



Between Legality and Loyalty: The Austrian Officer Corps in the First
Republic, 1918-34

by

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February 2026

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my wife, Maria, son, Matteo, and my extended family for all their patience and support over the course of writing this thesis.

This research draws primarily on material from the *Österreichisches Staatsarchiv* (Austrian State Archives) and the *Österreichische Nationalbibliothek* (Austrian National Library), whose staff I thank for their assistance. I also acknowledge the use of selected digitised material from the German *Bundesarchiv*, and a document consulted through the UK National Archives at Kew.

I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Irish Research Council and the Maynooth University Postgraduate Academy, which supported the early development of this research.

I would like to thank my colleagues and management in Maynooth University Library for their consistent support, understanding, and flexibility throughout the completion of this thesis. I am also grateful to Áine Trayer for her guidance and support during the writing process, and to Prof Raul Cârstocea, who acted as reader during the final stage of the thesis, for his careful engagement with the work and constructive comments.

Finally, I thank my supervisor, Dr John Paul Newman, and former co-supervisor, Prof Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses, for their supervision and guidance during the course of this research.



Glossary of German terms

Bundesheer - Federal army. The armed forces of the First Austrian Republic, established in 1920 as the successor to the *Volkswehr* under the constraints of the Treaty of Saint-Germain.

Bundesminister für Heerwesen - Federal Minister for Army Affairs. The cabinet minister responsible for the administration, organisation, and political oversight of the *Bundesheer* in the First Republic (formally established 1920).

Frontkämpfervereinigung - Front Fighters' Association. A right-wing Austrian veterans' organisation founded in 1919, composed largely of former Great War soldiers and officers, which adopted a nationalist and anti-socialist orientation and was involved in political confrontations during the First Republic, including the Schattendorf incident of 1927.

Heimwehr - Home Defence. A loose federation of right-wing paramilitary formations active in interwar Austria.

Militärverband der Republik - Military Association of the Republic. A Social Democratic-aligned soldiers' organisation that emerged from the *Vertrauensmänner* networks of the *Volkswehr* and developed into the most significant representative body of rank-and-file soldiers in the early First Republic.

Nationalrat - National Council, the lower house of the Austrian parliament.

Nationalversammlung - National Assembly. The provisional and constituent parliamentary body of German-Austria and the early Austrian Republic (1918–1920), preceding the establishment of the *Nationalrat* under the 1920 constitution.

Republikanischer Schutzbund - Republican Defence League. The Social Democratic workers' defence organisation founded by Julius Deutsch in 1924, intended to protect the Republic and party institutions against right-wing paramilitary violence.

Soldatenrat (pl. *Soldatenräte*) – Soldiers' representative. In the Austrian context of 1918–1919, the term generally referred not to a collective council (as in Germany) but to an individual elected soldiers' representative within military units.

Staatssekretär für Heerwesen - State Secretary for Army Affairs. Ministerial-level office responsible for the administration and political supervision of the *Volkswehr* within the

provisional government of German-Austria (1918–1919), prior to the consolidation of the republican ministerial structure and the later office of *Bundesminister für Heerwesen*.

Ständestaat – Corporate State. The Authoritarian corporatist regime in Austria, 1933-8.

Vaterländische Front - Fatherland Front. The single mass political organisation established by the Dollfuss regime in 1933 to replace parliamentary party competition and serve as the ideological foundation of the authoritarian Austrian state.

Vertrauensmann (pl. *Vertrauensmänner*) - Man/men of confidence. The term adopted in 1919 to replace *Soldatenrat*, referring to elected rank-and-file representatives within the *Volkswehr* and later the *Bundesheer*.

Volkswehr – People's Defence. The provisional armed force of German-Austria (1918–1920), formed after the collapse of the Habsburg army and later reorganised into the *Bundesheer* under the 1920 Defence Act (*Wehrgesetz*).

Wehrbund – Defence League. A Christian Social-aligned soldiers' organisation founded in the early 1920s, which promoted a conservative and explicitly anti-socialist conception of military identity within the First Republic.

Wehrgesetz - Defence Act of 18 March 1920. Domestic legislation that codified the military restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Saint-Germain and provided the legal basis for the organisation of the *Bundesheer*.

Abbreviations

Abg. – Abgeordneter/Abgeordnete (member of the *Nationalrat*, the Austrian lower house)

ANNO – Austrian Newspapers Online

AZ – Arbeiter-Zeitung (Workers' Newspapers)

k. u. k. – kaiserlich und königlich (imperial and royal)

ÖNB - Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Austrian National Library)

OeStA - Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (Austrian State Archives)

ÖWZ - Österreichische Wehrzeitung (Austrian Military Newspaper)

NL – Nachlass (personal papers/archival estate)

SDAP – Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei (Österreichs) (Social Democratic Workers' Party (of Austria))

StGBI – Staatsgesetzblatt (Official State Law Gazette, 1918-20)

Introduction

1. Opening Context and Rationale

The First Austrian Republic (1918-38) was born from the ruins of empire, yet was burdened by the inheritance of imperial institutions, traditions, and mentalities. It was a state that struggled to define itself amid economic crisis, social dislocation, and political polarisation. The Republic had to construct legitimacy without the dynastic authority or administrative cohesion that had underpinned the Habsburg Empire. Its short life was marked by a sequence of ruptures, the economic chaos of 1919-22, the paramilitary confrontations of the late 1920s, the collapse of parliamentary government in 1933-4, and the final absorption into the Third Reich in 1938. Historians have long interpreted this trajectory as a story of democratic failure, a small state unable to overcome the legacies of imperial defeat and ideological division.¹

Yet even within this narrative of collapse, the Republic possessed institutions that sought stability and professional identity. Among them, the officer corps of the *Bundesheer* (the small standing army established in 1920 as the successor to the imperial armed forces) occupies an anomalous place. Composed largely of former Habsburg officers and administrative structures inherited from the k.u.k. army, it represented both a remnant of the old order and the armed representative of the new Republic.

In contemporary political debate, it was alternately praised as the guardian of legality and condemned as a bastion of reaction. In later historiography, the army has often been treated merely as a backdrop to the Republic's political drama.² Its internal evolution, including its composition, ethos, and relationship with the civilian state, has attracted surprisingly little sustained analysis. While scholars have examined the *Heimwehr*, the *Schutzbund*, and the violent politicisation of Austrian society, the *Bundesheer* and its officer corps have remained curiously under-examined.³

¹ See: Ernst Hoor, *Österreich 1918-1938: Staat ohne Nation; Republik ohne Republikaner* (Vienna, 1966); Helmut Andics, *Der Staat, den keiner wollte: Österreich 1918-1938* (Vienna, 1962); Norbert Leser, *Zwischen Reformismus und Bolschewismus: Der Austromarxismus als Theorie und Praxis* (Vienna, 1968).

² See: Emmerich Tálos, *Das austrofaschistische Herrschaftssystem: Österreich 1933-1938* (Vienna, 1st ed, 1984; 4th ed., 2013); Ernst Hanisch, *Österreichische Geschichte: 1890-1990: Der lange Schatten des Staates: österreichische Gesellschaftsgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 1st ed. 1994; 2nd ed. 2005).

³ See: Gerhard Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik. Attentate, Zusammenstöße, Putschversuche, Unruhen in Österreich 1918 bis 1934* (Munich, 1976); Francis Ludwig Carsten, *Fascist movements in Austria: from Schönerer to Hitler*

This neglect is striking because the officer corps embodied both persistence and transformation of imperial culture. It inherited more than uniforms and regulations. It retained a moral vocabulary of service, hierarchy, and honour forged under the Habsburg Empire. Although these ideals were adapted to the new political circumstances, they reflected an enduring institutional memory that connected the Republic's ostensibly modern army to the ethos of an imperial bureaucracy. Understanding the officer corps therefore requires understanding how imperial administrative and cultural patterns survived the collapse of the empire and were repurposed within a fragile parliamentary state.

This thesis addresses the gap by treating the officer corps of the First Republic not as a passive residue of the Habsburg monarchy but as an institutional community that carried imperial assumptions about service, hierarchy, and authority into a radically altered political order. Rather than examining the army solely as an instrument of party politics or ideological struggle, the study focuses on how officers understood their professional role and how these assumptions shaped the evolving relationship between military institutions, parliamentary democracy, and executive power. It argues that the *Bundesheer* emerged as a hybrid institution: formally republican, yet culturally shaped by imperial professional traditions, committed less to ideological programmes than to procedural legality, hierarchy, and institutional continuity. Over the course of the First Republic, this understanding of military neutrality shifted from a claim of political distance to a form of executive loyalty, contributing to a situation in which the army could remain internally coherent while becoming increasingly detached from parliamentary authority.

This approach places the officer corps at the centre of analysis and enables three broader interpretations:

i) It repositions military history within Austrian historiography, moving beyond the paramilitary and political focus that has dominated studies of the interwar period. The army is treated not as an appendage of politics but as an autonomous institution with its own evolving ethos.

(London, 1977); Bruce F. Pauley, *Der Weg in den Nationalsozialismus: Ursprünge und Entwicklung in Österreich* (Vienna, 1988); Clifton E. Edmondson, *The Heimwehr and Austrian politics: 1918-1936* (Athens, GA, 1978); Martin Kitchen, 'Paramilitarism and Social Democracy: Theodor Körner and the Schutzbund' ed. V. R. Berghahn, *Martin Kitchen, Germany in the Age of Total War* (London, 1981), 170-88.

ii) It bridges the historiographical divide between empire and republic, showing that institutional continuities did not end in 1918 but helped to shape the new state's structures. In doing so, it complements recent scholarship that emphasises transformation rather than rupture in post-imperial Central Europe.

iii) It contributes conceptually to the study of institutions by demonstrating how memory, routine, and professional culture can persist through political collapse. The former-Habsburg officers of the *Bundesheer* thus serve as a case study in how bureaucratic traditions can both sustain and constrain democratic innovation.

2. Literature Review

The historiography of the First Austrian Republic has undergone significant reinterpretation since 1945, evolving from moralising narratives of failure to more complex analyses of structure, violence, ideology, and memory. Since the consolidation of the Second Republic in the 1950s, historians have explained the collapse of interwar democracy through successive interpretive lenses shaped by the intellectual trends of the era. These debates have broadened our understanding of the state, society, and political culture. This section maps the major historiographical trends relating to the First Republic and, where possible, to the army and its officer elites, in order to demonstrate the gap this thesis addresses. The following subsections outline this evolution and show how the neglect of the officer corps has distorted our understanding of Austria's interwar trajectory.

2.1 Early Interpretations and the Language of Inevitable Collapse (1950s–1970s)

Early interpretations of the First Austrian Republic were shaped by an assumption that the state was fundamentally unviable and destined to fail. In this reading, the Republic appeared not as a contingent political project shaped by circumstance and choice, but as an aberration whose collapse was implicit from its inception. Two oft-quoted books from the era captured this sentiment with particular force. Ernst Hoor's *Staat ohne Nation: Republik ohne Republikaner* (State without a Nation, Republic without Republicans) (1966) portrayed interwar Austria as a political construction that lacked both a genuine national foundation and

a committed republican citizenry.⁴ Helmut Andics, in his popular history *Der Staat, den keiner wollte* (The State that Nobody Wanted) (1962), reinforced the notion that Austria after 1918 was an unwanted and unloved entity, sustained more by circumstance than conviction.⁵ Although differing in approach, both works helped entrench the idea that the First Republic was illegitimate at its core, fractured by irreconcilable political cultures and devoid of meaningful democratic substance. In this framework, collapse was not a contingent event but the inevitable consequence of a state that had never been viable. Austrian political scientist Norbert Leser, though more intellectually ambitious than Hoor or Andics, contributed to the same interpretive trajectory. His influential studies of Austro-Marxism, particularly *Zwischen Reformismus und Bolschewismus: Der Austromarxismus als Theorie und Praxis* (Between Reformism and Bolshevism: Austro-Marxism as theory and practice) presented interwar politics as a clash of ideological absolutes, an unbridgeable conflict between Catholic-conservative and socialist worldviews.⁶ By emphasising the incompatibility of these political camps, Leser helped cement a narrative in which the Republic's failure was explained primarily through ideological polarisation. This perspective left little space for institutional analysis or for examining the role of state actors beyond the party system.

Within this early historiographical landscape, Ludwig Jedlicka was a rare exception in turning attention toward the military. His *Ein Heer im Schatten der Parteien: die militärpolitische Lage Österreichs 1918-1938* (An Army in the Shadow of the Parties. Austria's Military-Political Situation 1918-1938) (1955) remains one of the few major studies of the army in the First Republic, and he later condensed its main arguments in a chapter entitled 'Politische Parteien, Heer und Staat in Österreich 1918-1938' (Political Parties, Army and State in Austria 1918-1938) in Herbert St. Förlinger's edited volume *Unser Heer. 300 Jahre österreichisches Soldatentum in Krieg und Frieden* (Our Army: 300 Years of Austrian Soldiering in War and Peace) (1963).⁷ Yet despite his pioneering interest, Jedlicka's interpretation reflected the assumptions of his time. He portrayed the army as a largely apolitical institution caught between hostile parties, undermined by civilian interference and devoid of an independent

⁴ Hoor, *Staat ohne Nation*

⁵ Andics, *Der Staat, den keiner wollte*

⁶ Norbert Leser, *Zwischen Reformismus und Bolschewismus*.

⁷ Ludwig Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten der Parteien. Die militärpolitische Lage Österreichs 1918-1938* (Graz, 1955) and 'Politische Parteien, Heer und Staat in Österreich 1918-1938', *Unser Heer: 300 Jahre österreichisches Soldatentum in Krieg und Frieden*, ed. Herbert Förlinger (Vienna, 1963), 315-41.

institutional culture. In this narrative, the officer corps appeared as a neutral professional body acted upon by politics, rather than as a community with its own inherited traditions, institutional memory and agency. As a result, even the only substantial early contribution to the subject reproduced the broader limitations of the moral-fatalist school, leaving the internal world of the officer corps unexplored.

This body of early scholarship established a long-lasting interpretive template. The First Republic was viewed as a political tragedy driven by ideological conflict and doomed by the absence of a cohesive national identity. Institutions such as the army were treated as secondary, reactive elements within a narrative dominated by party antagonism. For the officer corps particularly, this meant historiographical invisibility. Its internal world, shaped by imperial inheritance, professional memory, and a distinctive conception of duty, remained largely unexamined. It was only with the emergence of later structural, social and cultural approaches that the possibility of understanding the army, and especially its leadership, as a historical actor in its own right began to develop. A more analytical framework would only emerge with the structural and social historiography of the 1970s.

2.2 From Structural to Cultural Approaches: Reinterpreting the First Republic, 1970s–2010s

The interpretive monopoly of moral and political narratives began to loosen in the 1970s. A new generation of historians, influenced by structural and social history, shifted the focus from moral failure to systemic instability and political violence as integral features of interwar Austria. Gerhard Botz' *Gewalt in der Politik. Attentate, Zusammenstöße, Putschversuche, Unruhen in Österreich 1918 bis 1934* (Violence in Politics. Assassinations, Clashes, Coup Attempts, Unrest in Austria from 1918 to 1934) (1976) pioneered the study of political violence as a normalised element of the Republic's political culture. Rather than moral failure, Botz emphasised systemic instability, endemic unemployment, class conflict, and the incomplete demobilisation of wartime mentalities.⁸ His later work, notably *Nationalsozialismus in Wien: Machtübernahme, Herrschaftssicherung, Radikalisierung 1938–1945* (National Socialism in Vienna: Seizure of power, consolidation of rule, radicalisation 1938–1945) (1978), extended this structural analysis into the Nazi period, demonstrating how

⁸ Gerhard Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik*.

patterns of social mobilisation and state coercion established in the 1930s persisted beyond the Republic's collapse.⁹

Emmerich Tálos, in *Das austrofaschistische Herrschaftssystem: Österreich 1933–1938* (The Austro-Fascist System of Rule: Austria 1933-1938) (1984), analyses the authoritarian regime that emerged after 1933 as a rationalised structure of power, a corporatist state built upon the debris of parliamentary democracy.¹⁰ Ernst Hanisch's *Der lange Schatten des Staates: österreichische Gesellschaftsgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert* (The long Shadow of the State: Austrian Social History in the 20th Century) (1994)¹¹ extended this approach, tracing continuities in administrative culture from the Habsburg bureaucracy to the authoritarian republic. The Republic's crisis derived not only from ideological conflict but from the endurance of pre-democratic state traditions. These structural approaches widened the frame of analysis yet still left the officer corps largely unexamined as a distinct social and institutional actor.

Interdisciplinary approaches within the last decade have broadened the study of the *Ständestaat* (corporate state) beyond political and social structures to include legal, memorial, and gender perspectives. In the collection edited by Pia Schölnberger, Ilse Reiter-Zatloukal, and Christiane Rothländer, *Österreich 1933–1938: Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen an das Dollfuß-/Schuschnigg-Regime* (Austria 1933-1938: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Dollfuss-/Schuschnigg-Regime) (2012),¹² Frank Höpfel analyses the judicial treatment of violence during the February 1934 conflict,¹³ while Winfried R. Garscha explores the politics of remembrance and traditional masculinity under authoritarian rule.¹⁴ Although these contributions illuminate the broader culture of repression and moral order, they remain largely detached from the institutional and organisational dynamics of the *Bundesheer* itself.

⁹ Gerhard Botz, *Nationalsozialismus in Wien: Machtübernahme, Herrschaftssicherung, Radikalisierung 1938–1945* (Vienna, 1st ed., 1978; 4th ed., 2018).

¹⁰ Emmerich Tálos, *Das austrofaschistische Herrschaftssystem: Österreich 1933–1938* (Vienna, 1st ed, 1984; 4th ed., 2013).

¹¹ Ernst Hanisch, *Österreichische Geschichte: 1890-1990: Der lange Schatten des Staates: österreichische Gesellschaftsgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert* (Vienna, 1st ed. 1994; 2nd ed. 2005).

¹² Pia Schölnberger, Ilse Reiter-Zatloukal, Christiane Rothländer (eds), *Österreich 1933–1938: Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen an das Dollfuß-/Schuschnigg-Regime* (Vienna, 2012).

¹³ Frank Höpfel, 'Gewaltexzesse im Bürgerkrieg: Zur juristischen Aufarbeitung von Verbrechen während eines nicht-internationalen bewaffneten Konflikts', *Österreich 1933–1938*, 129-39.

¹⁴ Winfried R. Garscha, 'Opferzahlen als Tabu. Totengedenken und Propaganda nach Februaraufstand und Juliputsch 1934', *Österreich 1933–1938*, 111-28.

Despite the decisive methodological turn in Austrian historiography in the 1970s and 1980s from moral interpretation toward structural and social analysis, Austrian military history has largely remained within older descriptive frameworks. Peter Broucek's contribution, 'Heerwesen' (Military affairs) in Erika Weinzierl and Kurt Skalnik (eds) *Österreich 1918–1938: Geschichte der Ersten Republik* (Austria 1918–1938: history of the First Republic) (1983), typifies this approach.¹⁵ His concise institutional survey, focused on organisation, command structures, and mobilisation, offered little reflection on the army's internal ethos or political culture. Nearly three decades later, M. Christian Ortner's 'Von der Volkswehr zum Bundesheer 1918–1938' in Stefan Karner (ed.), *Die umkämpfte Republik: Österreich von 1918–1938* (2017), continued in a similar vein, providing valuable technical detail but little interpretive engagement with the *Bundesheer's* social or ideological dimensions.¹⁶ The same empirical thoroughness characterises Harald Pöcher and Roland Schaffer's two volumes, *Das österreichische Bundesheer der Ersten Republik zwischen 1920 und 1930. Ein Heer, das keines sein durfte* (The Austrian *Bundesheer* of the First Republic Between 1920 and 1930: An Army That Was Not Permitted to Be One) (2020) and ... *zwischen 1931 und 1938. Das Bundesheer war zwar verlässlich, aber es hatte nur Munition für wenige Tage* (... Between 1931 and 1938: The *Bundesheer* Was Reliable, but It Had Ammunition for Only a Few Days) (2021).¹⁷ Both are meticulously documented and indispensable for factual reference, yet their perspective reflects the professional ethos of the institution itself. Written from within the institution's worldview (Pöcher was, at the time of writing the first volume, a serving *Bundesheer* officer), they exemplify a tradition of military historiography grounded in technical precision and administrative loyalty rather than interpretive critique. This approach, while valuable for its empirical depth, reproduces the *Bundesheer's* own self-image as a competent but constrained instrument of state authority. Together, these works demonstrate the persistence of a traditional, empiricist military history in Austria even as the wider historiography moved toward structural and cultural analysis.

¹⁵ Peter Broucek, 'Heerwesen', *Österreich 1918–1938. Geschichte der Ersten Republik*, ed. Erika Weinzierl and Karl Skalnik (Graz, 1983), 209–24.

¹⁶ M. Christian Ortner, 'Von der Volkswehr zum Bundesheer 1918–1938', *Die umkämpfte Republik: Österreich von 1918–1938*, ed. Stefan Karner (Vienna, 2017), 129–35.

¹⁷ Harald Pöcher, Roland Schaffer, *Das österreichische Bundesheer der Ersten Republik zwischen 1920 und 1930. Ein Heer, das keines sein durfte* (Salzburg, 2020) and *Das österreichische Bundesheer der Ersten Republik zwischen 1931 und 1938. Das Bundesheer war zwar verlässlich, aber es hatte nur Munition für wenige Tage* (Salzburg, 2021).

The most comprehensive attempt to address the historiographical gap around the *Bundesheer* to date is Florian Wenninger's 'Dimensionen organisierter Gewalt: Zum militärhistorischen Forschungsstand über die österreichische Zwischenkriegszeit' (Dimensions of Organised Violence: The State of Military History on Interwar Austria) in his and Lucile Dreidemy's edited volume *Das Dollfuß/Schuschnigg-Regime 1933–1938: Vermessung eines Forschungsfeldes* (The Dollfuss/Schuschnigg Regime 1933-1938: A Survey of the Scholarship) (2013).¹⁸ In addition to tracing the evolution of paramilitary formations, Wenninger's concluding section on military history (*Militärgeschichte*) underscores the persistent neglect of the *Bundesheer* and the *Exekutive* (government forces) within Austrian scholarship, observing that no coherent institutional study exists and that military-historical research has 'practically no interest at all' in the army or soldiers' unions.¹⁹ His call for investigations into continuities of personnel and mentality between the *Volkswehr*, the *Bundesheer*, and the post-1945 forces provides an explicit mandate for the present study. Despite the expanding analytical horizons, the *Bundesheer* and its officer corps remained overshadowed by party politics, paramilitary violence, authoritarianism, and state structures, rather than examined as institutions in their own right.

This historiographical neglect of the *Bundesheer* mirrors its ambiguous place within the political culture of the First Republic itself. The army was both product and symbol of the state's unresolved struggle between democratic legitimacy and inherited hierarchies. To understand this ambiguity requires attention to the moral and intellectual traditions that shaped interwar conservatism. Catholic corporatism, rooted in late-Habsburg political thought, provided the language through which notions of order, service, and authority were re-articulated in the republican era.

