and administrative languages. It would be much harder to annually mobilize regular war victims for actions in support of an inflation adjustment of the benefits than it had been to demand the law’s very creation in the midst of an “anything is possible” mixture of revolutionary excitement and postwar desperation.

A second unintended consequence was the fragmentation of the war victim movement. The first major internal struggle in the Zentralverband took place exactly when the new war victim welfare bill, for which the Zentralverband had struggled since its founding, was about to be formally presented to the Constituent National Assembly for debate and a vote. And then the passage of the law prompted the founding of several rival organizations. The Invalid Compensation Law’s articles were sufficiently neutral (or vague) to leave room for them to imagine their own place in the codetermination mechanisms. Indeed, war victims’ initial united front was a product of desperation, necessity, and some leading activists’ enterprising efforts. Internal differences among war victims remained. The new law opened the door for those who were not or no longer wanted to be part of the Zentralverband to strike their own paths and compete for a share of influence and resources. Whether these new or splinter organizations had the numeric strength to substantiate their power-sharing claims was another matter.

The provincialization of the Zentralverband movement and the end of the dramatic, Viennese activist-led fight on the national stage for rights and provisions should be understood in the same light. The Invalid Compensation Law had stipulated that the primary welfare agency for the actual day-to-day operations would be the Provincial Invalid Compensation Commissions, well before the broader debate over whether the Austrian Republic should become a federal state or a centralized one heated up in drafting a new constitution that would
align with the terms of the Saint-Germain Peace Treaty with the Entente Powers. The system and its procedures prescribed by the Invalid Compensation Law conditioned how client groups behaved. When benefit claims were decided by the Invalid Compensation Commissions’ panels in the province, thereby locating the most immediate codetermination process in these commissions, provincial war victim organizations became the most important and relevant everyday welfare actors for both individual war victims and the public authorities. Relying on the emboldened and institutionally empowered provincial organizations (Provincial Associations) to serve its members, the Zentralverband’s own provincialization was probably inevitable, especially when the larger constitutional debate in the background was also moving in favor of the federalist side. Provincial and smaller actors took the place of a central organization in representing war victims in day-to-day welfare politics, and welfare politics after the Invalid Compensation Law was nothing but routinized and day-to-day.

The second major factor in the decline of war victims’ power was the state leaders’ attitudes. It was obvious that the initial success of organized war victims had had much to do with the war victim–friendly social minister Ferdinand Hanusch and his generally collaboration-willing career officials. The Zentralverband as an organization lived on state subsidies from the very beginning. Its ability to attract many followers in the early postwar months was, to a large extent, due to its privileged access to resources that war victims desperately needed: food, cash, and information. This privileged access to resources, however, was a political decision made by state officials. The growth of the Zentralverband and the continuation of a single and moderate war victim movement, the state officials believed, would help defuse the volatile political situation. The investment paid off, and it explained why Hanusch and his officials worked so hard to mediate among the sparring war victim organizations in mid-1919.

However, when the function of organized war victims in the political system or, to put it more bluntly, their usefulness to the government, was viewed differently, organized war victims had difficulty maintaining their privileged position. The stalling of further war victim welfare legislation after the Invalid Employment Law of 1920 is a prime example. After the Social Democrats left the governing coalition in mid-1920, the Christian Social–controlled government was not enthusiastic about maintaining the state-organized war victim partnership. What was once welcomed in welfare politics became less so, as testified by Friedrich Hock’s changed attitude on certain extralegal practices in late 1920. When Richard Schmitz, who was less friendly toward war victims than his pragmatist Christian Social party colleague and predecessor Josef Resch,
became the social minister in the midst of a financial crisis, organized war victims not only lost their partner status but also became a burden and potentially an adversary for the government. Once the state leaders considered courting organized war victims unnecessary and ceased to extend the favor that contributed to their power, the activists had to find other allies and avenues to it.

Their search for alternatives points to the third factor: the broader society and general political context after 1921. As early as 1920, Hanusch had warned that times had changed for the worse for war victims. By 1922, it was clear that postwar societal sympathy for war victims had worn thin. The impoverishment and hunger suffered by the great majority of war victims had helped them convince themselves that they were “the poorest of the poor” in postwar Austria. In the eyes of other suffering citizens, however, they were the state’s demanding and complaining favorite wards. With indifference or jealousy replacing sympathy, it was hard for organized war victims to build enough social support to defend against the infringement of what they held as rights, not to mention advance new reforms in their favor. The Christian Socials’ austerity reforms between 1922 and 1925 were probably both a reflection of this wider shift in attitude and a policy intervention taking advantage of it. The financial crisis in 1922, which required an international bailout, brought in an outside force that compelled everyone in Austria to follow the command of imposed fiscal rationality and discipline. A League of Nations high commissioner, Dutchman Alfred Zimmermann, was sent to Vienna, and he had extraordinary power to force the Austrians to quickly balance the budget through drastic retrenchment. What war victims faced after 1922 were not only unfriendly Christian Social politicians, unsympathetic fellow citizens, and unwilling employers, but also foes beyond reach in the League of Nations and the international lenders.