2.3 Catholic-Conservatism and Ideological Continuity

From the 1980s onward, John W. Boyer redefined the intellectual history of Austrian conservatism. His twin studies, *Political Radicalism in Late Imperial Vienna: Origins of the Christian Social Movement* (1981)²⁰ and *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna: Christian*

¹⁸ Florian Wenninger, 'Dimensionen organisierter Gewalt: Zum militärhistorischen Forschungsstand über die österreichische Zwischenkriegszeit', ed. Florian Wenninger & Lucile Dreidemy, *Das Dollfuß/Schuschnigg-Regime 1933–1938: Vermessung eines Forschungsfeldes* (Vienna, 2013), 493-576.

¹⁹ Wenninger, 'Dimensionen organisierter Gewalt', 60.

²⁰ John W. Boyer, *Political Radicalism in Late Imperial Vienna: Origins of the Christian Social Movement* (Chicago, 1981).

Socialism in Power, 1897–1918 (1995),²¹ reconstructed the moral world of Catholic corporatism that shaped Austrian political thought well beyond the fall of the monarchy. In his chapter ‘Wiener Konservatismus vom Reich zur Republik: Ignaz Seipel und die österreichische Politik’ (Viennese Conservatism from Empire to Republic: Ignaz Seipel and Austrian Politics) in *Konservative Profile* (2003),²² Boyer demonstrated how Seipel’s conception of moral authority and social order provided ideological continuity between empire and interwar authoritarianism.²³ His recent synthesis, *Austria, 1867–1955* (2022), situates the Republic within a long trajectory of Catholic political culture and administrative continuity.²⁴ Boyer’s oeuvre is crucial because it anchors the interwar crisis in a deeper moral economy. For him, the Republic did not merely inherit institutions from the monarchy. It inherited a vision of society organised around hierarchy, authority, and moral discipline. This interpretative strand allows for a reconceptualization of the *Bundesheer* not as a neutral bureaucracy but as a moral community shaped by similar Catholic corporatist assumptions about order and duty.

More recent intellectual and political histories have expanded this analysis of the Catholic and corporatist Right. Janek Wasserman’s *Black Vienna: The Radical Right in the Red City, 1918–1938* (2014)²⁵ reconstructs the networks of conservative intellectuals and clerical activists who developed a sustained critique of parliamentary democracy in the interwar years. His account of the Catholic Right’s ideological blend of corporatism, nationalism, and moral discipline explains the cultural milieu from which the *Ständestaat* later drew much of its legitimacy. Julie Thorpe’s *Pan-Germanism and the Austrofascist State, 1933–1938* (2011)²⁶ complements this perspective by examining how the regime defined an ‘Austrian’ identity in opposition to National Socialist Pan-Germanism. Her analysis of competing national loyalties and the language of patriotic service provides essential context for understanding how the

²¹ John W. Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna: Christian Socialism in Power, 1897–1918* (Chicago, 1995).

²² John W. Boyer, ‘Wiener Konservatismus vom Reich zur Republik: Ignaz Seipel und die österreichische Politik’, ed. U. E. Zellenberg, *Konservative Profile: Ideen & Praxis in der Politik zwischen FM Radetzky, Karl Kraus und Alois Mock* (Graz, 2003), 341–62.

²³ Ignaz Seipel (1876–1932) was a Catholic priest and professor of moral theology who was one of the most influential figures in interwar Austrian conservatism. He served as Chancellor of the First Republic between May 1922 and November 1924 and October 1926 and May 1929.

²⁴ John W. Boyer, *Austria, 1867–1955* (Oxford, 2022).

²⁵ Janek Wasserman, *Black Vienna: The Radical Right in the Red City* (Ithaca, 2014).

²⁶ Julie Thorpe, *Pan-Germanism and the Austrofascist State 1933–38* (Manchester, 2011).

Bundesheer articulated its own ethos of duty and state loyalty during the final years of the Republic. Together, these works illuminate the intellectual environment that framed the army's self-understanding and link the institutional culture of the *Bundesheer* to the broader moral and ideological currents of interwar Austria.

Despite their insights into the intellectual landscape of the interwar Right, these studies remain primarily concerned with parties, church institutions, and ideological elites. The *Bundesheer* appears within them, if at all, as a symbolic instrument of order rather than as a historical actor with its own institutional culture. In emphasising political religion and ideological mobilisation, this scholarship has illuminated the moral horizons of Austria's conservative milieu, but it has left the internal dynamics of the officer corps unexplored. This gap is significant, for the army was not merely a passive repository of conservative values but a community that reproduced, adapted, and defended them through its own organisational traditions. The turn toward cultural and ideological explanations thus prepared the ground for later studies of memory and symbolism, yet it still failed to recognise the military as an institution with historical agency.

2.4 Cultural and Institutional Memory

From the 1980s onward, cultural historians began to explore the social afterlife of the Habsburg officer corps. Wolfgang Doppelbauer's *Zum Elend noch die Schande: das altösterreichische Offizierskorps am Beginn der Republik* (Shame on Top of Misery: The Old-Austrian Officer Corps at the Beginning of the First Republic) (1988) offered the first sustained study of how former imperial officers negotiated the moral and material collapse of their world.²⁷ He described an environment of dispossession and pride for men who had lost their empire but retained its code of honour. Peter Melichar's article 'Die Kämpfe merkwürdig Untoter. K. u. k. Offiziere in der Ersten Republik' (The Struggles of the Curiously Undead. K. u. k. Officers in the First Republic) in *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* (1998) extended this analysis, depicting the officers of the First Republic as "undead" figures, socially displaced yet symbolically powerful.²⁸

²⁷ Wolfgang Doppelbauer, *Zum Elend noch die Schande. Das altösterreichische Offizierskorps am Beginn der Republik* (Vienna, 1988).

²⁸ Peter Melichar, 'Die Kämpfe merkwürdig Untoter. K. u. k. Offiziere in der Ersten Republik', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften*, i (1998), 51-85.

More recently, in a wider comparative frame, Rudolf Kučera's 'Exploiting Victory, Sinking into Defeat: Uniformed Violence in the Creation of the New Order in Czechoslovakia and Austria, 1918–1922' in *Journal of Modern History* (2016) demonstrates that uniformed violence in the immediate post-war years was not simply an Austrian pathology but part of a broader Central European pattern of militarised social reconstruction.²⁹ These works opened the way for reading institutions not only as structures of power but as bearers of memory and identity. They imply that the *Bundesheer* inherited more than personnel. It inherited the cultural logic of imperial service. Yet even this cultural turn has prioritised symbolism, trauma, and representation over institutional analysis.

2.5 Empire, Bureaucracy, and Institutional Continuity

The conceptual vocabulary for analysing the persistence of imperial values and standards comes from recent imperial historiography. John Deak's *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War* (2015) reinterprets the Habsburg Empire as a modern, law-governed administrative state whose officials understood themselves as servants of an impersonal legal order.³⁰ Pieter Judson's *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (2016) further dismantles the old narrative of imperial decline, portraying the monarchy as an adaptive, participatory state that remained viable until 1918.³¹ Laurence Cole's *Military Culture and Popular Patriotism in Late Imperial Austria* (2014), explores the *k. u. k.* army's symbolic and educational roles, showing how it inculcated a moral economy of loyalty and discipline that transcended national boundaries.³² Together, these scholars have replaced the older paradigm of collapse with one of transformation and continuity. Their insights suggest that the First Republic did not arise *ex nihilo* but emerged from a long process of bureaucratic evolution (albeit one with significant institutional ruptures). Yet, for all their emphasis on administrative and cultural persistence, the 'continuity turn' has largely overlooked the military as an institution. Studies of bureaucracy, law, and civic identity have traced the survival of imperial habits into the republican state, but the

²⁹ Rudolf Kučera 'Exploiting Victory, Sinking into Defeat: Uniformed Violence in the Creation of the New Order in Czechoslovakia and Austria, 1918–1922', *Journal of Modern History*, lxxxvii, (2016), 827-55.

³⁰ John Deak, *Forging a Multinational State: State Making in Imperial Austria from the Enlightenment to the First World War* (Stanford, 2015).

³¹ Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, Mass, 2016).

³² Laurence Cole, *Military Culture and Popular Patriotism in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford, 2014).

Bundesheer, the most direct organisational heir to the Habsburg army, rarely figures in these analyses.

Iryna Vushko's *Lost Fatherland: Europeans Between Empire and Nation States, 1867-1939* (2024) and Gergely Romsics's *Memory of the Habsburg Empire in German Austrian and Hungarian Right-Wing Historiography and Political Thinking, 1918-1941* (2010) extend the discussion to the political and emotional afterlives of imperial elites, while Natasha Wheatley's *The Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty* (2023) exposes the legal and metaphysical persistence of imperial sovereignty.³³ These works illuminate how empire endured in imagination, law, and elite networks, yet they stop short of examining how continuity operated within the state's armed institutions. The *Bundesheer* inherited not only personnel but also the administrative ethos and moral grammar of Habsburg service, a dimension that remains absent from the current literature. By bringing the army back into this continuity debate, the present study challenges the assumption that interwar Austria represented a clean political and institutional break with its imperial past.

2.6 Synthesis and Gap

Across seven decades of scholarship, interpretations of the First Republic have evolved from early narratives that treated collapse as inevitable, through structural explanations emphasising socio-economic pressures, to more recent cultural and institutional approaches. Initial accounts painted the Republic as a state lacking national legitimacy and popular attachment. Institutional histories by Ludwig Jedlicka in the 1950s and 1960s, and later by Peter Broucek, reconstructed the development of the *Bundesheer* in detail but largely refrained from analysing its internal ethos or inherited professional culture. From the 1970s onward, structural historians such as Gerhard Botz, Emmerich Tálos, and Ernst Hanisch reframed authoritarianism as the outcome of administrative continuities, class conflict, and economic crises, shifting attention away from questions of intent or responsibility. More recent intellectual and political histories, most notably those of John W. Boyer, Janek

³³ Iryna Vushko, *Lost Fatherland: Europeans Between Empire and Nation States, 1867-1939* (New Haven, 2024); Gergely Romsics, *Memory of the Habsburg Empire in German, Austrian and Hungarian Right-Wing Historiography and Political Thinking, 1918-1941* (New York, 2010); Natasha Wheatley, *The Life and Death of States: Central Europe and the Transformation of Modern Sovereignty* (Princeton, 2023).

Wasserman, and Julie Thorpe, have situated conservative politics within a Catholic-corporatist moral universe sceptical of parliamentary democracy.³⁴

Since the late 1980s, cultural and memory-based studies by Wolfgang Doppelbauer, Peter Melichar, and Rudolf Kučera have examined the experiences of former imperial officers, while the ‘continuity turn’ in imperial historiography, led by John Deak, Pieter Judson, and Laurence Cole, has shown how imperial administrative traditions persisted beyond 1918. Yet these perspectives have not produced a sustained institutional history of the *Bundesheer* or its leadership.

Taken together, these debates reveal a persistent analytical gap. While the political crisis of the First Republic has been extensively examined through the lenses of party conflict, ideology, and paramilitary violence, the *Bundesheer* and especially its officer corps have rarely been analysed as institutional actors with their own inherited professional culture. Existing military histories remain largely descriptive or technical, while broader political histories tend to treat the army as a passive instrument shaped by external forces. This thesis addresses that gap by examining how the officer corps’ professional norms, institutional memory, and understanding of neutrality shaped the army’s relationship to the republican state. In doing so, it argues that military behaviour cannot be explained primarily through ideology or political sympathy but must be understood through the longer continuities of administrative culture and professional identity carried over from the imperial past.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The study of the First Austrian Republic has traditionally drifted between rupture and continuity. Earlier scholarship focused on regime change, how monarchy gave way to democracy, and democracy to authoritarian rule. More recent approaches ask a subtler question: how far did the habits, moral vocabularies, and administrative logics of empire survive the collapse of 1918? This thesis approaches the interwar Austrian officer corps through that lens. Drawing on insights from civil–military relations theory, institutional memory, and imperial state traditions, it argues that the officer corps must be understood not

³⁴ John W. Boyer, ‘Wiener Konservatismus vom Reich zur Republik’, 341-62; Janek Wasserman, *Black Vienna*, 145-51; Julie Thorpe, *Pan-Germanism and the Austrofascist State*, 109-15.

as a neutral state organ but as a political community that transmitted imperial military culture into the republican state and helped shape its contested legitimacy.

3.1 Civil–Military Relations and the Political Soldier

Civil–military relations scholarship has long been structured around the classic frameworks developed by Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz. Huntington’s model of ‘objective control’, grounded in professional autonomy and functional differentiation,³⁵ and Janowitz’s emphasis on military socialisation and societal integration³⁶ remain foundational points of reference in the field, not least because later theorists continue to define their own approaches in relation to them.³⁷ Yet both models presuppose stable constitutional orders, consolidated civilian authority, and a politically coherent state. These conditions were largely absent in the First Austrian Republic. While the officer corps of the *Bundesheer* inherited a professional ethos formed in the late Habsburg Empire, the political system of the 1920s lacked both the institutional cohesion that Huntington’s professionalism assumes and the societal integration central to Janowitz’s constabulary ideal.

Later theorists have further complicated these classic paradigms. Peter Feaver’s principal–agent model reframes civil–military relations as a continuous negotiation of monitoring and compliance.³⁸ Risa Brooks highlights how elite political fragmentation shapes the strategic behaviour of armed forces.³⁹ Rebecca Schiff’s concordance theory stresses the necessity of agreement among the military, political elites, and society to maintain stable civil–military relations.⁴⁰ Deborah Avant and Michael Desch similarly emphasise the interaction of institutional incentives and threat environments in determining military autonomy.⁴¹ These approaches have proven highly productive for the analysis of consolidated democracies. Yet they continue to presuppose the existence of civilian institutions capable of articulating

³⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The soldier and the state: The theory and politics of civil-military relations* (Cambridge, Mass, 1957).

³⁶ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A social and political portrait* (New York, 1960).

³⁷ Risa A. Brooks, ‘Integrating the civil-military relations subfield’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, xxii (2019), 388.

³⁸ Peter Feaver, *Armed servants: agency, oversight, and civil-military relations*, (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).

³⁹ Risa A. Brooks, *Shaping strategy: the civil–military politics of strategic assessment* (Princeton, 2008).

⁴⁰ Rebecca L. Schiff, ‘Civil–military relations reconsidered: a theory of concordance’, *Armed Forces & Society*, xxii (1995), 7–24.

⁴¹ Deborah D. Avant, *Political institutions and military change: lessons from peripheral wars* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), Michael C. Desch, *Civilian control of the military: the changing security environment* (Baltimore, MD, 1999).

coherent expectations, enforcing compliance, and sustaining a stable monopoly of political authority. It is precisely this framework of stability that the Austrian case calls into question.

The First Republic's chronic parliamentary instability, shifting governing coalitions, and competing party visions of the state prevented the emergence of coherent civilian control in any strong theoretical sense. At the same time, the officer corps retained an imperial habitus rooted in hierarchical authority, legalism, and apolitical state service. These inherited dispositions structured how officers interpreted politics and authority and limited the extent to which republican norms could take hold. In this respect, the *Bundesheer* of the 1920s exemplifies a path-dependent trajectory in which organisational cultures formed under the monarchy continued to shape military behaviour long after the imperial state had disappeared.

This thesis therefore deploys civil–military theory not as a prescriptive framework to be applied wholesale, but as a set of analytical contrasts through which the distinctive trajectory of the early *Bundesheer* can be clarified. The Austrian case highlights how inherited institutional cultures and fragmented political authority combined to produce a form of 'depoliticisation' that restored military hierarchy without securing democratic legitimacy. The officer corps of the First Republic conformed neither to Huntington's autonomous professionalism, nor to Janowitz's social integration, nor to Feaver's agent-centred model. Instead, it occupied an ambiguous position between imperial institutional memory and contested republican authority, a liminal condition central to the argument that follows.

3.2 Institutional Memory and Habitus

If civil–military theory explains how armies claim professional authority, institutional memory helps to show how those claims endure across political ruptures. Drawing on Paul Pierson's concept of 'path dependence', institutions can be understood as sequences of self-reinforcing choices in which rules, hierarchies and routines generate incentives for their own reproduction.⁴² Change occurs, but it is typically incremental and layered upon existing structures rather than replacing them outright. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' complements this view by emphasising that institutional norms are not only codified in

⁴² Paul Pierson, 'Increasing returns, path dependence, and the study of politics', *American Political Science Review* (2000) xciv, 251–67.

regulations, but embodied in dispositions: how officers speak, salute, interpret hierarchy, and conceptualise duty.⁴³ These dispositions reproduce themselves through training, mentorship and ritual, allowing institutional cultures to endure even when constitutional orders collapse. In the Austrian case, the *Bundesheer* retained imperial staff procedures, etiquette, and a moral language of service to *der Staat*, not to a democratic citizenry. Such continuities were born of institutional pride and inertia, but they limited the army's capacity to internalise the pluralist ethos of the new Republic.

3.3 Imperial Legacies and the Austrian State Tradition

The concept of imperial legacies describes the persistence of institutional forms and mentalities that originate under empire but outlive its political collapse. John Deak has shown that the late-Habsburg state possessed a remarkably modern administrative infrastructure built around legal rationality, bureaucratic discipline and service to an impersonal state rather than a dynasty.⁴⁴ Civil servants and officers alike developed a professional self-image as guardians of order and legality. Pieter Judson has reinforced this view by portraying the empire as a functioning, adaptive state whose officials and soldiers often experienced loyalty to 'Austria' as an institutional rather than ethnic identity.⁴⁵ Both historians therefore reframe 1918 not as rupture but as transformation. For the military, this meant that the new Austrian army was born into an institutional habitus already centuries old. As Laurence Cole has shown, the Habsburg army had cultivated a moral economy that linked loyalty, honour, and service into a single civic ideal. Its officer corps viewed itself as a transnational elite committed to the continuity of state and order.⁴⁶ When the monarchy fell, many of these officers entered the military of the new Republic. Their transfer of practice, etiquette, and self-conception was as significant as the material continuity of uniforms, manuals, and archives.

3.4 Legitimacy and the Post-Imperial Officer Corps.

Post-imperial states inherit institutions faster than they can rebuild legitimacy. After 1918, the First Austrian Republic lacked stable sources of political authority, yet it inherited a military establishment whose symbolic and coercive power made it central to the new state's self-definition. As scholars such as Deak and Judson have shown, administrative cultures and

⁴³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge, 1977).

⁴⁴ Deak, *Forging a Multinational State*.

⁴⁵ Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, Mass, 2018).

⁴⁶ Laurence Cole, *Military Culture and Popular Patriotism in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford, 2014).

institutional loyalties can long outlast the regimes that create them. In Austria, the officer corps embodied both the symbolic authority of the old state and the coercive authority of the new one. This made the army a political actor rather than a passive instrument of republican government. Understanding the *Bundesheer* in these terms makes it possible to see the officer corps as a carrier of imperial state traditions within a fragile republic, and therefore as a key site where authority, loyalty, and legitimacy were contested after 1918.

Together, these frameworks provide the conceptual foundations for analysing the *Bundesheer* as an institution shaped by imperial memory within a contested republican order. The following section outlines the sources and methods through which this study applies these insights.

4. Methodology and Sources

The methodological approach of this thesis combines institutional, cultural, and intellectual history to reconstruct how the officer corps of the First Republic understood itself and its role within the state. Rather than treating the army as a mere instrument of policy or a reflection of political events, it is examined as an institution that produced and transmitted meanings of hierarchy, service, and legitimacy. The analysis proceeds from the premise that institutions, like individuals, possess forms of memory embedded in their practices, and that these memories condition how they adapt to political change.

4.1 Analytical Approach

This analysis begins from a simple premise: institutions cannot be understood solely through their structures. They must also be read through their cultures. The officer corps was at once a bureaucratic organisation and a moral community. Its documents, orders, and correspondence reveal rationalised procedures, but its rituals, ceremonies, and internal rhetoric expose a deeper set of conventions around duty and identity. The thesis therefore combines two complementary perspectives: i) the external, *i.e.*, how the officer corps functioned as an administrative body within the state and ii) the internal, *i.e.*, how its members understood their own purpose. By treating institutional sources as cultural artefacts, this study draws upon approaches developed within the ‘new military history’, which views

armies as social and cultural systems rather than purely operational ones.⁴⁷ This allows the officers to be examined not as a relic of the monarchy nor as the leaders of a Catholic-conservative militia, but as a professional organisation negotiating its role within a fragile democracy. The analysis sits at the intersection of military history, political culture, and institutional study.

4.2 Primary Sources

The primary sources for this study are drawn mainly from Austrian state archives, supported by contemporary press and published memoirs. The principal collection is the *Kriegsarchiv* (War Archive) of the *Österreichisches Staatsarchiv* (Austrian State Archives), which preserves the institutional records of both the late-Habsburg Army and its republican successor, the *Bundesheer*. These include service lists, personnel files, and ministerial correspondence that document how continuities of staff and procedure shaped the new military establishment. The *Kriegsarchiv* also holds numerous *Nachlässe* (personal papers) of many of the officers examined in this study, which provide valuable insight into individual careers and the persistence of professional identity after 1918. Furthermore, material from the *Archiv der Republik* (Archive of the Republic), including files from the *Bundesministerium für Heerwesen* (Federal Ministry for Army Affairs) and cabinet minutes, offers further evidence of administrative reform and inter-ministerial relations. Complementary material is drawn from the *Österreichische Nationalbibliothek* (Austrian National Library), particularly printed sources such as writings by politicians including Otto Bauer, Julius Deutsch, and Carl Vaugoin, as well as the army's own publications and semi-official outlets, notably the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* and related periodicals available digitally via the ÖNB's online newspaper depository, ANNO. Parliamentary debates and government documents accessed through ALEX (also provided by the ÖNB) further clarify the legal framework of the army under the *Wehrgesetz* (Defence Act) and its subsequent amendments. Together, these sources highlight

⁴⁷ New military history, which emerged in the 1970s, looks at military history from below and treats armed forces not merely as instruments of policy but as cultural institutions shaped by professional norms, memory, and inherited conceptions of authority. See John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London, 1971), George L. Mosse, *Fallen soldiers: reshaping the memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male. Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London, 1996). For German/Austrian examples see: Thomas Kühne, *Kamaradschaft: Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn, 2006); Martin Schmitz, »Als ob die Welt aus den Fugen ginge« *Kriegserfahrungen österreichischer Offiziere 1914-18* (Paderborn, 2016); Maureen Healy, 'Civilizing the Soldier in Postwar Austria', ed. N. M. Wingfield, M. Bucur, *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Bloomington, 2006), 47-69.

how officers and political figures articulated the army's role within the Republic and justified professional autonomy in an environment of growing political suspicion. In addition to Austrian archival collections, a small number of digitised German and British sources have been consulted. These include documents from the *Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv* in Freiburg including *Wehrmacht* personnel files for Austrian officers which contain information missing from those of the *Bundesheer*, as well as selected reports from the National Archives at Kew.

4.3 Printed Sources and Source Criticism

In addition to archival material, this study draws upon memoirs, published writings, and contemporary print media that illustrate how officers and political figures interpreted service, hierarchy, and legitimacy within the Republic. Among the most significant are Edmund Glaise von Horstenau's *Ein General im Zwielficht* (A general in twilight) and Alfred Jansa's *Ein österreichischer General gegen Hitler* (An Austrian general against Hitler), both edited and annotated by Peter Broucek, which provide retrospective accounts of military life and professional ideology across the interwar period. While shaped by self-justification and hindsight, these memoirs reveal how former imperial officers framed their loyalty to the state and their understanding of political neutrality. Political writings by Otto Bauer, Julius Deutsch, and Carl Vaugoin further illustrate how competing parties sought to define the army's place within the republican order. Newspapers such as the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* (ÖWZ) and the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (AZ) offer complementary perspectives.⁴⁸ The former reflected the self-presentation of the officer corps and its conservative sympathisers, while the latter articulated the Social Democratic critique of militarism and hierarchy. Each was an ideological instrument rather than a neutral record, revealing more about the rhetorical languages of loyalty and legitimacy than about operational reality. These are read symptomatically, for the moral and political vocabularies they deploy rather than for factual precision. Parliamentary debates and published government documents, together with the newspapers of the main political parties

⁴⁸ I rely extensively on these two newspapers. It is important to stress that they were not simply the work of sympathetic or independent journalists. The *Arbeiter-Zeitung* functioned as the official organ of the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SDAP), and leading party figures, including Otto Bauer, exercised editorial influence, ensuring that its reporting and commentary broadly reflected the party's official line. The *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* (ÖWZ), by contrast, served as the official publication of the Professional Officers' Association and articulated the interests and self-understanding of the officer corps. Its editorial board included Friedrich Kollarz, a German National member of the *Nationalrat*, who frequently raised issues discussed in the paper in parliamentary debate. In addition, serving officers such as Edmund Glaise-Horstenau and Lothar Rendulic contributed regularly to the paper, indicating that its content enjoyed acceptance within professional military circles.

and the army's own organs, provide additional insight into how legality and professionalism were publicly framed. Read collectively, these printed sources illuminate the contested meanings of service, authority, and neutrality in the First Republic while also demonstrating the layers of mediation through which the army and its officers represented themselves.

4.4 Source Interpretation

The analysis emphasises discourse and vocabulary rather than quantitative data. Orders, circulars, and manuals are examined for the moral language through which authority was legitimised. Particular attention is paid to recurring terms, for example, *Dienst*, *Pflicht*, *Ehre*, *Staatstreue* (service, duty, honour, loyalty to the state), which formed the ethical lexicon of the officer corps. Reading these documents alongside parliamentary debates and press coverage makes it possible to identify both resonance and dissonance between military and civilian conceptions of legitimacy. Personnel files are used not to reconstruct biography, but to trace patterns of promotion, reward, and exclusion that reveal the social logic of the institution. Memoirs and veterans'/officers' publications are treated critically, as reflections of institutional self-understanding rather than objective accounts. The goal is not to measure political alignment, but to understand how the *Bundesheer* remembered itself, and how that memory shaped its behaviour within the First Republic.

5. Structure of the Thesis, Synthesis and Significance

5.1 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into three chapters following the introduction:

- **Chapter One: Building a Republican Army with Imperial Officers, 1918–20**
This chapter examines the demobilisation of the imperial army, the creation of the *Volkswehr*, and the formation of the *Bundesheer*. It analyses the political conflict between Social Democrats and Christian Socials over control of the new armed forces and shows how the inclusion of imperial officers ensured professional continuity but transmitted monarchical values into republican structures. It concludes with the collapse of the grand coalition in 1920, which marked the army's shift toward conservative dominance.

- **Chapter Two: Parliamentary Control, Ministerial Authority, and the Struggle over Depoliticisation, 1920-26**

Chapter two analyses the reconfiguration of civil–military relations in Austria between 1920 and 1926, focusing on how efforts to subordinate the *Bundesheer* to democratic control were progressively narrowed. It examines debates over parliamentary control, ministerial authority, and competing meanings of neutrality between 1920 and 1926. Through examination of parliamentary debates, ministerial practice, and the officer press, the chapter shows how ministerial authority was consolidated under Carl Vaugoin, while figures such as Theodor Körner exposed the limits of acceptable political pluralism within the officer corps. Depoliticisation thus reorganised, rather than removed, politics from the military sphere.

- **Chapter Three: The *Bundesheer* in a Time of Crisis: Neutrality, Loyalty, and the Use of Force, 1927–34**

The final chapter examines how the *Bundesheer* responded to escalating internal conflict during the final decade of the First Republic. It examines the army’s role in moments of crisis, including the violence of 1927, the suspension of parliamentary government in 1933, the suppression of the Social Democratic uprising in February 1934, and the National Socialist putsch of July 1934. Rather than treating these events as abrupt ruptures, the chapter shows how established patterns of procedural loyalty, legalism, and executive orientation shaped military conduct. Particular attention is paid to the asymmetrical framing of left-wing and National Socialist violence in official military narratives and officer discourse, revealing the limits of depoliticisation and the vulnerabilities created by an army loyal to authority rather than to a political order.

5.2 Synthesis and Significance

These chapters reinterpret the Austrian interwar army as an institution caught between memory and modernity. The *Bundesheer’s* story exposes a central dilemma of the First Republic: how to build a democratic state upon the habits and hierarchies of an imperial past that refused to disappear. By tracing the endurance of imperial administrative culture within

a republican framework, the thesis demonstrates that institutional continuity was not simply a legacy to be overcome but a condition that shaped the possibilities of political order. The officer corps of the *Bundesheer* embodied the tension between professionalism and ideology, legality and legitimacy, memory and adaptation. In recovering their perspective, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how post-imperial states negotiate identity, authority, and historical inheritance. It thus situates the Austrian case within the wider European problem of how institutions remember and how that memory constrains and enables the making of new political worlds.

Chapter One: Building a Republican Army with Imperial Officers, 1918–1920

Introduction

The end of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 produced a rupture so thorough that even institutions accustomed to crisis management found themselves without orientation. Among these, the military, and in particular the professional officer corps, experienced perhaps the most complete and disorienting collapse. This chapter examines the transformation of Austria's military sphere between late 1918 and the consolidation of the First Republic's new legal and institutional framework in 1920. It argues that the Austrian military's post-imperial transition cannot be understood simply as a matter of demobilisation or constitutional reorganisation. It represented a deeper clash between inherited professional cultures, revolutionary political expectations, and the externally imposed limits of the post-war settlement. The cadre of ex-Habsburg officers who remained in military service stood at the centre of this because they were both indispensable and politically suspect.

The late-Habsburg officer corps constitutes the necessary starting point. Far from being a nationally defined elite, the imperial officer corps functioned as a transnational bureaucratic caste embedded within a multi-ethnic state. Its authority rested on professional schooling, corporative hierarchy, and a culture of dynastic loyalty rather than on any explicit national ideology. Historians such as István Deák and Manfred Rauchensteiner have shown that, despite the monarchy's ethnic tensions, the officer corps remained surprisingly cohesive up until the empire's final disintegration. Its members saw themselves not as representatives of ethnic communities but as bearers of a universalising state mission, expressed through the procedural routines of command, administration and service, a professional ethos that anticipated, but was not derived from, later theoretical models of military professionalism.⁴⁹ This ethos was reinforced through institutions such as the Theresian Military Academy and

⁴⁹ The resemblance to later theories of military professionalism, most notably Samuel P. Huntington's concept of officership, is structural rather than genealogical. The Habsburg officer corps developed its professional ethos within a dynastic–bureaucratic state rather than a modern nation-state.

the *Kriegsschule*, which trained officers to sustain the administrative and disciplinary fabric of a large, composite state.

As illustrated by John Deak and Jonathan Gumz, this framework had undergone significant change during the war.⁵⁰ It was finally shattered by the collapse of late 1918. Officers returned from the front into a political landscape that had been transformed by military defeat, economic hardship, and popular resentment. Their social status had evaporated. The symbolic universe in which they had been embedded, which included uniforms, insignia and dynastic legitimacy, had lost its meaning. What had been markers of honour in the imperial system were now associated with defeat, hunger, and perceived complicity in the old regime. Former imperial officers confronted a society that no longer recognised the institutional and cultural codes on which their authority had depended. These conditions shaped not only their material insecurity but also the psychological and ideological disorientation that accompanied their reintegration into the truncated Austrian state.

At the same time, the political situation in late 1918 demanded the immediate creation of a new armed force. The *Volkswehr* (People's Defence Force) emerged from this necessity. Conceived under a Social Democratic government, it was intended simultaneously as a stabilising force during the revolutionary transition and as a democratising corrective to the imperial army's hierarchical ethos. Its organisational model, soldiers' representative organisations, elected representatives and politicised oversight mechanisms, reflected the Social Democrats' ambition to embed the new army within the structures of the workers' movement and the broader republican project. Yet the *Volkswehr* was never an ideologically homogenous institution. Former imperial officers, indispensable for maintaining command and administrative continuity, served alongside politically active rank-and-file soldiers. This forced the convergence and often the collision of two incompatible models of military legitimacy. One was the apolitical, procedural professionalism of the imperial officer corps. The other was the democratised, participatory vision of military authority articulated by the Social Democrats.

⁵⁰ John Deak and Jonathan E. Gumz, 'How to Break a State: The Habsburg Monarchy's Internal War, 1914-18', *American Historical Review*, cxxii (2017), 1105-36.

The chapter's first half reconstructs this friction and argues that it was structural rather than merely being a symptom of the times. Officers accustomed to serving an empire whose legitimacy was never subject to popular contestation found themselves answerable to organs of political oversight that questioned their loyalties, scrutinised their decisions, and undermined their sense of professional autonomy. Conversely, Social Democratic leaders viewed the officers as relics of an unreformed elite whose attitudes were out of step with the participatory ethos of the New Republic. These mutual suspicions had practical consequences. The *Volkswehr* struggled to construct stable hierarchies. Chains of command were unevenly respected and political oversight often clashed with the procedural exigencies of military organisation. The institution survived, but only in a precarious equilibrium that reflected the unresolved tension between revolutionary aspiration and administrative culture.

The future shape of Austria's armed forces, however, was not determined by this domestic friction but rather by international constraints. The second half of this chapter examines the Treaty of Saint-Germain as the decisive framework within which the *Volkswehr* would be dismantled and a new professional force, the *Bundesheer* (Federal Army), created. The treaty's political clauses reduced Austria to a landlocked, territorially diminished state with no capacity to pursue territorial revision or meaningful foreign policy. Union with Germany (*Anschluss*) was explicitly prohibited, large German-speaking populations were left outside the republic's borders, and the new Austria emerged as a geopolitical remnant rather than a successor state with viable great-power ambitions. Internally, the treaty cast the republic as a state whose sovereignty was conditional, monitored, and circumscribed.

The treaty's military clauses had the greatest impact on the officer corps. By abolishing conscription, forbidding mobilisation, and limiting the army to 30,000 men (with the number of officers capped at 1,500), the settlement fixed the future Austrian military as a long-service professional force.⁵¹ This model demanded continuity of training, staff work, and administrative expertise. Only the surviving members of the imperial officer corps possessed these skills. Veterans shaped by the *Volkswehr's* politicised structures were no longer compatible. Nor could the new Republic create a replacement cohort in the short term. The treaty therefore created a systemic dependency on ex-Habsburg officers, not because of

⁵¹ Part V Military, Naval and Air Clauses, Article 120, para. 3 of the 'Treaty of Peace with Austria', (St. Germain-en-Laye, 10 September 1919), *American Journal of International Law*, xiv (1920), 39.

ideological preference but because the range of viable alternatives was sharply narrowed, a constraint shared across the successor states, though mitigated elsewhere by either larger permitted forces or the presence of a unifying national ideology, as in post-Trianon Hungary.

This dependency shaped the officers' post-imperial trajectory. They entered the First Republic diminished in status, mistrusted by large parts of the political left, and struggling to redefine their professional identity. Yet the legal framework imposed in Austria gave them a function and a relevance they would, likely, not otherwise have regained. A small, professional army strongly favoured a small, professional officer corps. Their skills in administration, training, and organisational routine became indispensable again, even as their political position remained fragile.

The chapter concludes by arguing that the interaction of imperial legacies, revolutionary improvisation, and international *diktat* set the parameters within which ex-Habsburg officers would operate throughout the First Republic. The emerging military system was not the product of a coherent republican vision alone. While the Social Democrats articulated ambitious plans for republican control over and politicisation in the immediate post-war period, the institutional form of the *Bundesheer* ultimately emerged from the structural pressures that limited Austria's military options. By tracing the transformation from the disintegration of the imperial army to the creation of the *Bundesheer's* legal foundation in March 1920, this chapter establishes the environment that shaped the officers' political orientation, professional behaviour, and long-term influence. The constraints rooted in the crisis years of 1918 to 1920 remained central to the experience and outlook of the officer corps until the republic's collapse in 1938.

1.1 The Late-Habsburg Officer Corps: Formation, Ethos, and Professional Identity

The officer corps that entered the First Republic in 1918 had been formed, socialised, and promoted within the institutional world of the late Habsburg Empire. Its identity rested not on national allegiance but on a professional habitus: a shared training culture, a common administrative language, and a hierarchical conception of authority anchored in service to the

state. Officers did not understand themselves as 'Austrian' or 'imperial' in any emotional-national sense. Their loyalty was oriented toward the army itself as an institution and toward service within a hierarchical state that derived its legitimacy from continuity rather than popular sovereignty. This occupational identity survived the collapse of the empire more intact than the political order that had sustained it.

1.1.1 Military Education and Socialisation

The officer corps was shaped through a deliberately standardised training system that emphasised administrative competence, tactical procedure, and internalised discipline rather than ideological formation. Cadet schools and the Theresian Military Academy produced the basic behavioural code: self-governance, uniform correctness, controlled posture and tone. The *Kriegsschule* in Vienna then completed the process for staff-track officers. Its curriculum in 1911/12 was dominated by service regulations (*Dienstvorschriften*), terrain interpretation, logistics, and the drafting of written orders. Foreign-language instruction amounted to two hours a week and served purely operational needs (French remained the reporting language of the General Staff).⁵² The purpose was not cultural broadening but the production of officers who could read maps, evaluate the terrain, draft commands, and enforce hierarchy in routine conditions. This was therefore for the most part, a technical and behavioural training regime, not an overtly ideological one.⁵³ It generated a cohort that understood authority as something embedded in procedure and office (as well as in the Habsburg dynasty), not in national community or charisma. Identity was formed through role, not sentiment. This process created internal cohesion across social origin, confession, and regional background. The uniform conferred status, but only when combined with the internalised discipline of correct conduct. As István Deák and Laurence Cole have shown, the monarchy did not require emotional nationalism from its officers. It required obedience, administrative efficiency, and

⁵² 'K und K Kriegsschule. Tages- Stundeneinteilung für das erste Semester 1911/12.' OeStA KA, Nachlass Franz Böhme B/556, 64.

⁵³ Loyalty to the emperor, articulated most clearly through the officers' oath, can itself be understood as a normative or ideological framework. However, this form of dynastic loyalty differed in important respects from modern mass-political ideologies. It was oriented toward personal allegiance, legal order, and institutional continuity rather than toward programmatic political mobilisation or the transformation of society.

the maintenance of hierarchy.⁵⁴ The system trained officers to think of themselves as servants of the state, not representatives of a nation.

Discipline in this system was not simply imposed from above. It was internalised. Cadets were evaluated continuously on posture, tone of address, written clarity, and uniform maintenance. Correct behaviour was less about displaying loyalty than demonstrating competence within hierarchy. Deák observed that graduates of the Theresian Academy 'had learned to be gentlemen [...] Of politics they knew nothing; they took their absolute devotion to the ruler for granted.'⁵⁵ The ethos was sealed in ritual form: 'The ceremony of commissioning (*Ausmusterung*) is invariably described by the Alumni 'as the greatest day of my life', and most of them must have been sincere in shouting the academy's motto: '*Treu bis in den Tod!*' (Faithful unto death!).'⁵⁶ The army thus produced officers who understood authority as something inherent to office and performed through correct conduct, not something that required justification or negotiation.

1.1.2 Imperial Mobility and the Multi-Ethnic Officer Body

The officer corps was socially and geographically mobile. Officers were posted across the empire's provinces and linguistic regions, creating a career pattern that valued adaptability over local rootedness. Personnel files from the *Archiv der Republik (OeStA)*, particularly officers' service records (*Grundbuchblätter*), show how officers in the late imperial army moved between garrisons in Bohemia, Galicia, Bosnia, Dalmatia, Hungary, and the Alpine crownlands. This mobility reinforced an identity shaped more by service and hierarchy than by regional origin.⁵⁷

Language training illustrates the same point. Officers often had multiple languages listed in their files, but operational necessity, not cultural affinity, dictated which languages they learned. Officers serving in Bosnia or Galicia, for example, often acquired rudimentary phrases

⁵⁴ István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848–1918* (Oxford, 1990), 109–19; Laurence Cole, *Military Culture and Popular Patriotism in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford, 2014), 19–21.

⁵⁵ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 84.

⁵⁶ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 84.

⁵⁷ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ÖStA), Archiv der Republik (AdR), Offiziersgrundbuchblätter, e.g. Alfred Jansa, Alexander Löhr, Franz Böhme, Emil Liebitzky, Erhard Raus (service records consulted).

in local languages, but these were practical tools rather than markers of identity. Meanwhile, many officers of Slovene, Czech, or Croat background (such as Adelbert Lontschar from Marburg/Maribor,⁵⁸ Robert Martinek from Bohemia,⁵⁹ or Lothar Rendulic from a mixed Croat-German family)⁶⁰ pursued careers in which their linguistic background carried no political meaning. File entries such as *'tschechisch notdürftig'* (Czech rudimentary)⁶¹ or *'ungarisch gut'* (Hungarian good)⁶² indicated competence for command, not ethnic self-identification.

The multilingual character of the imperial army did not function as a sign of imperial inclusivity, but as a practical accommodation to the empire's diversity. As Rothenberg notes, the army distinguished three operational language categories: *Kommandosprache* (the language of command) and *Dienstsprache* (the language of administration), both of which were standardized German, and the *Regimentssprache* (the regimental language), the everyday spoken language of the enlisted men used within individual regiments.⁶³ In peacetime, officers were normally expected to acquire the regiment language to a *brauchbar* (serviceable) level in order to issue orders and maintain discipline. What united officers was a shared professional culture that treated nationality as irrelevant to the proper functioning of hierarchy and control.

⁵⁸ Adalbert Lontschar (sometimes written as Lončar). Born in Marburg/Maribor, he entered service with German as his mother tongue and Slovene recorded as functional. Nothing in his file treats Slovene as a national marker, it appears solely as a practical ability. In later *Bundesheer* personnel records Slovene disappears completely, reflecting the new Republic's preference to present the army as German-Austrian rather than a frontier institution. The ability itself did not vanish, the bureaucratic meaning of it did. Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, OeStA AdR. Grundbuchblatt Adalbert Lontschar.

⁵⁹ Robert Martinek, born in Gratzen, Bohemia, he entered service with fluent German and Czech recorded at a functional level (noted as *Böhmisch* (Bohemian) on his file), and later acquired rudimentary Polish and Russian during service on the Eastern Front. His personnel record carries Czech-language administrative stamps from 1918, likely added when his regiment was absorbed into Czechoslovakia. When he elected to serve in Austria rather than Czechoslovakia, the file records this as a career posting choice rather than a national decision. Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, OeStA AdR. Grundbuchblatt Robert Martinek.

⁶⁰ Lothar Rendulic (sometimes written Rendulić) was born in the military town of Wiener Neustadt, Lower Austria (the home of the Theresian Military Academy). The son of a former Croatian Grenzer, *Oberst* Lukas Rendulić, and a German-Austrian mother, Maria Polaschek, the younger Rendulic's service record shows no record of Croatian (he spoke fluent French). He later served in a Hungarian Honvéd unit during the war despite having no record of Hungarian language skills. This highlights the fact that, as Rothenberg points out, wartime necessity overruled peacetime standards for officers' language skills. Grundbuchblatt Lothar Rendulic, OeStA AdR & 'Personalakten für Dr. Rendulic, Lothar', BA KA PERS 6/51, 2.

⁶¹ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, OeStA AdR, Grundbuchblatt Edmund Glaise-Horstenau.

⁶² Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, OeStA AdR, Grundbuchblatt Alfred Ritter von Hubicky.

⁶³ Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The army of Francis Joseph* (West Lafayette, 1976), 108.

This imperial pattern of mobility and linguistic pragmatism mattered profoundly after 1918. Officers formed within a professional culture that treated nationality as administratively irrelevant and authority as embedded in office and procedure carried these assumptions into the republican *Bundesheer*, shaping a military institution whose understanding of loyalty, neutrality, and command remained legalistic rather than national.

1.1.3 War Experience and Status Transformations

The First World War altered the internal hierarchy of the officer corps. Heavy casualties at the front accelerated promotion and brought younger officers into positions of responsibility earlier than would have been possible in peacetime.⁶⁴ Wartime conditions also produced a bifurcation between frontline officers with combat experience and those who served in staff or administrative roles. The members of the '*Frontgeneration*' claimed legitimacy through combat leadership, endurance, and sacrifice. The elevation of frontline service as a marker of authority was sufficiently powerful that administrative and non-combatant officers felt compelled to defend their own wartime legitimacy in explicitly martial terms, emphasising proximity to combat, decorations for bravery, and service '*vor dem Feinde*' (before the enemy).⁶⁵ In the absence of monarchy or legal continuity, experience in battle thus emerged as a key currency of authority within the officer corps.

Yet pre-war status logic remained intact. Public notices about officers continued to signal identity through rank, family, and local standing. A Carinthian newspaper notice reporting the wounding and capture of Karl Eglseer in 1915 introduced him primarily as '*Oberleutnant Karl Eglseer des IR. 87, ein Sohn des früheren Theaterdirektors Herren Franz Eglseer in Klagenfurt [...]*', before noting his condition and captivity.⁶⁶ The markers of identity were rank, family lineage, and respectable profession. This was the symbolic grammar of the officer corps. Belonging was structured by hierarchy and social standing, not by nationality or ideology.

These patterns endured into the final months of the war. Officers who had acquired practical authority in combat or staff work believed that competence proven in wartime entitled them

⁶⁴ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 192-3.

⁶⁵ *Militär-Soziale Rundschau*, 1 January 1919.

⁶⁶ 'First Lieutenant Karl Eglseer of IR 87, a son of the former Theatre Director Franz Eglseer of Klagenfurt [...]' (*Freie Stimmen*, 18 February 1915, 9).

to continued authority in peace. This professional self-understanding remained anchored in hierarchy, rank, and service. This pre-war symbolic order formed the backdrop against which the upheavals of late 1918 would later be experienced.