Where, then, did war victims turn for support and allies? The major milieu parties became the most logical places for both organized and unorganized war victims to find reliably strong protectors, especially as the milieu parties were more than eager to appeal to the numerically important war victim voters. After the passage of the Invalid Compensation Law, the Social Democrats and the Christian Socials—and not the government or other private welfare organizations—quickly produced accessible pamphlets about the newly inaugurated entitlements and rules for applicants and beneficiaries. As the major milieu parties asserted their power throughout the Republic’s political structure, it was only a matter of time before their outreach found the receptive (or desperate) war victims. Relatively independent war victims ceased to be politically relevant because they could not find enough allies; they had to choose the alignment most
congenial to their own political-social values for effective representation and protection. The Zentralverband, or at least the always left-leanin Vienna Provincial Association, became rather explicitly and unabashedly partisan, taking aim at the “cold-hearted” Christian Social government whenever possible. Der Invalide, the Vienna Provincial Association’s periodical, returned from irregular to monthly publication in the mid-1920s. The reenergized newspaper had a strong anti-Christian Social position, openly government-critical coverage, a confrontational tone, and obviously much better funding that enabled it to have more pages in each issue than during the days of peak Zentralverband influence back in 1919.

The Christian Socials, despite their miniscule presence in the 1919/1920 war victim field, developed their own war victim organization by building on the smaller, more local efforts. The National Association of Christian War Invalids, War Widows, Orphans, and Returnees (Reichsverband christlicher Kriegsinvaliden, Kriegerwitwen, Waisen und Heimkehrer) was an example. In 1920, even with the infusion of non-war victim members (“returnees”), it had at most 3,000 members. Gradual growth in both Vienna and the provinces finally led to a reorganization under the leadership of the Christian Social parliamentarian Prelate Karl Drexel and the launch of a national organization in the National League of War Victims (Reichsbund der Kriegsopfer Österreichs) in June 1924. Aiming to rival the by now openly prosocialist Zentralverband-Provincial Associations group, in 1925 it had an initial membership close to 23,000 (with 11,000 in Vienna) and a newspaper, Oesterreichs Kriegsopfer. Decidedly partisan, this newspaper supported the government with melancholic, semipacifist essays and relied on the personal appeal of Drexel, who was famous for serving Austrian POWs in Siberian camps, to lend it an air of sincerity and Christian comradeship. But its mission was clear: fighting a running war of words with Der Invalide and denying the Zentralverband-Provincial Associations group the monopoly of the war victim sector in the public sphere.

Although Christian Social leaders occasionally complained about Drexel trying to outbid the Zentralverband in his public demands, his organization was seen as safely and squarely “our invalid association.” Drexel, for his part, toed the party line. For instance, he proactively criticized regional health insurance carriers for being too generous and letting war victims report illness so as to receive full pensions. To him, this practice turned medical treatment for disabled veterans into a hidden pension and was surely an abuse. The social citizenship of the early Republic survived, at least in principle, the austerity onslaught. But the leading war victim organizations had become more or less specialized wings
of the major parties after the mid-1920s. The warring milieu parties finally completed the colonization of the war victim welfare field.

War victims’ loss of independence and institutional influence notwithstanding, the dynamic war victim politics makes a strong case to bring new, less fatalistic perspectives on the history of the Austrian First Republic. The vibrant revisionist historiography of late Imperial Austria has liberated research and debates on Habsburg Central Europe from the gloom-and-doom, successor state–serving narratives. *Victims’ State* demonstrates that the conventional teleological framing that emphasizes interwar Austria’s endless and allegedly insurmountable crises is too partial and too limiting. Both in long-term developments and short-term revolutionary innovations, a history from the perspective of social citizenship shows that people were active creators of a different, democratic political culture in the wake of the First World War. Without denying the profound challenges the small Republic faced and the political elite’s doubts about its viability, it is notable that rump Austria enjoyed the “loser’s advantage”: there was no explicit need to wrangle over preferential provision for those who were supposed to have contributed more to the national cause as in the “victorious” successor states, Czechoslovakia and Poland, for example, in introducing bold and comprehensive welfare programs. The Austrian Republic was even ahead of economically more robust Weimar Germany in finding its domestic political, if not economic, footing; Weimar Germany suffered more frequent and more serious open challenges to its constitutional order and its very legitimacy in the first half of the 1920s. Having created the infrastructure of both democratic-political and social citizenships—the plumbing and wirings of a stable modern democratic polity—that in some ways lasts into the twentieth-first century despite severe interruptions in the 1930s and 1940s, the Revolution of 1918 and the First Republic, and even the wartime reforms under the Monarchy, are too significant and too rich to be forced into the gloom-and-doom straightjacket. War victim welfare shows that the First Republic was, after all, not “a state that no one wanted.”

The Austrian administrative state, the milieu-based political parties, and organized war victims converging to create a participatory welfare system in a time of crisis was not a one-off experiment. The emergence of a more participatory war victim welfare system in Austria was part of an interwar European phenomenon of simultaneous welfare state expansion and corporatist stabilization through the sometimes contentious coordination among the state and competing class-based interest groups. Organized Austrian war victims may not fit the class-based interest mobilization mold, but they were a symbolically
as well as numerically significant interest group that the newborn Republic successfully turned into its constituency. This model of coordination and consensus building among the state and interest groups, moreover, foreshadowed the fully institutionalized “social partnership” of the Austrian Second Republic, in which the state and the legally defined umbrella organizations of employers’ and employees’ interest groups consulted one another and negotiated key economic and social policy issues. All of this contributed to the social stability and economic prosperity of post-1945 Austria. War victim welfare in Austria heralded not only a more robust welfare state but also a path for postcatastrophe recovery. It is a reminder that the dual thickening of political and social citizenship, as manifested in the democratization of political culture and welfare state expansion, often happened in times of crisis, not in times of plenty.