1.1.4 Limits of 'Imperial Loyalty' Narratives

Recent historiography, especially Pieter Judson's work on imperial belonging, has emphasised the flexible, layered, and non-national character of Habsburg civic identity. Judson argues that many imperial institutions and mass organisations operated on a deliberately non-national basis, seeking to 'transcend one national community or another by making the empire and its many peoples the objects of their political agitation.'⁶⁷ This model also applies to the officer corps, but in a distinct institutional form. Officers were not carriers of imperial tolerance or supranational idealism; rather, they embodied a corporate mode of imperial belonging rooted in hierarchy, discipline, and service to the state. Their identity was anchored less in civic participation than in bureaucratic continuity and professional obligation. While persuasive for the monarchy's civilian population, this model does not map cleanly onto the officer corps.

For officers, loyalty was not a plural or civic category, but a professional orientation structured by rank, command, and the assumption that authority was inherent in office. The oath of personal fealty to Franz Joseph bound officers directly to the apex of the state. As Deák notes, by 1900 every active officer had received his commission from the emperor and 'sworn personal fealty to him', a commitment that 'overruled all other considerations.'⁶⁸ This oath did not express dynastic patriotism in an emotional sense, but the institutional logic of a career spent inside a state that equated obedience with professional honour. The officer corps thus illustrates the limits of civic flexibility within the imperial system, while simultaneously confirming Judson's central insight that loyalty to empire was produced through institutional practice rather than national identity.

Judson is right to highlight the multiplicity of identities available to imperial subjects, but this plurality operated unevenly across imperial institutions. Within the officer corps, imperial belonging took a markedly bounded professional form. Their self-understanding was not

⁶⁷ Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, (London, 2016), 186.

⁶⁸ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 4.

negotiated, hybrid, or civic. What bound officers to the Habsburg state was not an ideology of empire in a programmatic or political sense, but an institutional belief that legitimate authority flowed through office, command, and service. This form of dynastic-institutional loyalty functioned as an implicit imperial ideology, embedded in professional practice rather than articulated as a political doctrine. This professional orientation shaped not only how officers understood the empire but also how they would confront the radically different legitimacy of the First Republic.

This perspective is stated explicitly in Alexander Löhr's unpublished manuscript *Meine Stellung in Österreich*. Reflecting on his early career, he wrote: '*Ich wurde Leutnant mit der Überzeugung, daß in Österreich-Ungarn Vieles verbesserungsbedürftig sei, daß diese Staat aber die einzig mögliche Lösung des Nationalitätsproblems von Mittel- und dem angrenzenden Südosteuropa darstelle.*'⁶⁹ Löhr did not defend the monarchy out of dynastic sentiment. He understood it as the organisational framework in which authority and order remained intelligible. His reasoning exemplifies the officer corps' functional, state-centred understanding of loyalty.

1.2 The Collapse of the Empire and the Meaning of Return

The collapse of the Habsburg Empire in late 1918 produced not only a political vacuum but a profound crisis of authority within Austria. The imperial state disintegrated faster than any mechanism could replace it, leaving German-Austria with no functioning army, no stable administrative framework, and almost no means of controlling demobilisation. What returned from the front were not intact military units but fragmented groups of exhausted, wounded, and politically disoriented men. The structures that had governed their professional world (hierarchy, discipline, and the symbolic power of the uniform) had dissolved before they reached home. The early months of the Republic were therefore defined by a double loss: the loss of imperial state capacity and the collapse of the social codes that had sustained military authority. It was in this vacuum that the *Volkswehr* would be constructed.

⁶⁹ 'I became a lieutenant with the conviction that much in Austria-Hungary was in need of improvement, but that this state nevertheless represented the only possible solution to the nationality problem of Central and the adjacent Southeast Europe.' Alexander Löhr, *Meine Stellung in Österreich*, OeStA KA, Nachlass Löhr, B/521, 54 (year unknown).

1.2.1 Political Disintegration and the Vacuum of Authority

The collapse of the Habsburg Empire in October-November 1918 created not only a constitutional crisis but also a profound rupture in the structures of authority upon which the members of the officer corps had built their careers. Emperor Karl's manifesto of 16 October came too late to halt centrifugal national movements spurred on by US President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points.⁷⁰ The imperial government no longer exercised authority beyond Vienna, and, by late October, new states had been declared across the former Habsburg crownlands. On 30 October, the Austrian Diet established a provisional National Assembly for what was now styled German-Austria.⁷¹ Karl withdrew from political life on 11 November, hoping to preserve the possibility of restoration by avoiding a formal abdication.⁷² No such restoration occurred, and he left the country shortly thereafter.⁷³

Political authority in the new state rested provisionally with a coalition dominated by the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Austria (SDAP) whose leader, Karl Renner, became the first State Chancellor (*Staatskanzler*).⁷⁴ The Social Democrats were determined to separate the new republic from its Habsburg past and immediately moved to remove Habsburg symbols from official life, including army uniforms.⁷⁵ This anti-dynastic position would be codified in the *Habsburgergesetz* of April 1919, which formally expelled the members of the House of Habsburg-Lothringen from Austrian territory.⁷⁶ For officers returning from the front, this represented a further break in continuity: the old constitutional anchor (the Habsburg Dynasty) had vanished, and its successor was defined explicitly by parliamentary and party politics rather than by hierarchical state authority.

While much of the civil administration remained in place, the new Republic lacked an intact military instrument and coercive apparatus. The imperial army disintegrated during demobilisation in the autumn of 1918, as units returning from the front fragmented along national and territorial lines and many soldiers made their way to the newly established

⁷⁰ John W. Boyer, *Austria, 1867-1955* (Oxford, 2022), 594.

⁷¹ Gesetz von 12. November 1918 über die Staats- und Regierungsform Deutschösterreich (StGBI. Nr. 5/1918).

⁷² 'Kaiser Karls Rücktritt von den Regierungsgeschäften', *Neue Freie Presse* (Vienna, 11 November 1918), 1.

⁷³ Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (London, 2016), 111.

⁷⁴ Stenographische Protokolle der Provisorischen Nationalversammlung, 30 October 1918.

⁷⁵ M. Christian Ortner, 'Von der Volkswehr zum Bundesheer 1918-1938', ed. Stefan Kartner, *Die umkämpfte Republik* (Innsbruck, 2017), 129-30.

⁷⁶ Gesetz vom 3. April 1919 betreffend die Landesverweisung und die Übernahme des Vermögens des Hauses Habsburg-Lothringen (StGBI. Nr. 209/1919).

successor states rather than to German-Austria. By early November 1918, the structures of command and cohesion that had sustained the imperial army were visibly disintegrating. Cohesion and discipline had eroded during the retreat and demobilisation process, leaving officers with only limited authority over men who no longer identified as members of functioning imperial units. As a result, the Republic initially lacked a reliable military hierarchy and possessed only weak coercive capacity in the immediate post-war months.⁷⁷

On 12 November, the new Republic was proclaimed and immediately declared itself '*ein Bestandteil der Deutschen Republik*'.⁷⁸ The emotional and material situation was bleak. Morale was shattered, the economy destabilised, and both the industrial heartland of Bohemia and Vienna's agricultural supplier, Hungary, now lay outside of the state. Much of Austria's coal and iron resources were gone, and Vienna continued to face acute food shortages. This was the context in which the new state (and the new army) had to be built.

Austria's situation was unique among the successor states. It was a defeated state, lacking both territorial resources and a pre-existing national identity around which to rally. Unlike the other successor states, the new Austria lacked a pre-existing national tradition. German-speaking Austrians had largely defined themselves in cultural or political German terms, and no consolidated Austrian nationalism had taken shape before 1918.⁷⁹ As Helmut Andics captured in the title of his 1962 study, *Der Staat, den keiner wollte* (The State that No One Wanted), the new Austria appeared less a chosen homeland than an unwanted remnant.⁸⁰ Unlike Germany, which retained industrial capacity, or Poland and Czechoslovakia, which drew on long-standing nationalist movements, Austria entered the interwar period without either material self-sufficiency or a unifying national myth. The Republic faced the dual task of state and nation building under conditions of military defeat, territorial loss, and economic scarcity.

1.2.2 The 'Revolution' of 1918

The Austrian Social Democrats, who dominated the early government of German-Austria, presented the transition from empire to republic as a revolution. The *Arbeiter-Zeitung*

⁷⁷ Wolfgang Doppelbauer, *Zum Elend noch der Schande: Das altösterreichische Offizierskorps am Beginn der Republik* (Vienna, 1988), 14-19.

⁷⁸ 'a constituent part of the German Republic' (*Gesetz von 12. November 1918 über die Staats- und Regierungsform von Deutschösterreich* (StGBI. Nr. 5/1918), § 2.

⁷⁹ Julie Thorpe, *Pan-Germanism and the Austrofascist State, 1933-38* (Manchester, 2011), 14-18.

⁸⁰ Helmut Andics, *Der Staat, den keiner wollte: Österreich 1918-1938* (Vienna, 1962).

declared in early November 1918, '*Wir haben eine Revolution durchgemacht, wie sie selten erhört ist.*'⁸¹ The phrase was less a description of events than a claim to legitimacy. It framed the collapse of imperial authority and the proclamation of the republic as the fulfilment of popular sovereignty, even as much of the administrative and institutional order remained intact.

This rhetorical framing did not imply the absence of violence. Across Central and Eastern Europe, the end of the war was accompanied by widespread instability, paramilitary mobilisation, and episodic violence, a pattern from which Austria was not exempt.⁸² What distinguished the Austrian case was not a lack of conflict, but the relative orderliness of the initial transfer of governmental authority in Vienna, which contrasted with the prolonged struggles over power that followed. In 1919, political violence intensified as competing visions of the republic emerged, including communist attempts at radicalisation that were suppressed by government forces. The language of 'revolution' thus served less to describe a singular insurrectionary moment than to legitimise a new political order amid continuing uncertainty and conflict. Cautious not to provoke the Entente, the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* warned on 18 April that:

*Die Entente will nicht zulassen, daß die Verkehrswege von Italien zu ihren tschechischen und polnischen Verbündeten gestört werden; wenn sie fürchten beginnt, daß unser Land Schauplatz größerer Unruhen werden könnte, dann droht uns die Gefahr, daß Wien und unsere anderen großen Industriegebiete von Ententetruppen besetzt werden. Dann triumphiert die Gegenrevolution!*⁸³

In short: the Austrian 'revolution' was restrained. Caution stabilised the state in the short term, but it left unresolved the structural conflict between socialist mass politics and conservative state authority.

⁸¹ 'We have gone through a revolution such as is rarely heard of'; *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 3 November 1918.

⁸² See: Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*; Eliza Ablovatski, *Revolution and Political Violence in Central Europe: The Deluge of 1919* (Cambridge, 2021). John Horne and Robert Gerwarth (eds), *War in peace* (Oxford, 2012); Jochen Böhrer, *Civil war in Central Europe* (Oxford, 2018); Tomas Balkelis, *War, revolution, and nation-making in Lithuania, 1914-1923* (Oxford, 2018); Ota Konrád, Rudolf Kucera, *Paths out of the Apocalypse: Physical Violence in the Fall and Renewal of Central Europe, 1914-1922* (Oxford, 2022).

⁸³ 'The Entente does not want to allow the transport routes from Italy to its Czech and Polish allies to be disrupted; if it begins to fear that our country could become the scene of major unrest, then we are threatened by the danger that Vienna and our other large industrial areas will be occupied by Entente troops. Then the counter-revolution would triumph!' *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 18 April 1919.

1.2.3 War Heroes or Warmongers? The Officers' Homecoming and Public Hostility

For returning officers, the political and administrative rupture of late 1918 was accompanied by an equal disorienting social one. The hierarchical habits and symbolic markers that had structured their professional world were no longer recognised. In the monarchy, the uniform conferred authority, deference, and social standing. In the Republic, it became a target of resentment. Officers were associated not with order but with the failures of the imperial state, military defeat, and perceived privilege. Class hostility, long suppressed under the monarchy, now surfaced openly. Contemporary newspapers registered a striking shift in public attitudes. The *Arbeiter-Zeitung* routinely described officers as relics of a discredited system, symbols of an authoritarian past incompatible with the new democratic order. Their former status did not simply diminish, it inverted. What had once signified honour and command now marked them out as representatives of an illegitimate hierarchy.

In some cases, the inversion acquired a physical dimension. According to Wolfgang Doppelbauer:

*Ungefähr ab dem 30. Oktober 1918 wird Gewalttätigkeiten berichtet, bei denen Offizieren meist die den kaiserlichen Namenszug tragende Kokarde von der Mütze gerissen oder geschnitten wurde, die goldenen Sterne, also Rangabzeichen, abgerissen, Orden zerstört und Waffen zerbrochen wurden.*⁸⁴

This collapse of symbolic respect was swift. As Peter Melichar notes, the uniform, '*die eben noch als „Ehrenkleid“ gegolten hatte*', had lost its prestige within weeks and in some localities '*Offiziere wurden als Tiere gehetzt*'.⁸⁵ The uniform, once a marker of service and authority, had become the target of scorn and violence.

These effects were personal as well as professional. In *Meine Stellung in Österreich*, Alexander Löhr captured the abrupt reversal of the officer's social position: '*Wir Offiziere waren sozial verfemt [...] Dauernde Unterernährung befiel meine alte Mutter, meine kleine Tochter trägt*

⁸⁴ 'Reports from around 30 October 1918 describe acts of violence in which officers had the cockade bearing the imperial monogram torn or cut from their caps, the golden stars, that is, rank insignia, ripped off, medals destroyed, and weapons smashed'. (Doppelbauer, *Zum Elend noch die Schande*, 17).

⁸⁵ 'Which only recently had been a "garment of honour"'; 'officers were hunted like animals' (Peter Melichar, "Die Kämpfe merkwürdig Untoter. K. u. k. Offiziere in der Ersten Republik," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften*, ix (1998), 54–55).

noch die Folgen des Milchmangels.⁸⁶ Löhr's recollection illustrates more than material hardship. It captures the broader collapse of the social world that had sustained the imperial officer. Authority no longer flowed through rank. Respectability no longer followed from uniform or service. Even the officer's family, historically part of the respectable middle strata of provincial society, was exposed to the instability of the moment. The external signs of a once-secure professional identity had lost their meaning.

The press campaign intensified this process. On 26 November 1918, the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* published a front-page indictment titled '*Die Schuldigen*' (The Guilty Ones). The article denounced imperial officers as the prime culprits of wartime failure, accusing them of 'incompetence, cowardice, and irresponsibility' (*Untüchtigkeit, Feigheit und Verantwortungslosigkeit*), and asserting that: '*in keinem Heere haben sich die aktiven Offiziere elender gehalten als die österreichisch-ungarischen.*' It contrasted alleged cowardice at the front with supposed '*Schwelgerei der Offiziersmenagen*' stocked with '*kostbarsten Weinen und echten Friedensschnäpsen*', before concluding that no one should be surprised at the '*sittliche Fäulnis und Verkommenheit*' revealed by the officer caste.⁸⁷ The attack was not an isolated outburst but a representative articulation of the public mood. Officers were understood not as war heroes but as moral culprits.

What officers encountered on their return, then, was not only the absence of a functioning state, but the erosion of the social and symbolic foundations of command legitimacy. They entered the Republic as a politically suspect and socially marginalised group, yet one whose skills and organisational experience the new state urgently needed. The early hostility had long-term consequences. The public vilification of officers, reinforced by the Social Democratic organ, helped to fix a pattern of mutual distrust. As Otto Naderer observes, the '*publizistischer Rachefeldzug*' (journalistic campaign of revenge) waged against the former-Habsburg officer corps was politically short-sighted.⁸⁸ It convinced many officers that the Social Democrats were determined to destroy not only the monarchy but also the very principles of hierarchy

⁸⁶ 'We officers were socially ostracized [...] My aged mother suffered constant undernourishment, and my young daughter still bears the consequences of the milk shortage.' Löhr, *Meine Stellung in Österreich*, 3.

⁸⁷ 'in no other army did the active officers conduct themselves more miserably than those of the Austro-Hungarian army'; 'indulgence of the officers' messes'; 'expensive wines and "genuine peacetime schnapps"'; moral decay and corruption' (*Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 26 November 1918).

⁸⁸ Otto Naderer, *Die bewaffnete Aufstand: Der Republikanischer Schutzbund der österreichischen Sozialdemokratie und die militärische Vorbereitung auf den Bürgerkrieg* (Graz, 2004), 34.

and professional authority on which their world had rested. For a cohort already disorientated by the collapse of the empire, these attacks shaped a political reflex that would endure throughout the First Republic. The officer Corps did not enter the state as neutral professionals. Many entered believing that the party dominating the Republic's early government regarded them as enemies.

1.2.4 Demobilisation and Post-Imperial Violence: A Comparative Perspective

The disorder that accompanied the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in the First Republic in late 1918 was neither uniquely Austrian nor uniquely dramatic. Across Central and Eastern Europe, the end of the war produced a violent demobilisation landscape in which returning soldiers, collapsing state structures, and competing national projects combined to erode the very idea of military authority. Austria's situation was distinct only in degree, not in kind.

As John Paul Newman has observed, in the former Habsburg South Slav lands the disintegration of imperial authority produced an immediate contest over sovereignty. Local committees and national councils faced 'near lawlessness in parts of the Croat lands' as deserters and returnees formed armed 'Green Cadres' that attacked the 'vestiges of the Habsburg ancien régime'.⁸⁹ In Czechoslovakia, the reception differed sharply by ethnicity. Czech and Slovak veterans (especially veterans of the Czechoslovak Legions) were celebrated as symbols of national liberation, while German-Bohemian officers were often treated with suspicion or hostility, their imperial service interpreted as loyalty to an alien state.⁹⁰ Developments in Hungary underscored the extreme volatility produced by imperial collapse. As Pieter Judson notes, the transition from the Károlyi government to Béla Kun's Soviet Republic and then to the counter-revolutionary forces grouped around Miklós Horthy turned demobilisation into a prolonged civil conflict. Romanian intervention, mass violence, and the anti-Semitic 'White Terror' created conditions in which the army's disintegration and reconstitution occurred through open fighting rather than administrative transition. Far from providing a model of republican consolidation, Hungary's trajectory demonstrated how

⁸⁹ John Paul Newman, *Yugoslavia and the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903-1945* (Cambridge, 2015), 42.

⁹⁰ Martin Zückert, 'Zur Loyalität deutscher Soldaten. Die Nationalitätenfrage in der tschechoslowakischen Armee 1918–1938,' in M. Schulze Wessel (ed), *Loyalitäten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik 1918–1938*, (Munich, 2004), 155.

quickly imperial military structures could become engines of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary mobilisation.⁹¹ As Benjamin Ziemann and Ángel Alcalde have shown in their wider studies of Interwar European veterans, demobilisation everywhere blurred the line between war and peace.⁹² The return of soldiers often intensified political fragmentation rather than stabilising it.

Austria differed from its neighbours in one crucial respect. It lacked both a nationalising elite and a territorial project that could transform returning soldiers into nation-builders. A useful contemporary comparison came from within Austria itself. In January 1919, the *Militär-Soziale Rundschau*, a paper aligned with the Social Democrat Economic Association of Professional Soldiers of German-Austria, noted bitterly that all other successor states had welcomed their returning troops with ‘*jubilend und voll Ehren*’, while ‘*[n]ur Deutschösterreich, dessen Söhne am meisten geblutet und am zähesten bis zuletzt ausgeharrt hatten, begrüßte seine Helden mit Geschimpfe und bewarf sie mit Unflat*’. The paper framed this as a moral inversion: what elsewhere functioned as a moment of national unity and symbolic consolidation became in Austria an acrimonious settling of accounts, as ‘*berechtigten Vorwürfe gegen das System*’ were transformed by a resentful homefront into a ‘*Maßlosen Hetze gegen “Militarismus” und gegen das Offizierskorps*’.⁹³ The contrast was exaggerated for polemical effect, but it nonetheless captured a real divergence in post-imperial political culture.

Across post-imperial Central and Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Habsburg, Romanov and Hohenzollern states involved not only the dismantling of institutions but the rapid delegitimization of the symbolic authority those institutions had embodied. Austria followed the same pattern. The officer’s uniform, long a visual shorthand for hierarchy, competence, and imperial service, was suddenly recoded as a sign of defeat, mismanagement, and association with a discredited regime. The many instances of officers being spat upon, insulted, or having their insignia torn off were not simply expressions of popular anger, they signalled the unravelling of the social and cultural assumptions that had underpinned their

⁹¹ Judson, *The Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, 2016), 215.

⁹² Benjamin Ziemann, *Veteranen der Republik: Kriegserinnerung und demokratische Politik 1918–1933* (Bonn, 2014); Ángel Alcalde, *War Veterans and Fascism in Interwar Europe* (Cambridge, 2017).

⁹³ ‘jubilant and full honours’; ‘only German-Austria, whose sons had bled the most and endured the longest, greeted its heroes with insults and pelted them with filth.’; legitimate accusations against the system’ ‘unrestrained agitation against “Militarism” and against the officer corps’ *Militär-Soziale Rundschau*, 1 January 1919.

authority. What disintegrated in late 1918 was not only the Habsburg state but the entire symbolic order that had made military rank intelligible.

Comparative demobilisation also highlights another Austrian peculiarity: the absence of alternative armed formations loyal to the state. Czechoslovakia had the Czechoslovak Legion, Poland had Piłsudski's legions and paramilitary networks, the South Slav state had the remnants of the regular Serbian army, regional militias, and guerilla networks all, of which could be retrospectively integrated into narratives of national statehood. Austria had none. Instead, the first armed formations to emerge were not creations of the republican state but rival partisan forces: the *Heimwehr* or *Heimatschutz* units founded by conservative provincial elites and the workers' militias of the Social Democrats.⁹⁴ This was a symptom of institutional vacuum. As Newman observes, when the Habsburg Monarchy collapsed, its imperial institutions 'disintegrated almost overnight,' with army units and local authorities breaking down 'along local, regional, and political lines'.⁹⁵ Austria entered the post-war period with a population heavily armed, deeply traumatised, and sharply divided, but with almost no structure for converting that violence into nation-building.

The comparison with Czechoslovakia is particularly instructive. As Martin Zückert shows, the new republic sought to transform the multiethnic officer corps of the Habsburg army into a 'loyal, Czechoslovak' institution, projecting the rhetoric of national liberation onto an essentially imperial inheritance. The Ministry of National Defence attempted to reconcile the ideal of a civic army with deep structural mistrust toward its German and Hungarian soldiers.⁹⁶ Austria, by contrast, inherited the stigma of defeat without any corresponding national narrative capable of legitimising its armed forces. Austria also lacked any structural framework capable of absorbing its returning soldiers. The new state inherited defeat and disorientation without the compensating prestige of a liberation or national army.

The key point for this chapter is therefore not simply that Austria was violent, almost all the successor states were, but that Austria's violence lacked a direction. The *Volkswehr* emerged

⁹⁴ Otto Naderer, *Der Bewaffnete Aufstand*, 93 & 138.

⁹⁵ John Paul Newman, 'Post-Imperial and Post-War Violence in the South Slav Lands, 1917–1923' *Contemporary European History*, xix (2010), 250.

⁹⁶ Martin Zückert, 'Zur Loyalität deutscher Soldaten. Die Nationalitätenfrage in der tschechoslowakischen Armee 1918–1938', *Loyalitäten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik 1918–1938*, ed. M. Schulze Wessel (Munich, 2004), 153–163.

not from a triumphant political revolution but from a defensive need to prevent collapse. The behaviour of returning officers makes sense only in this comparative frame. They returned to a society that had no place for their rank-based authority, a state that did not yet exist as a nation, and a political class that regarded them with suspicion. Their experience was not unique, but Austria's political vacuum made their position uniquely precarious.

1.3: The Volkswehr

The collapse of the imperial army in late 1918 forced the new Austrian Republic to improvise a military force under unprecedented political, social, and administrative restrictions. The *Volkswehr* emerged not from an intact institution but from the debris of a disintegrated one. Its structures reflected the tensions of the moment: revolutionary expectations among workers and soldiers, conservative fears of disorder, and an officer corps whose professional identity had been shattered but whose technical skills were indispensable. The *Volkswehr* was thus simultaneously a military organisation, a political project, and a mechanism for stabilising a fragile state. Its internal arrangements reveal how different conceptions of authority (democratic, bureaucratic, and military) collided in the early Republic.

1.3.1 The Social Democrats' Plans for the Army

The provisional government that emerged in late October 1918 faced an immediate problem: Austria lacked a functioning army. The imperial forces had dissolved during the march home, leaving no reliable chain of command and no guarantee of public order. In this vacuum the Social Democratic leadership, which dominated the first coalition government, moved quickly to assert political oversight over the emerging *Volkswehr*. Their aim was both stabilising and ideological, to ensure that the new force would defend the Republic rather than become a reservoir of counter-revolutionary sentiment.

A crucial component of this oversight did not originate in November 1918 but in the beginning of that year. As Ludwig Jedlicka has shown, Julius Deutsch (later State Secretary for Army Affairs) had been transferred to Vienna after the last Battle of Isonzo to serve in the War Economy Section (*Kriegswirtschafts-Abteilung*).⁹⁷ According to Deutsch's own later account, it

⁹⁷ Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten*, 9-10.

was during this period, particularly after the January Strike of 1918, that efforts began to establish a *Vertrauensmänner* (*lit.* men of confidence)⁹⁸ organisation within Vienna garrison. Formed while the monarchy was still intact, this network provided the Social Democrats with an organisational foothold in the military administration that proved decisive during the political upheavals of October-November 1918. When the *Volkswehr* was created, these pre-existing contacts allowed the party to act more quickly and coherently than any other political force.

The Christian Social Party approached the military question from a fundamentally different ideological position. Where the Social Democrats sought to embed the armed forces within a participatory civic framework, the Christian Socials envisioned the army primarily as an instrument of internal order, social discipline, and protection of property. Their military thinking drew not on republican citizenship but on Catholic corporatist ideas of hierarchy, authority, and functional differentiation within society. For them, the army was not to be politicised from below but insulated from mass politics and aligned with the state's conservative social order.⁹⁹ This position did not originate in reaction to the *Volkswehr*. It reflected longer-standing Christian Social hostility to class-based mobilisation and socialist concepts of popular sovereignty.

The *Volkswehr's* ethos diverged sharply from that of the imperial army. Soldiers were now explicitly framed as citizens in uniform, with voting rights, union membership, and political education actively encouraged.¹⁰⁰ This was never intended as a revolutionary guard, despite later conservative caricatures. Even the so-called 'Red' 41st Battalion functioned primarily as a mechanism for containing the most radicalised demobilised soldiers rather than directing them outward.¹⁰¹ As Melichar notes, in 1918–1919 the *Volkswehr* could, '[...] angesichts der Machtlosigkeit der Republik im Rahmen der neuen internationalen Kräftekonstellation keine militärische Funktion im traditionellen Sinn haben.'¹⁰² Its purpose was internal stabilisation, not external defence.

⁹⁸ Julius Deutsch, *Aus Österreichs Revolution* (Vienna, 1923). Quoted in Jedlicka, 10.

⁹⁹ Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ Christian Frech, Markus Pichler, Peter Steiner, *Der Offiziere der österreichischen Revolution: Die Republik und ihre Volkswehrleutnante* (Vienna, 2018), 1-10.

¹⁰¹ Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten*, 15.

¹⁰² '[...] in view of the Republic's powerlessness within the new constellation of international forces, have no military function in the traditional sense.' (Melichar, 'Die Kämpfe merkwürdig Untoter', 57).

Yet the Social Democrats could not staff such a force solely with loyalists. Politically reliable cadres were scarce, and the training pipeline had collapsed. Former imperial officers were therefore retained out of necessity. In their conduct and self-representation, many of these officers adhered to a Habsburg-derived conception of apolitical service, understood as loyalty to legality, hierarchy, and professional duty rather than to a party or programme.^[OBJ] For many, continued service was also an economic necessity. The result was a force politically aligned with the Social Democrats, but operationally dependent on officers shaped by a monarchical military culture. This contradiction was structural, not incidental.

A report in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* on 21 November 1918 captured this directly. At a ceremony commissioning the first *Volkswehr* officers, Deutsch stressed that former imperial officers would remain in service provided they recognised the authority of the new state; alongside them, twelve NCOs promoted from the ranks were presented as evidence that advancement would depend on demonstrated competence and civic loyalty, not social background.¹⁰³ The point was not to purge the officer corps, but to redefine the basis of authority. Rank would no longer flow from birth, education pathway, or imperial prestige, but from service and accountability. It was here that the fundamental tension in the *Volkswehr* was established. The Social Democrats located legitimacy in the organised citizenry. Former imperial officers located it in institutional continuity and hierarchical command. These were competing theories of authority housed within the same organisation.

This tension was formalised in the system of *Soldatenräte* (later renamed *Vertrauensmänner* precisely to avoid the revolutionary connotations of the term). Importantly, the word *Rat* here denoted an individual representative, not a collective council. Their purpose was not co-governance of the army, but the mediation of loyalty between a democratic state and a professional officer corps. For officers trained in the imperial habitus, obedience was something presumed, not negotiated. The *Volkswehr* required obedience to be acknowledged. For many officers, this was not merely unfamiliar, it appeared as a direct threat to the professional foundations of their identity.

¹⁰³ 'Militärische Fragen. Offiziere aus dem Mannschaftsstand' *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 21 November 1918, p. 5.

1.3.2 Ex-Habsburg Officers in the Volkswehr.

The new republic's immediate need for trained military personnel ensured that large numbers of former imperial officers entered the *Volkswehr*. Roughly forty-seven per cent of Austro-Hungarian career officers (16,463 men) opted for service in German-Austria, though many were quickly pensioned off for fiscal reasons.¹⁰⁴ Those who remained faced precarious circumstances. Even officers who would later reach the highest ranks of the *Bundesheer* endured material hardship. Alfred Jansa, the future chief of staff of the *Bundesheer*, later recalled in his memoirs that in March 1920 he was formally employed as a *Maurerlehrling* (bricklayer's apprentice), undertaking '*echte Maurerarbeit mit Ziegeln, Mörtel, Hammer und Kelle*' in order to meet his family's needs.¹⁰⁵ Economic necessity, rather than ideological or dynastic commitment, was one of the strongest incentives keeping former imperial officers in uniform.

From the outset, their integration into the *Volkswehr* was shaped by political mistrust. The Social Democratic leadership believed that career officers, shaped entirely by monarchical military culture, were instinctively counter-revolutionary. In a lecture to officers of the Social Democratic soldiers' organisation the '*Militär-Verband*' in April 1921, Otto Bauer, the leading theorist of Austro-Marxism and a central figure in the Social Democratic leadership, set this belief out clearly:

*Es ist eine unbestreitbare Tatsache, daß ein sehr großer Teil des Offizierskorps Abneigung gegen die Republik erfüllt ist, von Haß gegen jene breiten Massen der sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterschaft, die die Republik geschaffen haben und die die stärkste Stütze der Republik sind, von Sehnsucht nach der Wiederkehr der alten Ordnung, der staatlichen Ordnung der Monarchie [...]*¹⁰⁶

Many officers in turn perceived the *Volkswehr* as a partisan project designed to marginalise them.¹⁰⁷ Nowhere was this tension more visible than in the protracted debates over the

¹⁰⁴ Melichar, 'Die Kämpfe merkwürdig Untoter', 53.

¹⁰⁵ 'actual bricklaying work with bricks, mortar, hammer and trowel' (Jansa, *Ein österreichischer General gegen Hitler*, 451).

¹⁰⁶ 'It is an incontestable fact that a very large part of the officer corps is filled with aversion toward the Republic, with hatred toward those broad masses of the Social Democratic working class who created the Republic and who constitute its strongest support, and with a longing for the return of the old order, the state order of the monarchy [...]' (Otto Bauer, *Die Offiziere und die Republik* (Vienna, 1922), 3). Otto Bauer (1881-1938) was a leading member of the SDAP and a key theorist on Austro-Marxism. He served as editor-in-chief of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* from 1913-1934 and had himself served as an officer in the Great War. (Ewa Czerwińska-Schupp, *Otto Bauer: thinker and politician* (Leiden, 2017), 16-17).

¹⁰⁷ Edmund Glaise von Horstenau, Peter Broucek (ed), *Ein General in Zweilight*, Vol. 1, 527.

military oath. Between November 1918 and early 1919 the wording was revised repeatedly, oscillating between formulations pledging loyalty to the government, the constitution, or the people of German-Austria.¹⁰⁸ For Social Democrats, a vague utilitarian oath risked reproducing imperial patterns of hierarchical obedience. For ex-Habsburg officers, an explicitly political oath resembled a loyalty test. The resulting compromise satisfied neither side and remained a source of suspicion until the founding of the *Bundesheer* in March 1920.

A contemporary account by Edmund Glaise von Horstenau vividly illustrates the uncertainty that shaped officers' actions in the days leading up to the empire's collapse. Writing in April 1920 in the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* under the title '*Zur Frage des Soldateneides*' (On the Question of the Soldiers' Oath), he recalled that Emperor Karl had '*die Armee formell ihres Eides nicht entbunden*'.¹⁰⁹ The problem was not abstract. In the ministerial council of 30 October 1918, which he attended as a member of the General Staff, the oath question was explicitly raised at a moment when the '*furchtbare Stimmung des Zusammenbruches lag über Wien und Oesterreich*'. Young officers, he wrote, wished to serve the new authorities but '*könnten dies aber erst dann mit ruhigem Gewissen tun, wenn sie wüßten, wie sie es mit ihrem Soldateneide zu halten hätten*'. In Glaise's view, the government's failure to provide clarity allowed political tendencies within the *Volkswehr* to gain ground that were '*den konservativ Denkenden kaum erwünscht sein konnten*'.¹¹⁰ His testimony shows that former imperial officers were not primarily resisting the Republic. They were navigating an unresolved legal-moral dilemma during the collapse of imperial sovereignty.

Yet political mistrust did not eliminate practical necessity. Despite the removal of imperial insignia and the symbolic rebranding of the armed forces, the *Volkswehr* depended heavily on the organisational habits and administrative skills of former k. u. k. officers. Their rights of citizenship were gradually normalised within the republican order and (due to demands by officers) the Defence Act (*Wehrgesetz*) of 1920 would confirm their right to vote.¹¹¹ This initiated what contemporaries termed the politicisation of the army. This politicisation,

¹⁰⁸ Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten der Parteien*, 27.

¹⁰⁹ 'not formally released the army from its oath'; (Edmund Glaise von Horstenau, '*Zur Frage des Soldateneides*' *ÖWZ*, 22 April 1920.)

¹¹⁰ 'Frightful atmosphere of defeat hung over Vienna and Austria'; 'Could only do so with a clear conscience once they knew how they were to reconcile it with their soldier's oath'; 'could scarcely have been welcome to those of conservative persuasion'. (Edmund Glaise von Horstenau, '*Zur Frage des Soldateneides*' *ÖWZ*, 22 April 1920.)

¹¹¹ *Wehrgesetz* vom 18. März 1920, StGBI. Nr. 165/1920.

however, was not radicalisation. It was the formal admission of officers into the structures of a parliamentary state. In practice, officers adapted organisationally before they adapted ideologically.

This ambivalence was nowhere clearer than during the 1919 Carinthian border conflict, when officers' loyalty to the republic was under scrutiny, even in situations when they served the nation well. In early 1919, hoping to exploit Austria's vulnerability, troops of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS State)¹¹² under the command of a Slovene ex-Habsburg officer, Rudolf Maister, advanced into Austrian Carinthia. Despite the *Volkswehr's* well-documented structural weaknesses, Austrian forces succeeded in halting the incursion and had even secured limited territorial gains by July 1919.¹¹³ Captain Karl Eglseer, the Carinthian officer and former k. u. k. first lieutenant who was wounded and captured by the Russians in 1915, played a central role as a local commander, negotiating ceasefires and organising counterattacks.¹¹⁴ A report in the conservative Carinthian newspaper *Freie Stimmen* described Eglseer as '[ein] tatkräftig und taktvollen Kommandant' who was 'bei seinen Soldaten und bei der Bevölkerung in gleicher Weise ungemein beliebt'.¹¹⁵

Yet success at the front did not shield him from political suspicion. After the SHS forces broke a ceasefire (which had been part brokered by Eglseer) and launched a surprise attack on sleeping Austrian troops, a Social Democratic *Soldatenrat* from Villach, Carinthia, Robert Katholnig, publicly accused Eglseer of incompetence and fraternisation with 'Serbian officers'.¹¹⁶ These accusations collapsed under legal scrutiny. Witness testimony, including that of two Social Democrat-supporting officers and the regional commander, confirmed that the contested ceasefire of 11 April had been ordered from above and not negotiated privately, as Katholnig had claimed.¹¹⁷ Katholnig was required to pay Eglseer's legal costs and to publish

¹¹² SHS = *Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca* (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes). This is how the South Slav kingdom is referred to in shorthand by Austrians in both early twentieth century reports and in modern historiography (including that referenced below).

¹¹³ Claudia Fräss-Ehrfeld, 'Die Kärntner Volksabstimmung – Ein Erfolg der jungen Republik Österreich', ed. Stefan Karner, *Die umkämpfte Republik* (Innsbruck, 2017), 111-5.

¹¹⁴ *Freie Stimmen*, 4 May 1919.

¹¹⁵ 'an energetic and tactful commander'; 'immensely popular with his soldiers and the population alike' (*Freie Stimmen*, 8 May 1919).

¹¹⁶ 'Ein Nachspiel zur Dr. Deutsch-Versammlung' *Freie Stimmen*, 30 October 1919, p. 4.

¹¹⁷ *Freie Stimmen*, 30 October 1919.

formal apologies in both *Freie Stimmen* and the Social Democratic *Arbeiterwille* (Will of the Workers).¹¹⁸

The *Volkswehr* thus became the arena in which the Republic's competing theories of authority were tested. Rank-and-file soldiers' encouraged by the Social Democrats approached military hierarchy as contingent on democratic oversight. Former imperial officers approached it as a legal and administrative function that could not be subordinated to party politics. Neither position could simply displace the other. When the Treaty of St. Germain and the 1920 Defence Act imposed a small, permanent, professional army, it was the officers' institutional model, rather than the Social Democratic vision of a politicised militia, that ultimately prevailed. International law, more than domestic politics, structured the final form the Austrian army would take.

1.3.3 Soldiers' Unions and the Politicisation of the Rank and File

The internal structure of the *Volkswehr* was shaped not only by the provisional government's top-down reforms, but also by the rapid politicisation of the rank-and-file. Between late 1918 and the early 1920s, soldiers' 'trade union organisations' (*Gewerkschaftsorganisationen*) emerged within the force itself, transforming barracks culture into a microcosm of Austria's wider partisan conflicts. These developments were deeply unsettling to former imperial officers. In the k. u. k. army, political neutrality had been an article of faith, reinforced by strict prohibitions on voting, party activity, or political debate in uniform. Service was defined precisely by its insulation from partisan life.

The Social Democrats' influence stemmed from the informal *Vertrauensmänner* networks, which expanded into a structured soldiers' trade union, the *Militärverband der Republik* (Military Association of the Republic). It promoted a model of citizenship in uniform. Soldiers were encouraged to participate politically, read party newspapers, such as the *Militärverband's* own publication, '*Der freie Soldat*' (The Free Soldier), and remain vigilant against reactionary elements amongst the officer corps. This degree of political mobilisation and institutionalised participation by serving soldiers was exceptional in the post-imperial landscape, where most Central European states restricted soldiers' political rights and prohibited the formation of councils or unions. For former imperial officers, trained in a

¹¹⁸ Robert Katholnig, 'Erklärung', *Freie Stimmen*, 19 May 1920, 5.

system where voting and party activity were prohibited, this constituted a fundamental breach of professional ethos.

Nothing symbolised this rupture more sharply than the creation of the role of *Soldatenrat* (pl. *Soldatenräte*). The term '*Rat*' in standard German generally refers to a council, but in Austrian political parlance it often refers to an individual official (for example a *Hofrat*, originally referring to a court councillor, now refers to a high-ranking Austrian civil servant). So, whereas in the German revolutionary context, *Soldatenrat* meant a group of soldiers, in Austria in 1918/19 it referred to an individual soldiers' representative. It was likely to avoid this confusion (and the revolutionary connotations of the soldiers' councils in Germany) that, in 1919, Julius Deutsch renamed the *Soldatenräte* to *Vertrauensmänner* (men of confidence), the term he had used for his trusted lieutenants within the Vienna garrison in early 1918. These were to be elected by each unit in the armed forces and would represent the rank-and-file in issues concerning pay and discipline among others. The very existence of an elected intermediary violated the unwritten code of the imperial army. Grievances were expected to remain within the chain of command and informing on fellow soldiers or officers breached an established moral norm.¹¹⁹ The *Volkswehr* institutionalised the opposite: disciplinary complaints, disputes, and objections could be channelled through political representatives. For officers who regarded authority as a legal attribute of rank, mediating it through political structures seemed an inversion of the proper military order.

Otto Naderer's analysis makes clear that the Social Democrats viewed the *Volkswehr* not merely as a temporary security force but as the nucleus of a democratic militia. The provisional *Wehrgesetz* of 6 February 1919 reflected this ambition. It introduced general conscription, mandated short service terms to avoid a return to 'k.u.k. militarism', and embedded the *Soldatenräte* and political rights directly into the legal framework. Viktor Adler's longstanding programme of a '*Bewaffnung des Volkes im proletarischen Sinne*' informed these provisions, and, as Naderer notes, the Social Democrats believed that a lightly modified *Volkswehr* could evolve into a permanent, republican mass army grounded in citizen participation.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 84.

¹²⁰ 'proletarian arming of the people' (Naderer, *Die Bewaffnete Aufstand*, 143.)

Contemporary memoirs convey how disorientating this felt in practice. Glaise recalled that in the *Kriegsarchiv*, an officer colleague of his, an army general named Hoen, found himself subject to what Glaise called a '*Soldatenratwirtschaft*' (*Soldatenrat* economy), where *Soldatenräte* '*klopfen ihm auf den Rücken und auf den Bauch und behandelten ihn wie einen der Ihnen*.'¹²¹ Even changes to uniform were perceived as humiliation. When imperial rank stars were removed and replaced by the republican (single-headed) eagle, Glaise sneered that he now had to wear a '*gelb-blechener Katastrophenvogel*' (yellow tin catastrophe-bird) on his collar.¹²²

Politicisation was not confined to the left. In late 1920 the Christian Socials founded their own soldiers' organisation, the *Wehrbund* (Defence League). An announcement in the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* described it as a '*jedweder parteipolitischen Tendenz fernstehende Organisation*' which sought '*durch aufklärende Tätigkeit einen Ausgleich der heute herrschenden Klassengegensätze*' in order to give the new armed forces '*jenen Stempel der Unparteilichkeit aufzuprägen, den sie bedarf, um als Hort und Stütze des Staates sich das Vertrauen aller jener Bürger zu erwerben mit Steuern belastet sind*'.¹²³ This language of non-partisanship was itself a political intervention. Rather than withdrawing the army from politics, the *Wehrbund* sought to counter Social Democratic influence by offering a conservative, Catholic model of military identity. Its appeal to impartiality and class harmony functioned as a rhetorical inversion of Social Democratic class politics aimed at detaching soldiers from the workers' movement and re-anchoring loyalty in a hierarchical, state-centred conception of order.

In ideological terms, this vision overlapped considerably with the professional ethos of many former imperial officers. Yet the existence of organised soldiers' representation itself still sat uneasily with a military culture shaped by hierarchical command. Socialisation in the k. u. k. army had taught them that the authority of command depended on political neutrality, hierarchical clarity, and obedience grounded in institutional rather than partisan legitimacy.

¹²¹ 'slapped him on the back and the stomach and treated him as one of their own' (Glaise, *Ein General in Zwielficht: Bd 1*, 524).

¹²² Glaise, *Ein General in Zwielficht: Bd 1*, 523.

¹²³ 'An organisation entirely removed from any party-political tendency'; 'through educational activity, a reconciliation of the class antagonisms that prevail today'; 'to confer upon it that stamp of impartiality which it requires to serve as a bulwark and support the state to secure the trust of those citizens that are burdened with taxes on its behalf.' (*Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 3 December 1920).

The officers' suspicion was reinforced by the fact that *Vertrauensmänner* exercised meaningful influence over grievances and disciplinary matters. For an officer corps trained to understand authority as a top-down function of rank, the idea that soldiers would bring disputes to a political representative rather than their commander was almost incomprehensible.

To ex-Habsburg officers, the cumulative effect was unmistakable. The *Volkswehr* had become a politically saturated institution in which authority no longer flowed automatically from rank, training, and professional competence. Orders could be questioned by *Soldatenräte*, disciplinary measures appealed through a union, and officers' behaviour discussed in party meetings. Glaise wrote with alarm about a 'socialist association of officers' (*Der Zentralverband deutschösterreichischer Militärgagisten*) and dismissed their newspaper, the *Militär-soziale Rundschau*, as indistinguishable from the Social Democratic *Arbeiter-Zeitung*.¹²⁴ He even referred to the socialist civil commissioner Hugo Schulz as '*eine Art Politruk*' (a kind of political commissar).¹²⁵ Whether fair or exaggeration, his testimony reveals how officers interpreted their environment: not merely politically influenced, but politically hostile.

What made the Austrian case distinctive was not that soldiers engaged in politics, that occurred across the successor states, but that politicisation occurred from within the army rather than solely through external veterans' groups. The *Volkswehr* fused military and civic spheres instead of separating them. For former imperial officers, this fusion was anathema. It challenged not only their authority, worse still it challenged the very definition of what they believed an army was. Their service in the *Volkswehr* was therefore less a continuation of their careers than a professional adaptation to a political order they neither understood nor fully embraced.

1.4 The Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye and the Reshaping of the Austrian Armed Forces

The Treaty of Saint-Germain, signed on 10 September 1919, did far more than settle borders or impose punitive clauses. It legally determined what kind of army Austria was allowed to have, and in doing so resolved, from the outside, the internal struggle between Social

¹²⁴ Glaise, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 524.

¹²⁵ Glaise, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 524.

Democratic, Christian Social, and former imperial military future visions. The treaty created conditions in which a small, professional, hierarchical army staffed by largely former Habsburg officers became the most structurally viable model. This section outlines the political and military terms of the treaty before analysing its consequences for the *Volkswehr* and the emerging *Bundesheer*.

1.4.1 The Political Terms of the Treaty

The Treaty of Saint-Germain was not simply a diplomatic settlement. It was an externally imposed constitutional framework that reshaped the political, territorial, and ideological parameters within which the new Austrian state (and thus any future army) would have to function. Its political terms dismantled the core assumptions on which Austrian leaders had based their expectations for 1919 and reduced the Republic to a small, landlocked state whose sovereignty was conditional and closely monitored.

The leaders of the new republic entered 1919 with a series of strategic assumptions that collapsed once the Allies' terms were revealed. Across party lines, political elites anticipated that the principle of self-determination would allow the predominantly German-speaking remnant of the monarchy to unite with the new German Republic.¹²⁶ Yet the treaty made explicit that the *Anschluss* was forbidden. This clause was not an abstract formality. It legally severed Austria from its only plausible economic partner and condemned the new state to survive within borders that virtually no Austrian political actor regarded as sustainable.

The treaty went further. Austria was prohibited from even calling itself 'German-Austria'. The new state had to adopt the neutral title 'Republic of Austria'.¹²⁷ The symbolic intent was transparent. It aimed to break the association between Austrian statehood and German national ideas and to pre-empt the possibility of plebiscites or constitutional manoeuvres aimed at unification. For the Social Democrats, whose ideological vocabulary rested heavily on a 'German' identity and whose electoral base expected *Anschluss*, this was a profound setback.¹²⁸ The treaty's official erasure of the term *Deutschösterreich* signalled the end of any international tolerance for their programme.

¹²⁶ Thorpe, *Pan-Germanism and the Austrofascist State*, 28

¹²⁷ Boyer, *Austria*, 654-5.

¹²⁸ Thorpe, *Pan-Germanism and the Austrofascist State*, 28.

These expectations were not confined to the political elite. A contemporary officer perspective reinforces this sense of political and economic fragility. In his memoirs, Jansa recalled the widespread belief within the former imperial officer corps that the truncated Alpine provinces, burdened by what he called the '*Wasserkopf Wien*', an oversized former imperial capital disproportionate to the reduced Alpine republic, were not viable as an independent state and would therefore have to seek *Anschluss* with a larger economic area. His remarks capture how deeply the perception of structural weakness shaped officers' expectations in 1919 and how the Allied prohibition of *Anschluss* shattered what many regarded as the only realistic future for Austria.¹²⁹

As a nominal 'co-heir' to the Austro-Hungarian state (along with Hungary), the Republic of Austria was forced to accept 'the responsibility of Austria and her Allies for causing the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments [...] have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Austria-Hungary and her Allies'.¹³⁰ This positioned the Republic, an entity that did not exist in 1914, as a successor to imperial responsibility and justified the far-reaching restrictions that followed. Moreover, the treaty confirmed the territorial losses already effected by events on the ground in late 1918. Bohemia, Moravia, and Galicia were gone, and their predominantly German-speaking border regions were integrated into Czechoslovakia and Poland without consultation.¹³¹ These losses mattered politically and socially. Many Austrian officers, administrators, and professionals came from precisely these regions.¹³² Their incorporation into neighbouring states created a vast pool of 'German-Austrian' personnel outside the new borders while intensifying the demographic and administrative narrowness of the state that remained. The one apparent 'gain', the transfer of the Burgenland (*Őrvidék*) from Hungary, did little to offset the broader pattern. The territory was awarded largely through Allied decision making during the post-war settlement rather than through Austrian leverage. Hungary's political instability and international isolation after 1919 weakened its position in the negotiations and limited its

¹²⁹ Jansa, *Ein österreichische General gegen Hitler*, 446-7.

¹³⁰ Australian Treaty Series, 'Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Austria; Protocol, Declaration and Special Declaration (1920)', Part VIII – Reparation, Section I, Art. 177 (<https://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/1920/3.html>) (accessed 16 Feb 2026).

¹³¹ Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*, 204.

¹³² Several of the officers studied in this thesis were born in places that were awarded to Czechoslovakia: Karl Bornemann (Znaim, S. Moravia), Maximilian Felzmann (Zwiittau/Svitavy, Sudetenland), Friedrich Materna (Hof/Dvorce, Sudetenland), Erhard Raus (Wolframitz/Olbramovice, S. Moravia).

ability to challenge the decision effectively. Burgenland thus symbolised dependency on external diplomacy rather than its own agency.¹³³

Taken together, these political terms produced a radically constricted state, shorn of its historic economic hinterland, stripped of its imagined national solution, and defined by borders that none of its major political parties had anticipated.¹³⁴ The First Republic emerged not as a self-determining successor state but rather as a residual political entity whose sovereignty was conditional, supervised, and contingent on adherence to a framework set by the Allied settlement.

For the military, this new geopolitical reality had immediate and long-lasting consequences. The treaty eliminated the possibility that Austria could pursue an independent foreign policy grounded in strategic thinking. Without access to heavy industry, resources, or alliances, the state lacked the preconditions for anything resembling a conventional army. The political clauses were therefore inseparable from the military clauses that followed. Austria was not merely discouraged from acting as a military power. It was legally constituted as a non-power. Its borders were largely fixed, notwithstanding limited adjustments such as the Carinthian plebiscite of 1920, its international orientation restricted, and its room for manoeuvre eliminated. This context is essential for understanding why Saint-Germain effectively predetermined the internal debates over the army's future.

The consequences for the internal political landscape were immediate. The Social Democrats had envisioned a militia-based defence force grounded in democratic participation, political mobilisation, and a broadened base of national participation. This rested on two assumptions: first, that Austria could rely on its German partner, and second, that the state's borders and population would be sufficient to sustain mass mobilisation. Both assumptions were shattered by the treaty. Once *Anschluss* was forbidden and conscription abolished, the Social Democratic military project ceased to be viable not because it lacked domestic support but because international law made it structurally impossible.

The Christian Socials, too, were manoeuvred into accepting a reduced view of Austrian statehood. Their vision of a conservative, Catholic Austria tied culturally and economically to

¹³³ Joseph Imre, 'Burgenland and the Austria-Hungary border dispute in international perspective, 1918-22', *Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*, iv (2015), 233-4.

¹³⁴ Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Unter Beobachten* (Vienna, 2021), 63-65.

the German sphere was rendered incoherent by borders that excluded millions of German-speaking Habsburg subjects and by a diplomatic regime that prohibited any expression of pan-German orientation. After the collapse of the Grand Coalition in 1920, the Christian Social leadership presided over a state too small to pursue an independent strategy and too closely monitored to develop one. Their political energies increasingly shifted toward internal order, social pacification, and the consolidation of Catholic corporatist structures, themes that would later dominate the Dollfuss/Schuschnigg Regime of the 1930s.

In short, the political clauses of the Treaty of Saint-Germain did not merely define Austria's external position, they reshaped the internal terrain in which debates about the army would unfold. The treaty created a state that could not base its legitimacy on national self-determination, could not pursue *Anschluss*, and could not project power beyond its own borders. Any military institution formed within this framework would necessarily reflect these political limitations and be defensive, inward-looking, professionalised, and stripped of the strategic autonomy enjoyed by the armies of larger or more secure states. For the Christian Social leadership, however, Saint-Germain also presented an opportunity as much as a defeat. The destruction of the Social Democratic militia project removed their principal domestic rival in military affairs. A mass, politicised *Volkswehr* was incompatible with Christian Social ideals of authority; a small, disciplined career-based force oriented toward internal order was not. The treaty thus dissolved the military foundation of socialist mass politics while simultaneously validating the Christian Social preference for a narrow security force detached from popular mobilisation. What appeared geopolitically as national diminishment translated domestically into ideological advantage.

1.4.2 The Military Terms of the Treaty.

If the political terms of the Saint-Germain defined the narrow limits of Austrian sovereignty, the military clauses translated those limits into a legal blueprint that permitted only one kind of army: a small, professional force oriented towards internal security rather than national defence. These measures did not simply disarm Austria. They predetermined the institutional character of the future army.

Article 120 fixed the total strength of the Austrian Army at 30,000 men, including officers, NCOs, depot troops and administrative personnel.¹³⁵ More important than the ceiling itself was the mechanism that enforced it. Crucially, conscription was abolished, eliminating the state's ability to draw on the population at large and destroying the Social Democratic conception of a militia rooted in democratic citizenship. Without compulsory service, the republican ideal of a broad, politically integrated '*Volksheer*' (people's army) became structurally unviable. Austria was denied a reserve, could not store stocks of armaments necessary for mobilisation, and was prohibited from training former soldiers. Although the *Wehrgesetz* would formally maintain a *Reservedienstpflicht* (reserve service obligation), the Treaty of Saint-Germain prohibited all mobilisation measures, the creation of supplementary cadres, and the formation of reserve munitions stocks, while subjecting the Austrian armed forces to permanent Inter-Allied control. A reserve force therefore existed only as a legal fiction and could not function as a working military instrument.¹³⁶ The *Volkswehr*'s improvisational, mass-political character had no institutional future. Austria's army was locked into peacetime dimensions, with severely limited capacity for scaling or doctrinal adaptation.

The restriction on manpower was reinforced by stringent limits on the officer corps, which was capped at roughly 1,500 officers (one-twentieth of the total number of army personnel).¹³⁷ This was not just a numerical reduction. It locked the army into a narrow command elite. The treaty required long service terms for both existing and future officers, creating a closed, career-bound professional caste rather than a socially representative or politically responsive leadership. Because only former imperial officers and NCOs possessed the training necessary to operate within such a force, the treaty strongly reinforced their organisational centrality. The state lacked both the legal flexibility and the internal scale to recruit or promote a new cadre of republican officers on any meaningful scale. Even if political actors had wished to reshape the command culture of the army, the structure imposed by the treaty made such transformation difficult. Professional continuity from the Habsburg army was not a political victory, but rather a systemic outcome. Here Harald Pöcher and Roland

¹³⁵ Part V Military, Naval and Air Clauses, Article 120, para. 3 of the 'Treaty of Peace with Austria', (St. Germain-en-Laye, 10 September 1919) in *The American Journal of International Law*, XIV, no. 1/2, (Jan-Feb 1920), p. 38.

¹³⁶ Pöcher & Schaffer, *Das Österreichische Bundesheer von 1918 bis 1929*, 29.

¹³⁷ 'Treaty of Peace with Austria' Part V Military, Naval and Air Clauses, Article 120, para. 2 of the, (St. Germain-en-Laye, 10 September 1919), *The American Journal of International Law*, xiv, no. 1/2, Supplement: Official Documents (Jan-Feb 1920), 38.

Schaffer highlight a deeper structural paradox. While the treaty forced Austria to rely on professional officers, it simultaneously restricted the educational infrastructure required to reproduce such expertise. Articles 124 to 126 of the treaty limited military schools and staff training to functions relating to internal order. Advanced doctrinal or operational instruction could not be maintained.¹³⁸ The new army thus inherited imperial expertise but lacked the means to renew it, a contradiction that shaped the institution throughout the 1920s.

Naderer underlines how abruptly the treaty invalidated the Social Democratic project. The February 1919 *Wehrgesetz* had been intended only as a provisional measure until a full militia-based *Landesverteidigungsgesetz* could be enacted. Yet the Allied settlement rejected both conscription and the militia principle entirely, prescribing instead a narrowly defined *Berufsheer* (professional army).¹³⁹ The Social Democrats therefore sought, through the *Wehrgesetz* of March 1920, to salvage what remained of their republican military vision within a force already fixed by the terms of the peace settlement.¹⁴⁰

Austria was permitted only strictly limited quantities of small arms and artillery, and even these were tied to Allied inspection. The prohibitions on armour and military aviation were decisive.¹⁴¹ The Austrian army was effectively frozen at an organisational and technological level that matched its legal purpose: internal security, not national defence. Industrial restrictions reinforced this stasis. With only one authorised arms factory and imports of armaments prohibited, Austria could neither modernise nor diversify its military equipment.¹⁴² Neighbouring states, such as Czechoslovakia, the SHS state, Italy and later Germany, rearmed, circumvented limits, or modernised; Austria remained bound to a deliberately static technological base. The Austrian army thus entered the 1920s with an ageing equipment base and no pathway to augment or replace it.

The cumulative effect of the treaty did not simply create a weakened army but a legally defined structural identity. Austria's armed forces were permitted to act only within its borders, to maintain order, defend the frontiers in a limited sense, and assist the civilian authorities. They were denied the characteristics that make an army a strategic instrument,

¹³⁸ Pöcher and Schaffer, *Das Österreichische Bundesheer*, 27-8.

¹³⁹ Naderer, *Die bewaffnete Aufstand*, 32-3.

¹⁴⁰ Naderer, *Die bewaffnete Aufstand*, 145.

¹⁴¹ 'Treaty of Peace with Austria', Article 135 and 144, 42 and 47.

¹⁴² 'Treaty of Peace with Austria', Article 132, 42.

i.e., conscription, reserves, mobility, technological adaptability, and the capacity to scale. The settlement progressively eliminated the institutional basis for the *Volkswehr's* politicised, participatory, and improvisational character. It also ended the domestic contest over what the army should be. The Social Democratic militia project was rendered impossible. The Christian Social preference for a narrow internal-order force was reinforced, and the continued prominence of former imperial officers became a structural reality rather than a political concession. Pöcher and Schaffer underline the degree of external engineering by showing that the treaty not only limited the army's size but also prescribed its internal organisation. The authorised unit structures and force tables reproduced in their work demonstrate that planning the army meant conforming to a predetermined organisational framework rather than designing one itself.¹⁴³ The state did not choose its army's skeleton. It inherited it.

The *Wehrgesetz* (Defence Act) of 18 March 1920 merely translated the limitations mandated by Saint-Germain into domestic law in Austria.¹⁴⁴ From this law came the Republic's new army, the *Bundesheer* (Federal Army). Austria did not freely choose the *Bundesheer's* form. It inherited it from an international order designed to confine the Republic to lasting military marginality.

1.4.3 Saint-Germain and the Closure of Military Possibility

The combined effect of the political and military clauses of Saint-Germain was to close the unstable military landscape of 1918–19 and replace it with an institutional model imposed from the outside. What had briefly been an open question was now fixed by the legal framework drafted in Paris. The *Volkswehr*, with its hybrid political–military character and origins in the emergency conditions of late 1918, had no place within this order. The treaty set the limits of institutional possibility long before Austrian policymakers attempted to define the army's purpose.

The political clauses had already undermined the assumptions underpinning competing military visions: Austria's reduction to a narrow territorial core, the prohibition of *Anschluss*, and the loss of strategic autonomy eliminated the strategic premises on which both Social Democratic and Christian Social concepts rested. As Rauchensteiner argues, Saint-Germain

¹⁴³ Pöcher & Schaffer, *Das Österreichische Bundesheer von 1918 bis 1929*, 24.

¹⁴⁴ *Das Wehrgesetz von 18. März 1920*, StGBI. Nr. 165/1920.

marked '*das Ende der Illusionen*', the moment when Austria was forced to acknowledge that it could neither negotiate a favourable peace nor preserve elements of its imperial strategic posture.¹⁴⁵

The military clauses transformed political limitation into institutional permanence. Rather than merely reducing Austrian military capacity, they closed off alternative developmental paths and channelled military reform toward a professionalised, long-service cadre army whose structure mirrored the treaty's assumptions about Austria's reduced role in Europe. The *Volkswehr*'s decentralised, participatory model was incompatible with these limitations. M. Christian Ortner's analysis of the *Volkswehr*'s committee structures, political loyalties, and regional variation demonstrates precisely why it could not survive within the professionalised and centrally controlled framework mandated by the treaty.¹⁴⁶

Contemporary Austrian reactions captured this abrupt narrowing of structural possibilities. Social Democratic voices, such as the *Militär-Soziale Rundschau*, warned that abolishing conscription destroyed the democratic militia concept.¹⁴⁷ Professional military writers approached the settlement differently but recognised the same basic fact: the treaty left no space for a mass-participatory defence system. This is reflected clearly in a February 1920 article in the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, written during debates over the Officer Reduction Act (*Abbaugesetz*). The author described the officer corps as 'the socially weakest group among all state employees' and acknowledged that the abolition of conscription made any 'militia-based army' a distant prospect. While expressing hope that a conscription-based army might one day re-emerge, the article conceded that, under present conditions, the professional army (*Berufsheer*) was the only organisational form compatible with the treaty and the republic's political fragility.¹⁴⁸ Even within the officer corps itself, the cadre army was thus understood not as a preferred solution but as a structurally imposed outcome.

Jedlicka's analysis of the coalition negotiations confirms this logic. The government's programme for the new army declared that the force must be loyal to the democratic republic while remaining institutionally apolitical. Soldiers would retain full civic rights as individuals,

¹⁴⁵ 'the end of illusions'; Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Unter Beobachten* 62-3.

¹⁴⁶ M. Christian Ortner, 'Von Volkswehr bis Bundesheer' in S. Karner (ed) *Die umkämpfte Republik: Österreich von 1918-1938* (Vienna, 2017), 130.

¹⁴⁷ *Militär-Soziale Rundschau*, 23 July 1919.

¹⁴⁸ *Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 4 February 1920.

but the army itself was required to stand outside party conflicts. As Jedlicka observes, the attempt to detach the idea of an '*unpolitische Wehrmacht*' from day-to-day party politics proved almost impossible within Austria's domestic political constellation. Granting full political rights under these conditions exposed a small professional army to partisan pressures.¹⁴⁹ The tension between democratic participation and enforced neutrality, already widened by the treaty's abolition of conscription, was never satisfactorily resolved.

These contradictions were intensified by the unavoidable reliance on former imperial professionals. The coalition programme made clear that officer and NCO posts in the new army would be filled largely from Austro-Hungarian veterans, as only they possessed the required training. Jedlicka stresses that this was not a political preference but a structural inevitability. The returning imperial officers and NCOs constituted a 'sociologically closed group' whose organisational coherence allowed them quickly to form associations, veterans' networks, and informal lobbies. Their struggles over pensions and state employment, the *Versorgungsanspruch*, pushed them visibly into parliamentary and public debate and helped translate post-treaty personnel restrictions into lasting institutional influence.¹⁵⁰ Austria did not choose continuity with the imperial officer corps; it was compelled into it.

The coalition's deliberations also revealed the uncertainty surrounding the constitutional position of the new armed forces. Jedlicka shows that debates over civilian control, whether the army should be subordinated to constitutional authorities '*nach dem Muster der westlichen Staaten*' or whether traces of a Prussian-style '*Spitzengliederung*' (apex structure) of military authority should be retained, took place within a structure already defined by the treaty.¹⁵¹ With the general staff abolished, advanced training restricted, and the army confined to internal-security tasks. Austria's civil-military relationship was therefore negotiated within a narrow, externally determined space rather than developed freely.

Naderer's account of parliamentary politics in the early 1920s further shows how the Social Democrats sought to preserve fragments of their earlier influence through institutional oversight. Instruments such as the *Vertrauensmänner*, the National Assembly's oversight commission, and the preservation of political rights for soldiers were designed to prevent the

¹⁴⁹ Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten*, 85.

¹⁵⁰ Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten*, 23.

¹⁵¹ 'following the model of the Western states'; (Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten*, 23).

new *Bundesheer* from becoming a conservative instrument deployed against the working class. Yet these mechanisms operated within an increasingly narrow space. As Naderer observes, they reflected defensive adaptation rather than genuine co-determination: residual levers of influence in an army whose basic structure had been fixed by foreign powers.¹⁵²

In this sense, Saint-Germain did more than curtail Austria's military capacity: it defined the *Bundesheer's* institutional identity. The army of the First Republic emerged as a small, career-based, professionally-dominated force shaped not by ideological choice but by the structural constraints of 1919, constraints that would continue to shape Austrian military and political development throughout the interwar period.

Conclusion

The years between the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy in late 1918 and the legal foundation of the *Bundesheer* in March 1920 were far more than a transitional interlude. They constituted a foundational reordering of Austria's military sphere, and, crucially, a redefinition of the place of the former imperial officer corps within it. Nothing about this process was linear, consensual or domestically determined. It was the product of three interacting forces: the disintegration of the imperial state, the unstable experiment of the *Volkswehr*, and the externally imposed architecture of the Treaty of Saint-Germain. Together, these forces shaped the environment the officer corps would inhabit for the rest of the First Republic.

The first force was collapse. The end of the monarchy did not simply remove a sovereign. It destroyed the institutional grammar that had defined military professionalism. Officers returning to Austria in late 1918 confronted not a new state, but the absence of a state. Their rank carried no authority, their uniform no prestige, and their professional codes no meaning outside the vanished imperial hierarchy that had created them. The early Republic offered them hostility rather than continuity. The public vilification of officers, reinforced by the *Arbeiter-Zeitung's* campaign, was not an episode but a formative experience. It created a durable sense among many officers that the political left regarded them as a dangerous remnant of a discredited world.

¹⁵² Naderer, *Die Bewaffnete Aufstand*, 145-6.

The second force was improvisation. The *Volkswehr* embodied the revolutionary and democratic hopes of the Social Democrats, but it also laid bare the incompatibilities between those hopes and the professional habitus of former imperial officers. It placed officers inside a structure in which authority was mediated through soldier-representatives, political unions, and partisan oversight, arrangements that violated the institutional culture in which they had been trained. The friction that resulted was structural, not moral. Officers accustomed to professional loyalty were asked to navigate political loyalty. Soldiers encouraged to think as citizens in uniform confronted commanders who believed that authority flowed from rank, not election. The *Volkswehr* survived as an unstable synthesis that depended on the very officers whose ethos it challenged.

The third force was constraint. The Treaty of Saint-Germain abruptly ended the contest over the army's future by abolishing conscription, banning mobilisation, capping personnel, eliminating modern arms, and restricting military training. These were not simply disarmament measures. They created a legal environment in which no mass-participatory or democratised military model could survive. The Social Democrats' militia project was rendered legally and practically impossible. The *Volkswehr's* political-military hybrid was rendered obsolete. What remained was the only army compatible with the treaty: a narrow, long-service professional force.

This was the decisive moment for the ex-Habsburg officers. The treaty did not restore their status, but it restored their utility. Their administrative expertise, staff training, and long-service orientation matched the only model of army Austria was legally permitted to maintain. No republican alternative could be built at the necessary scale or speed. Professional continuity with the imperial officer corps was not chosen. It was imposed. The new army inherited a sociologically closed group not because the Republic desired it, but because international law left no other credible cadre.

By 1920, Austria did not have the army imagined by any political party. It had the army made possible by collapse, improvisation, and constraint, and an officer corps whose professional indispensability had outlived the political world that created them. The *Bundesheer* that emerged in March 1920 was therefore neither an imperial remnant nor a republican creation. It was a contraction of imperial professionalism into a sharply reduced framework, shaped by a treaty that eliminated all competing visions.

These conditions – public mistrust, political suspicion, structural indispensability, and externally defined limits – became the enduring parameters of the officer corps' position in the First Republic. They shaped how officers understood themselves, how they interpreted political authority, and how they responded to the crises of the 1920s and 1930s. The patterns established in these formative years, continuity without legitimacy and professionalism without autonomy, formed the core of the *Bundesheer's* institutional identity until the Republic itself collapsed in 1938.

Chapter Two: Parliamentary Control, Ministerial Authority, and the Struggle Over Depoliticisation, 1920-26

Introduction

The establishment of the *Bundesheer* in 1920 marked the formal conclusion of the revolutionary phase that had accompanied the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy. Yet legal consolidation did not in itself resolve the fundamental political problem created by the survival of an overwhelmingly imperial-trained officer corps within a republican state. For the First Republic, the central question of the early 1920s was not whether an army would exist, but how far that army could be made politically accountable without abandoning the professional structures inherited from the late Habsburg world. The transition from the *Volkswehr* to the *Bundesheer* thus stabilised existing tensions rather than eliminating them.

This chapter examines how those tensions unfolded in practice during the first half of the 1920s, as parliamentary ambitions to embed civic education, political accountability, and democratic oversight within the military sphere encountered growing resistance from conservative actors and from within the officer corps itself. The legal framework of the new army, most notably the *Wehrgesetz* (Defence Act), embodied a compromise between republican supervision and professional autonomy. That compromise proved fragile. Fiscal constraint, an unstable coalition government, and the administrative dependence of the state on the competence of former imperial officers all limited the scope of military reform from the outset.

During the early years of the republic, Social Democratic politicians sought to preserve aspects of the *Volkswehr*'s political conception within the *Bundesheer*. Long-service soldiers were to be prepared for reintegration into civilian life through education programmes, parliamentary bodies were to exercise active oversight of the military administration, and the officer corps was to be gradually reshaped through republican education and legal accountability. These ambitions rested on the assumption that the military could be integrated into the constitutional order as a politically supervised institution without sacrificing its basic

professional effectiveness. From 1921 onward, however, this project came under sustained pressure. Conservative critics increasingly framed parliamentary intervention in military affairs as illegitimate politicisation. Within the officer corps, demands for civic accountability were met with assertions of professional neutrality and corporate solidarity. The meaning of '*unpolitisch*' (apolitical) itself began to shift. What had initially been conceived as the subordination of the army to democratic control increasingly came to be interpreted as the exclusion of party-political influence from the military sphere. Under this redefinition, political oversight by Social Democratic representatives appeared not as a constitutional safeguard but as an intrusion into a supposedly apolitical institution.

The appointment of Carl Vaugoin as defence minister in 1922 marked a decisive moment in this transformation. Under his leadership, the language of depoliticisation acquired a distinctly conservative content. Measures originally intended to secure parliamentary influence over the *Bundesheer* were gradually weakened, while professional autonomy and ministerial authority were strengthened. The officer corps emerged as a key beneficiary of this shift. The early 1920s, thus, witnessed not the retreat of politics from military life, but its reorganisation into new, less visible forms. It was in this context that General Theodor Körner assumed a central role in the conflicts of 1923–24. As army inspector, he stood at the intersection of military expertise and political authority. Unlike most senior ex-Habsburg officers, he publicly aligned himself with Social Democracy and endorsed the republican reorientation of military culture. His position rendered him uniquely disruptive. He could intervene in institutional debates not merely as a party politician, but as a senior professional whose authority derived from his imperial career as well as from his republican loyalties. When he challenged the political direction of the *Bundesheer* in his *Denkschrift*, the resulting controversy exposed the limits of parliamentary influence and the growing resistance to republican supervision within the military sphere.

The disputes surrounding Körner's removal did not remain confined to the institutional arena. They unfolded across parliamentary debates, the officer press, and the wider public sphere, and they were accompanied by intense symbolic conflict over ritual, religion, tradition, and humour. Minor disciplinary incidents and questions of ceremonial practice acquired disproportionate political weight, as competing actors struggled to define what counted as legitimate neutrality within the armed forces. In these controversies, imperial military

tradition was progressively recoded as politically harmless heritage, while challenges to that tradition were framed as dangerous politicisation.

Taken together, these developments illuminate a broader structural shift in the political function of the military during the early years of the First Republic. The *Bundesheer* that emerged from the crisis of 1923–24 was formally loyal to the republican state but increasingly insulated from direct parliamentary intervention. The removal of figures such as Körner signalled the weakening of participatory ambitions inherited from the *Volkswehr* period, and the consolidation of a model of military authority that privileged professional expertise, executive control, and symbolic conformity over democratic contestation.

This chapter therefore reconstructs not simply a sequence of political disputes, but the gradual redefinition of the relationship between the ex-Habsburg officer corps and the republican state. It shows how efforts to democratise the military sphere were first compromised, then progressively displaced, as neutrality, tradition, and professional autonomy were reassembled into a conservative framework of military loyalty compatible with the First Republic's unstable political order.

By following these developments through the figure of Körner and the conflicts surrounding him, this chapter illuminates a wider structural dynamic of the First Republic: the gradual shift from participatory experimentation toward a controlled, symbolically saturated, and increasingly insulated military institution. The *Bundesheer* that emerged from the crisis of 1923–24 was formally loyal to the Republic, but politically reoriented in ways that limited the scope of democratic intervention. The consequences of that transformation would shape the political function of the officer corps well beyond the mid-1920s.

2.1 Crisis and Realignment, May 1920–Early 1921

The collapse of the Grand Coalition in June 1920 marked the first major political rupture in the life of the new *Bundesheer*. With the Social Democrats leaving government, the only party that had sought to reshape the army along explicitly republican and democratic lines lost direct influence over military policy. What followed was not a coherent conservative reorientation, but a period of institutional suspension in which the meaning of political neutrality, the role of soldiers' representatives and the limits of legitimate political activity within the army all became matters of open dispute. This section traces how the

Vertrauensmänner crisis exposed these unresolved tensions, how the legal framework of the Defence Act was reinterpreted after the coalition's collapse, and how General Josef Wächter's short and politically fragile tenure as state secretary represented the first, tentative attempt to impose order on an institution caught between competing visions of the Republic.

2.1.1 Deutsch's Decree and the *Vertrauensmänner* Crisis, May–June 1920

The struggle for control of the new Austrian army reached a decisive point in late May 1920. At the centre of events stood the *Vertrauensmänner*, the soldiers' representatives who had emerged from the *Volkswehr* tradition of 1918 and who were retained, with modifications, in the *Wehrgesetz*. For the Social Democrats, these representatives were intended to act as a form of internal oversight that would prevent the re-emergence of an autonomous, conservative officer caste. For the majority of ex-Habsburg officers, they symbolised an unwelcome intrusion into the chain of command and a lingering threat of political supervision by the left. The clash that followed revealed how fragile the balance was between a republican legal framework and the habits of an officer corps formed in the empire.

On 25 May 1920 the State Secretary for the Army, Julius Deutsch, issued a service decree that strengthened the position of the *Vertrauensmänner*. It granted them immunity from dismissal and clarified their right to intervene in conflicts between enlisted men and their superiors. According to his opponents, Deutsch issued this decree '*ohne vorherige Fühlungnahme mit den Landesregierungen, mit den militärischen Verwaltungs- und Kommandostellen, unter Übergehung des [...] Zivilkommissariats*.'¹⁵³ For the bourgeois parties (*bürgerliche Parteien*),¹⁵⁴ and for many senior officers, this appeared to be an attempt to entrench Social Democratic influence within the ranks by empowering representatives who were, in their view, still too closely tied to the partisan culture of the *Volkswehr*. The *Reichspost*, the main Christian Social newspaper, immediately denounced the decree as '*ein Willkürakt gegen die Nationalversammlung*' and warned that it marked the beginning of anarchy in the new army.¹⁵⁵ Its criticism rested on two assumptions that were widely held within the officer corps.

¹⁵³ 'Without prior consultation with the provincial governments, with the military administrative and command authorities, while bypassing the Civilian Commission [...]' *Konstituierenden Nationalversammlung, Stenographisches Protokoll*, 88. Sitzung, 10 June 1920, 2905 (Präsident Hauser).

¹⁵⁴ The grouping '*bürgerliche Parteien*' reflects the terminology of Social Democratic political language and has been widely retained in the historiography to denote the Christian Social and Greater German parties. It is used here strictly as a contemporary political label rather than an analytical category.

¹⁵⁵ 'An arbitrary act against the National Assembly', *Reichspost*, 30 May 1920.

The first was that the *Vertrauensmänner* were overwhelmingly drawn from the early *Volkswehr* cohort, a cohort whose Social Democratic loyalties were taken for granted by the Right. The second was that any mechanism capable of constraining or publicly criticising an officer amounted to a direct threat to discipline.

The *Reichspost* intensified these fears by claiming that the new regulation created a representative for every twenty-eight soldiers, nearly one thousand men in total. It insisted that these representatives would be free to neglect their military duties and ‘*mit Hilfe eines eigenen Kanzleiapparates den ganzen Tag über „die Interessen der Mannschaft zu vertreten.“*’¹⁵⁶ Although exaggerated, these accusations captured the deeper anxiety that the decree would turn the officer corps into an object of supervision rather than a source of authority. The newspaper concluded that the *Bundesheer* had been promised as ‘*[e]ine disziplinierte, unpolitische Armee*’ but was instead ‘*von parteipolitischen Erwägungen diktiert*’.¹⁵⁷

The Social Democratic *Arbeiter-Zeitung* responded the next day with a pointed rebuttal. It insisted that the new regulation merely clarified powers already granted by the *Wehrgesetz* and reminded readers that the Christian Socials had voted for the law. Its main point, however, was directed not at party rivals but at the officers themselves. The paper claimed that the ‘*schwankende, zwiespältige Haltung der Offiziere zur Republik*’ made it impossible to entrust them with unchecked authority.¹⁵⁸ The spectre of the German *Reichswehr*, often celebrated by the Right, was invoked as a warning. An officer corps hostile to parliamentary democracy, the paper argued, could transform the army ‘*aus einem Werkzeug der Freiheit in ein Werkzeug der blutigsten Unterdrückung der Freiheit*’.¹⁵⁹ In this view the *Vertrauensmänner* were not a partisan weapon but a safeguard that would keep the still monarchically-minded officers loyal to the new constitutional order.

The controversy reached parliament on 10 June and would bring the Grand Coalition to an end. Greater German deputies demanded that the decree be revoked calling it: ‘*die*

¹⁵⁶ ‘Spend their days representing the “interests of the enlisted men” with the support of their own clerical staff’, *Reichspost*, 30 May 1920.

¹⁵⁷ ‘a disciplined and apolitical army’, ‘dictated by party-political considerations.’ *Reichspost*, 30 May 1920.

¹⁵⁸ ‘Wavering, ambivalent attitude of the officers towards the Republic’, *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 31 May 1920.

¹⁵⁹ ‘From an instrument of liberty into an instrument of the bloodiest suppression of liberty.’ *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 31 May 1920.

*Einschmuggelung eines ungemein weitgehenden Immunitätsrechtes für alle Soldatenräte der neuen Wehrmacht.*¹⁶⁰ The Christian Social chairman, Leopold Kunschak, threatened to leave the government. Deutsch refused to withdraw the measure and Chancellor Renner would not contradict him. Renner then announced that he and the Social Democratic state secretaries would resign from government.¹⁶¹ The ex-Habsburg officers had not engineered the crisis, but they were its silent centre. Each side claimed to be defending the ‘apolitical’ character of the army yet both relied on assumptions about the political loyalties of the officer corps that left no room for genuine neutrality. For the Social Democrats, the officers were a latent threat to the Republic. For the Right, they were the natural guardians of order. The collapse of the coalition confirmed to many officers that the bourgeois parties would protect their institutional autonomy in ways the Social Democrats would not. It also marked the moment when the political left lost its last real opportunity to influence the culture and direction of the new army.

2.1.2 After the Coalition Collapse: A Political Holding Pattern, mid-1920 to mid-1921.

The collapse of the Social Democrat-Christian Social coalition in June 1920 created a political environment in which the internal organisation of the *Bundesheer* was defined by a legal framework shaped during the revolutionary period yet administered by a ministry no longer committed to its underlying assumptions. Since the Social Democrats had been the only political force with the institutional authority to shape the army’s republican orientation in 1918–20, their departure after the *Wehrgesetz* left no party with either the will or the capacity to define the *Bundesheer*’s constitutional role. As Jedlicka notes, the Defence Act of 1920 was itself a compromise that neither side viewed as final.¹⁶² The Social Democrats believed they retained structural influence through the soldiers’ representatives and their strong support base among the rank-and-file, while the bourgeois parties feared that the *Bundesheer*, through its inheritance from the *Volkswehr*, might become a *Parteitruppe* (Party Militia).¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ ‘The smuggling in of an extraordinarily far-reaching right of immunity for all Soldiers’ representatives of the new army.’ (Konstituierenden Nationalversammlung, *Stenographisches Protokoll*, 88. Sitzung, 10 June 1920, 2905 (Präsident Hauser)).

¹⁶¹ *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 11 June 1920.

¹⁶² Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten*, 56.

¹⁶³ Jedlicka, *Heer im Schatten*, 57.

This mutual mistrust framed the early life of the *Bundesheer* far more than any settled agreement about the political role of the officer corps.

The most revealing public discussion of the army's political identity took place on 22 April 1922 during the *Nationalrat* debate on revisions to military disciplinary law. Julius Deutsch used the occasion to restate the Social Democratic view that the *Bundesheer* must be a republican institution with democratic guarantees. He contrasted the imperial officer corps with the requirements of the new state. He argued that '*die Wehrmacht der Zeit der Monarchie war zum großen Teil eine persönliche Schutzgarde des Monarchen [...] Das Offizierkorps fühlte sich durchaus in einem persönlichen Lebensverhältnisse zum Kaiser*'.¹⁶⁴

The Republic, by contrast, required an army that protected the people and functioned as an organ of the people. This formulation captured the Social Democratic attempt to replace an imperial, dynastic conception of military loyalty with a civic and constitutional one. For Deutsch, this shift in constitutional purpose demanded corresponding internal reforms: the abolition of unchecked officer disciplinary power, the strengthening of disciplinary commissions, and the equal evaluation of officers and enlisted men. His argument rested on a straightforward premise: it was impossible to stabilise republican discipline so long as officers enjoyed 'impunity' for conduct that openly violated the spirit of the Republic.

The new parliamentary majority, dominated by the Christian Socials and their bourgeois allies, did not dismantle these institutions. It also did not regard them as essential to the functioning of the army. Their priority in late 1920 was constitutional reconstruction and financial stabilisation. As a result, the internal life of the *Bundesheer* entered a period of administrative inertia. The ministry issued no directives comparable to Deutsch's controversial interventions, and there was no effort to refine or abolish the soldiers' representation created under the Defence Act. The result was a system in which participatory structures remained legally embedded yet lacked any active enforcement.

This static situation was complicated by the Defence Act's insistence that the army must avoid all forms of party-political activity or use. The law stated that political influence was

¹⁶⁴ 'The armed forces of the time of the monarchy were, to a large extent, a personal guard of the monarch. [...] The officer corps believed it stood in a personal relationship with the emperor'. (Österreichischer Nationalrat, *Stenographisches Protokoll*, 104. Sitzung, 7. April 1922, 3437 (Abg. Deutsch)).

incompatible with military service and that training was to avoid any partisan character.¹⁶⁵ These clauses had been intended by the Social Democrats as safeguards against a return to pre-war political loyalties among the officer corps. Under the new ministry they were interpreted differently. The bourgeois parties understood political neutrality as the absence of Social Democratic influence in the ranks, not as a mechanism for limiting conservative or monarchist impulses within the officer corps. The same legal language therefore acquired a different political meaning once the Social Democrats were no longer present to shape its interpretation.

For the officer corps, this shift in emphasis was significant. The political pressure they had encountered in 1919 and early 1920 diminished sharply once the Social Democrats left the ministry. The expectation that officers should explain or justify decisions to political representatives faded. Disputes that might previously have escalated into political controversy were now more likely to be handled within the chain of command. Officers continued to operate under the legal constraints of the Defence Act, but they did so in an environment where oversight had become weaker and less ideologically charged. The absence of new ministerial initiatives signalled that the period of experimentation with soldiers' participation had ended for the time being.

The soldiers' unions illustrate this evolution particularly clearly. They remained numerically strong, especially in units with a high proportion of working-class conscripts. Their representatives continued to bring forward complaints related to training, welfare, and disciplinary decisions. However, without Social Democratic control of the ministry, such interventions had far less practical effect. Union representatives could still speak, but they could no longer count on political backing. Cases that might have drawn ministerial attention a year earlier now tended to be resolved informally, with commanders drawing on the discretionary authority they had exercised before 1918. The legal rights of soldiers' representatives remained intact, but their ability to shape practice declined sharply.

The Civil Commissariat itself found its position altered in similar ways. It continued to exist as the Defence Act prescribed, but its relationship with the ministry shifted. The Commissariat's

¹⁶⁵ Georg Lelewer (ed.), *Das Wehrgesetz vom Jahre 1920 mit Auszügen aus den Materialien und mit Anmerkungen* (Vienna, 1920), §26, 21–22.

ability to scrutinise internal matters depended less on statutory competence than on ministerial willingness to cooperate. In the absence of such cooperation, the Commissariat became a formal institution with limited influence. The Social Democrats in parliament protested against what they regarded as a dilution of the legislative intent of the Defence Act, but their criticism rarely produced concrete outcomes.

By mid-1921 the *Bundesheer* existed in a state that combined legal continuity with political drift. The soldiers' representatives, unions, and the Civil Commissariat remained in place, but no longer shaped the army's daily life in the way the Social Democrats had intended. The bourgeois parties did not replace these mechanisms with an alternative programme. Instead, they allowed internal practice to settle into a pattern shaped by routine, budgetary constraint, and the absence of political direction. Officers interpreted this as a cautious return to professional normality, while the Social Democrats increasingly regarded the Defence Act as being applied in name rather than in substance.

This holding pattern remained intact until the appointment of Josef Karl von Wächter in July 1921. Wächter's approach was modest, and he lacked the political authority to impose a new organisational model. His tenure would nevertheless reveal that the apparent calm of 1920 and early 1921 concealed unresolved tensions regarding the meaning of neutrality and the limits of political expression within the army.

2.1.3 General Josef Karl von Wächter and the First Attempt at depoliticisation (1921–22)

Former Habsburg officer and recipient of the Maria-Theresian-Orden,¹⁶⁶ Josef Karl von Wächter was appointed Minister for Army Affairs in July 1921 as a non-partisan figure whose selection reflected the non-aligned second Schober government's desire for stability rather than reform. A respected career officer of the old army, he represented professional continuity at a time when the political environment of the *Bundesheer* had been unsettled by the events of 1919 and 1920. Wächter did not arrive with a coherent programme. His task was to preserve order within an institution that still contained unresolved tensions between different political currents.

¹⁶⁶ One of the highest honours in the Habsburg military.

The most visible of Wächter's actions concerned political agitation inside the ranks. Small legitimist groups had continued to exist informally, often through veteran or social circles, and some of their activity began to attract public criticism. In response, Wächter issued an edict that attempted to define the limits of political behaviour for soldiers. It stated that any member of the army who belonged to or actively campaigned for '*alle Parteien, die nach ihrem Programm den Sturz der demokratischen Republik anstreben*', would be punished with dismissal.¹⁶⁷ The language was deliberately broad. In practice it was directed at monarchist circles, since their stance, at least in theory, conflicted most directly with the constitutional order. Wächter's intention was to assert a minimal principle of republican legality without turning the ministry into an instrument of overt partisan control.

A similar understanding of military neutrality appeared in later conservative commentary. During a parliamentary debate June 1923, the former army major, Friedrich Kollarz, who at that time was the chairman of the officers' union and ÖWZ editor, articulated a principle that reflected attitudes already present within the officer corps during Wächter's tenure. He argued that any soldier who wished to engage in overt monarchist activity should not do so in the army, but leave the service and practice their politics as a private citizen: '*ich bin der Meinung, wenn ich mich monarchistisch betätigen will, so habe ich dies in der Armee nicht zu tun, sondern gehe als Bürger meine eigenen Weg und vertrete meine monarchistische Gesinnung im bürgerlichen Leben.*'¹⁶⁸ Although expressed two years after Wächter's edict, the statement captures a view widely shared by many conservative officers that political identity was permissible only in private life and had no place in uniform. This stands in sharp contrast to Social Democratic interpretations, which regarded monarchist loyalties as incompatible with republican service while at the same time viewing communist activism as radical yet still oriented toward the preservation, and eventual transformation, of the Republic.

¹⁶⁷ 'all parties which, according to their programme, strive for the overthrow of the democratic republic' (*Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 10 February 1922).

¹⁶⁸ 'I am of the opinion that, if I were to engage in monarchist activity, I should not do so in the army. I should instead go my own way as a private citizen and express my monarchist convictions in civilian life.' (*Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 22 June 1923).

The *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* went further. It accused the ministry of ignoring the real subversive force within the army, namely the communists. In a strongly worded article titled 'Ein Kraftprobe' (A Test of Strength), the paper claimed:

*Die österreichischen Kommunisten, die von Moskau geleitet werden und auf den Sturz der demokratischen Republik mit unendlich drastischeren Mitteln hinarbeiten gewohnt sind wie die 'Schwarz-gelben Legitimisten', sind in der Wehrmacht unter den Augen des Ministeriums seit Jahren straff organisiert, haben ihre eigenen Soldatenräte und ihr Fachorgan, und betreiben ungestört ihre Propaganda.*¹⁶⁹

From this perspective, Wächter's edict failed not because it was too harsh, but because it targeted the least dangerous group while leaving the most dangerous undisturbed.

The same article interpreted the ministry's action against legitimist circles as a politically risk-free move taken along the direction of least resistance, signalling goodwill without addressing what conservative commentators regarded as the deeper constitutional problem of party politics within the army. At the root of this critique lay a rejection of Article 7 of the constitution, which was denounced as inherently state-endangering because it granted soldiers full political rights while simultaneously demanding loyalty to the democratic republic.¹⁷⁰ From this perspective, Wächter's intervention appeared as an improvised attempt to bypass a constitutional contradiction rather than a coherent programme of military reform.

The *Arbeiter-Zeitung* presented the opposite interpretation. From the Social Democratic perspective, legitimist networks represented an unambiguous challenge to the Republic, whereas communist activity, although objectionable, did not contradict the basic framework of democratic politics. As the paper put it, the communists did not seek the overthrow of the Republic but rather '*die Entwicklung der demokratischen Republik zur sozialen, also die Entwicklung der jetzt gegebenen Gesellschaftsordnung zu einer höheren.*'¹⁷¹ In other words, whatever their rhetoric, they were not advocating the abolition of the state but a change in its social orientation. This argument reflected the *Arbeiter-Zeitung's* long-standing suspicion

¹⁶⁹ 'The Austrian Communists, who are directed from Moscow and are accustomed to working for the overthrow of the democratic republic with far more drastic means than the 'black-yellow legitimists', have for years been tightly organised within the army under the eyes of the ministry. They have their own soldiers' representatives and their own specialised organ and carry on their propaganda without disturbance' (*Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 10 February 1922).

¹⁷⁰ *ÖWZ*, 10 February 1922

¹⁷¹ 'The development of the democratic republic into a social one, that is, the development of the present social order into a higher one.' (*Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 4 February 1922).

of the officer corps and its belief that monarchist nostalgia posed a greater institutional threat than radical agitation among enlisted men.

The immediate political context of this dispute was the death of the former Emperor Karl on 1 April 1922. His passing prompted public requiems and small legitimist demonstrations that, while numerically limited, gave monarchist sentiment a sudden symbolic visibility.¹⁷² Social Democratic commentators seized upon the fact that some serving officers attended these events to argue that legitimist agitation still permeated within sections of the officer corps.

Reporting on the *Kaiserrequiem* (requiem for the emperor) in Vienna which it denounced as a 'Mißbrauch einer Totenmesse für eine monarchistische Demonstration', the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* wrote:

*Nicht minder empörend war es, daß sich Offiziere unserer Wehrmacht in voller Adjustierung an der monarchistischen Kundgebung beteiligten. Diese Ehrenmänner hielten es mit ihrem auf die republikanische Staatsverfassung freiwillig abgelegten Eid für vereinbar, stramm salutierend, die Kaiserhymne zu singen!*¹⁷³

The episode created pressure on the ministry to respond and helps explain why Wächter felt compelled to take a public stance on monarchist activity at precisely this moment. In the *Nationalrat* session of 22 April 1922 Wächter declared that monarchist agitation within the *Bundesheer* was unacceptable and should be punished.¹⁷⁴ On the surface, this appeared to confirm the Social Democratic view that legitimism posed a genuine threat to the Republic. In practice, however, the gesture was politically risk-free. The legitimists were numerically marginal, lacked parliamentary leverage, and were not essential to the Christian Social–Greater German governing bloc. Criticising them cost the ministry nothing. At the same time, taking a public stance against monarchist activism offered a symbolic concession to the Social Democrats, who remained as strong electorally as the Christian Socials and whose exit from government had left the issue of the army's legitimacy unresolved. Wächter's statement thus

¹⁷² ÖWZ, 14 April 1922.

¹⁷³ 'Misuse of a requiem mass for a monarchist demonstration.'; 'No less outrageous was the fact that officers of our armed forces took part in the monarchist demonstration in full uniform. These gentlemen of honour evidently found it compatible with the oath they had voluntarily sworn to the republican constitution to sing the imperial anthem while standing at attention and saluting smartly!' (*Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 7 April 1922).

¹⁷⁴ Österreichischer Nationalrat, *Stenographisches Protokoll*, 104. Sitzung, 7. April 1922, 3441 (Bundesminister für Heereswesen Wächter).

revealed less about ideological alignment than about political calculation under conditions of fragmentation.

For the officer corps, Wächter's tenure was characterised by stability rather than direction. His presence reassured many officers because he did not revive the participatory experiments of 1919 and 1920. He also did not introduce reforms that would have challenged their authority. The disputes surrounding his edict showed, however, that internal neutrality remained contested. Officers could agree on the principle that political agitation should not appear in uniform, but they did not agree on what counted as a threat. To some, monarchist sentiment was harmless, to others it was a violation of oath-bound loyalty to the Republic. To some, communist organisation represented a direct challenge to the state. To others it was a familiar and containable expression of working-class politics.

Wächter's departure in May 1922, following a change of government and subsequent cabinet reshuffle, left little institutional legacy. He neither transformed the army nor weakened it. His interventions remained isolated and reactive. What his tenure revealed, however, was that the political equilibrium that had emerged in late 1920 was shallow. Any attempt to enforce neutrality exposed deeper disagreements about the identity of the *Bundesheer* and its place in the republican order. Such ambiguity made it easier for Wächter's successor, Carl Vaugoin, to impose a clearer and more assertive direction once he returned to the ministry in mid-1922.

2.2 Carl Vaugoin, Hierarchy, and Institutional Reorientation

The return of Carl Vaugoin to the Ministry for Army Affairs in mid-1922 marked a turning point in the political consolidation of the *Bundesheer*. Whereas Wächter's tenure had been defined by caution and tactical containment, Vaugoin entered office with a far stronger political mandate and a clearer conception of ministerial authority.¹⁷⁵ This section traces how his ministry reoriented the army's internal balance of power through the restoration of hierarchical command, the curtailment of participatory and union-based structures, and a redefinition of neutrality that aligned military order with conservative conceptions of the

¹⁷⁵ Vaugoin had already held the portfolio briefly during the unstable ministerial rotations of 1920, but this earlier tenure was too short and politically constrained to allow for any sustained institutional reorientation.

state. In doing so, it examines how the officer corps' authority was strengthened institutionally, even as civil–military tensions continued to play out in parliament and the press.

2.2.1 Carl Vaugoin and the Reassertion of Ministerial Authority

Carl Vaugoin's appointment as Minister for Army Affairs in mid-1922 marked a decisive break with the politically constrained cautiously technocratic management of the army that characterised General Wächter's tenure. Contemporary conservative commentary explicitly framed Wächter as a professionally competent but structurally weak figure. The *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* noted that while he possessed the experience of the specialist, he lacked the firm political backing available to a party politician, concluding pointedly that Vaugoin now entered the ministry as a politician determined to administer his office in '*unpolitischer Sachlichkeit* (unpolitical practicality).¹⁷⁶ This formulation already contained the central tension of the new phase: depoliticisation presented as neutrality but anchored in a consolidated conservative political mandate.

This ministerial shift occurred within a broader restructuring of power relations inside the *Bundesheer*. As Manfred Rauchensteiner has shown, the years after 1922 were defined by a personnel-political transformation that removed Social Democratic leverage at the administrative core of the army. The resignation of Julius Deutsch as state secretary, the parliamentary transition of Theodor Körner, and the consolidation of ministerial command under Vaugoin together produced what Rauchensteiner explicitly describes as a process of '*Entpolitisierung*', understood not as the removal of politics as such, but as the removal of one political current in favour of another.¹⁷⁷ The army was no longer a space of negotiated coexistence between socialist and conservative actors but was re-anchored institutionally within the Christian Social orbit.

From the perspective of political conflict, this realignment was anything but neutral. John W. Boyer characterises Vaugoin as 'a bitter and intemperate anti-Marxist', a formulation that reflects Boyer's assessment of Vaugoin's sustained efforts to weaken socialist influence within the republican army, especially after 1922, when the Social Democrats still retained

¹⁷⁶ 'ÖWZ, 16 June 1922.

¹⁷⁷ Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Unter Beobachtung: Österreich seit 1918* (2nd ed., Vienna, 2021), p. 84.

considerable standing among sections of the rank-and-file.¹⁷⁸ The subsequent formation of the Republican *Schutzbund* in 1924 cannot therefore be understood independently of Vaugoin's ministerial strategy. It represented a direct socialist response to their progressive exclusion from the state's coercive institutions rather than the sudden radicalisation of an otherwise passive movement.

Otto Naderer's analysis sharpens this dynamic further. What officially appeared as the depoliticisation of the *Bundesheer* after 1922 functioned in practice as a targeted '*Umpolitisierung*' (re-politicisation). The dismantling of soldiers' councils and military unions, the reactivation of k. u. k. professional traditions, and the elevation of the officer corps as the uncontested bearer of authority did not remove politics from the army. They reconfigured it along conservative lines and detached it from its brief post-revolutionary experiment in participatory control.¹⁷⁹ Neutrality thus became synonymous not with institutional balance, but with reliable insulation against socialist influence. This transformation was embedded within a wider reorganisation of conservative politics in the early 1920s. Robert Kriechbaumer has shown the Christian Social camp underwent a marked radicalisation after 1920, increasingly shaped by resentment toward 'Red Vienna', the legacy of the revolution of October/November 1918, and fears of socialist cultural and political hegemony.¹⁸⁰ Military policy became one of the arenas in which these revisionist impulses were translated into institutional practice.

Vaugoin's appointment therefore marked not simply a change of personnel but the stabilisation of a new governing logic. Military neutrality ceased to function as a fragile compromise negotiated between political camps. It was redefined as hierarchical discipline enforced through ministerial command. Authority was recentred upward, away from representative soldier structures and parliamentary mediation, and toward the ministry as the exclusive node through which military power was filtered. The *Bundesheer* was not removed from politics. It was structurally repositioned within a conservative state project.

¹⁷⁸ John W. Boyer, *Austria, 1867-1955* (New York, 2022), p. 697.

¹⁷⁹ Otto Naderer, *Der Bewaffnete Aufstand: Der Republikanische Schutzbund der österreichischen Sozialdemokratie und die militärische Vorbereitung auf den Bürgerkrieg (1923-1934)* (Graz, 2004), pp 51-2.

¹⁸⁰ Robert Kriechbaumer, 'Die Christlichsoziale Partei 1918 bis 1933/34', ed. Stefan Karner, *Die Umkämpfte Republik: Österreich von 1918-1938* (Innsbruck, 2017), 137-41.

2.2.2 The Reorientation of Officers' Authority

The reconstitution of officers' authority after 1922 was not simply a return to pre-war discipline, but a structural redefinition of how authority functioned within the republican military order. In analytical terms, this process bears a clear resemblance to what Samuel Huntington described as the logic of 'objective control', according to which 'objective civilian control of the military is achieved by professionalising the military and by making it politically neutral'.¹⁸¹ In this model, authority rests on technical competence, hierarchical command, and the insulation of the officer corps from overt political participation.

In formal terms, the *Bundesheer* moved decisively closer to this configuration after the suppression of participatory soldier politics. The dismantling of soldiers' councils, the tightening of disciplinary frameworks, and the reassertion of vertical chains of command systematically narrowed the space for explicit political activity within the army.¹⁸² Authority was now articulated primarily through legal command and professional competence rather than through any form of representative structures at troop level.

Yet Janowitz's analysis exposes the limits of this conception of neutrality. As he insists, 'partisan neutrality does not mean "above politics" to the point of being unpolitical'.¹⁸³ Even when formally excluded from party conflict, professional officers continue to exercise political influence through advisory authority, organisational expertise, and control over institutional knowledge. In the Austrian case, the depoliticisation of the *Bundesheer* after 1922 therefore did not eliminate political power from the officer corps. It displaced that power into less visible but more institutionally resilient forms rooted in expertise, administrative indispensability, and interpretative control over military reality.

This transformation was structured not only by institutional reform but by the durable professional dispositions of the officer corps itself. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of '*habitus*' precisely captures this continuity. As he defines it, 'history turned into nature, that is, denied as history is what constitutes habitus'.¹⁸⁴ The professional disposition of the late Habsburg officer shaped by hierarchy, legalism, discipline, and an ethos of apolitical state service, did

¹⁸¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA, 1957), 83.

¹⁸² Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten*, 93

¹⁸³ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier* (New York, 1960), 234.

¹⁸⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge, 1977), 78.

not dissolve with the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy. These dispositions continued to organise expectations of command, obedience, and authority under republican legality. The rejection of participatory soldier politics after 1922 was therefore not experienced as a rupture within the officer corps, but as a realignment of institutional practice with deeply internalised professional reflexes.

Authority in the *Bundesheer* thus rested simultaneously on formal legal command and on the symbolic capital embedded in this professional habitus. Officers did not merely wield authority by virtue of statute. They embodied it as a social relationship grounded in training, tradition, and collective self-understanding. This helps to explain both the speed with which hierarchical command was reconstituted once the political balance shifted and the limited resistance encountered from within the officer corps itself.

The consolidation of this authority was further reinforced through mechanisms of institutional lock-in. As Paul Pierson has noted, 'once established, patterns of public policy become increasingly difficult to reverse.'¹⁸⁵ The decisive defeats of participatory control between 1921 and 1923 did more than settle immediate political struggles inside the army. They generated self-reinforcing expectations about the legitimate location of authority within the military. Once reconstituted along strictly hierarchical lines, officer dominance benefited from cumulative feedback effects. Command prerogatives reaffirmed professional identity, which in turn legitimised further consolidation of authority. Alternative models of military governance rapidly lost not only political viability but cognitive plausibility.

The reorientation of officers' authority after 1922 therefore cannot be described either as a straightforward restoration of Habsburg militarism or as the successful establishment of politically neutral professional autonomy. It constituted a hybrid formation. Hierarchical command was reconstructed under republican legality. Professional identity was reaffirmed without being democratised. Political conflict was expelled from the visible structures of the army without being eradicated from the operations of authority itself. This unresolved structural tension created the conditions for a displacement rather than a disappearance of

¹⁸⁵ Paul Pierson, 'Increasing returns, path dependence, and the study of politics', *American Political Science Review*, xc, no. 2, (2000), 251.

politics. Once overt participation inside the army had been suppressed, political power re-emerged in procedural, expert, and advisory forms.

2.2.3 Authority, Law, and the Legalisation of Political Control

This displacement of politics into procedural and legal forms after 1922 was inseparable from a broader transformation in how authority operated within the *Bundesheer*. As overt political participation was excluded from the army, control was displaced into law, administration, and executive procedure. The consolidation of hierarchy therefore did not depoliticise the *Bundesheer* in any absolute sense. It altered the channels through which political influence was exercised.

Janowitz's analysis of modern civilian control illuminates this transformation with particular clarity. Civilian authority, he argues, operates not through the exclusion of the military from politics but through its embedding within an expanding administrative and executive apparatus.¹⁸⁶ Control is exercised through budgetary supervision, bureaucratic supervision, and privileged access to decision-makers rather than through parliamentary confrontation. In this configuration, the military is politically constrained in form but often decisive in implementation. This logic maps closely onto the Austrian experience of the mid-1920s, where the formal depoliticisation of the army coincided with the concentration of real authority within ministries and executive circuits.

Parliament remained a central arena of conflict over military affairs until the retirement of the Army Inspector, General Theodor Körner, in early 1924. Only after this defeat did the Social Democratic leadership effectively abandon sustained parliamentary confrontation over the *Bundesheer* and redirect its strategic focus toward extra-parliamentary forms of power, above all the Republican *Schutzbund*. As Deutsch warned in parliament, the curtailment of soldier participation and the tightening of disciplinary law did not strengthen democratic oversight.¹⁸⁷ Instead they relocated military decision-making beyond the reach of routine parliamentary intervention. Budgetary control became the primary remaining lever available to the legislature, yet even this was increasingly shaped by executive pre-negotiation. Parliamentary military politics did not disappear. It was procedurally thinned and institutionally marginalised.

¹⁸⁶ Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 350.

¹⁸⁷ Nationalrat, Stenographisches Protokoll, 191. Sitzung der Republik Österreich (7 June 1923).

At the centre of this transformation stood the consolidation of ministerial authority within the military administration. The reorganisation of command structures after 1922 was accompanied by a simultaneous compression of legal authority into the Ministry for Army Affairs itself. This process was driven above all through the ministry's legal bureau, under the ministry's senior civil servant Section Chief Dr Robert Hecht, whose sustained programme of legislative '*Novellierung*' (amendment) subjected the army's constitutional framework to an incremental transformation in line with ministerial priorities. The failed 1923 attempt by civilian austerity authorities to dissolve the Ministry of Army Affairs altogether revealed just how far the ministry had already become the institutional choke point of military power. Its preservation was defended not only by the professional officer corps but also against the Social Democratic opposition, precisely because further erosion would have meant a decisive weakening of Austria's remaining capacity for independent military organisation.¹⁸⁸

Hecht's role in this configuration is illustrative.¹⁸⁹ As a central figure in the reorganisation of military administration, he exemplified the transformation of political power into procedural competence. Authority was no longer asserted through public mobilisation or partisan alignment but through the mastery of legal frameworks, regulatory instruments, and bureaucratic processes. Control over the institutional mechanics of the army proved more durable than control over its ideological declarations. The *Bundesheer* was stabilised less by reconciliation of political visions than by the construction of a dense legal infrastructure that insulated decision-making from open contestation.

This procedural displacement of power altered the meaning of civilian control itself. Control no longer functioned primarily as democratic supervision exercised through a representative assembly but increasingly as executive management conducted through the ministries. As Janowitz observed, such configurations tend to strengthen executive authority at the expense of parliamentary oversight by embedding control within administrative and bureaucratic circuits.¹⁹⁰ The Austrian case conforms closely to this pattern. As Robert Kriechbaumer has shown for the Christian Socials after the collapse of the Grand Coalition in 1920, parliamentary government increasingly gave way executive brokerage, in which ministries, coalition

¹⁸⁸ Jedlicka, *Ein Heer im Schatten*, 62-3.

¹⁸⁹ Peter Huemer, *Sektionschef Robert Hecht und die Zerstörung der Demokratie in Österreich* (Vienna, 1975), 24-94.

¹⁹⁰ Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 361-9.

manoeuvring, and administrative leverage replaced stable legislative majorities.¹⁹¹ By the mid-1920s, the centre of gravity in military affairs had shifted decisively away from the legislature and into the executive sphere, prefiguring rather than contradicting the later authoritarian concentration of power after 1933.

At the same time, the legalisation of control did not neutralise the internal dynamics of the officer corps. Professional authority was now shielded from direct political challenge while remaining functionally indispensable to the state. This asymmetry generated a structural paradox. The army was formally subordinated within a dense legal framework. Yet its practical autonomy in matters of expertise, planning, and implementation expanded. Political conflict was not resolved, but rather it was rendered indirect. Officers no longer confronted politicians openly. They negotiated instead through procedures, regulations, and administrative routines.

The symbolic reconstruction of ministerial authority is captured with particular clarity in a 1931 hagiographic account of Vaugoin's tenure, which recast the procedural consolidation of control as a heroic struggle for national survival. Rejecting any notion of bureaucratic routine, the author insists: *'Das war keine Hofratsarbeit, das war kein geruhssames Abfassen von Erlässen, das ging auf Leben und Tod.'*¹⁹² Legal-administrative authority is here stripped of its procedural character and reimagined as existential combat. Vaugoin appears not as a minister of a parliamentary republic but as a solitary figure confronting the destructive forces allegedly embedded within the army and society itself, a *'Daniel in der Löwengrube'* (Daniel in the lions' den), required to *'Schritt für Schritt, aber unbeirrbar vorwärtsschreiten'*.¹⁹³ The consolidation of authority is thus displaced from law into moral courage, compressing legality, leadership, and salvation into a single heroic narrative. Such language reveals how fragile purely juridical authority still appeared even after depoliticization. Executive power required symbolic transfiguration to stabilise obedience. What had been achieved through law and procedure was retrospectively justified through myth, sacrifice, and personalised resolve.

This displacement had important consequences for the distribution of frustration within the military. Senior officers like Jansa, integrated into ministerial circuits and executive advisory

¹⁹¹ Kriechbaumer, 'Die Christlichsoziale Partei', 137-44.

¹⁹² 'This was no routine work of a civil servant, no calm drafting of decrees; this was a matter of life and death'; Sozius (Eli Rubin), *Carl Vaugoin: Aufstieg einer Armee* (Vienna, 1931), 40.

¹⁹³ 'Advance step by step, yet without wavering'; Sozius, *Aufstieg einer Armee*, 44.

structures, adjusted comparatively easily to the new order. Middle-ranking officers, by contrast, occupied a position in which depoliticization functioned primarily as exclusion.¹⁹⁴ Cut off from both participatory representation and real influence over policy, they confronted a widening gap between professional identity and political agency. This tension did not register immediately as organised opposition. It accumulated as a latent condition within the officer corps and the broader veteran milieu.

By the mid-1920s, the *Bundesheer* thus occupied a deeply ambiguous position within the First Republic. It was formally depoliticised, legally regulated, and administratively stabilised. Yet the political significance of military authority had not been diminished. It had been redistributed across legal, bureaucratic, and executive channels that lay increasingly beyond the reach of parliamentary supervision. The state had not removed the army from politics. It had merely changed the terrain on which politics operated.

This transformation also reshaped the public visibility of military authority. As open struggle within institutions receded, symbolic and cultural forms of conflict acquired heightened significance. Questions of tradition, honour, and the meaning of military sacrifice assumed a new political charge precisely because procedural channels now dominated formal decision-making. The displacement of politics into law and administration created the conditions under which ritual, commemoration, and street symbolism emerged as alternative arenas of political contestation.

2.3 The Körner Affair, Symbolic Conflict, and the Limits of Depoliticisation

By the early 1920s the *Bundesheer* had entered a phase in which the formal structures of republican control were largely consolidated, but their political meaning remained deeply contested. These tensions came to a head in 1923–24 in a series of conflicts that centred on General Theodor Körner, at that time serving as *Heeresinspektor* (army inspector). As the highest professional supervisory authority within the army, Körner occupied a position at the intersection of military expertise and political oversight. His intervention in debates over training, civic education, and the political orientation of the officer corps transformed what

¹⁹⁴ Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 268–9.

might otherwise have remained administrative disputes into a crisis over the meaning of republican authority within the armed forces.

2.3.1 The Körner Affair and the Crisis of Republican Military Authority

The conflict surrounding Colonel (later General on his retirement) Theodor Körner in 1923–24 did not erupt from a calm institutional field. Körner had been marked since late 1918 as a figure who violated the emotional and symbolic coordinates of the pre-1918 officer corps. His wartime reputation was widely respected, but his public rejection of Habsburg service conventions, his explicit Social Democratic affiliation, and his insistence that the future Austrian army had to be reshaped according to republican political values fixed him in hostile memory as a breaker of professional solidarity. The tensions that resurfaced around his role as army inspector in 1923 can only be understood against this background. By the time he re-entered the senior command structure, the mere fact of his authority activated a latent emotional rupture that survived long after the dissolution of the imperial army.

Körner's appearance before General Staff officers in November 1918, preserved in the recollections of Alfred Jansa, remained central to this antagonism. According to Jansa, Körner's sober assessment that only a small minority of officers would find employment in the post-imperial army was accepted with resignation. The break occurred instead when he allegedly dismissed imperial decorations as '*Kinkerlitzchen*' (trinkets), encouraged officers to align themselves politically with the Republic, and declared his own adherence to the Social Democratic Party.¹⁹⁵ What offended was not republican loyalty per se, which many accepted as unavoidable, but the perceived symbolic degradation of imperial service and the repudiation of the honour economy that had structured officer identity. Körner thus became, in conservative memory, the embodiment of the revolutionary affront to the old order, a man whose republicanism carried an implicit moral indictment of the officer corps as a whole. This background explains why his 1923–24 clash with Minister Carl Vaugoin escalated so rapidly into an institutional crisis. Körner occupied an anomalous position: he was an accomplished professional soldier who enjoyed the respect of many colleagues, yet he was also the only high-ranking former Habsburg generals to identify openly with Social Democracy. For Julius Deutsch, he was a crucial counterweight within the high command. For Vaugoin, he

¹⁹⁵ Alfred Jansa, *Ein österreichische General gegen Hitler*, ed. Peter Broucek (Vienna, 2011), 430.

represented the continued presence of Social Democratic influence in a sphere the Christian Socials now regarded as strategically essential to depoliticisation and conservative consolidation. The conflict was triggered by Vaugoin's decision in late 1923 to remove civic and political education from the *Bundesheer's* training regulations. Introduced under Deutsch and rooted in §25 of the *Wehrgesetz*, these provisions were designed to prepare long-service soldiers for civilian reintegration.¹⁹⁶ Vaugoin viewed them rather as a vehicle for socialist ideological penetration into the army.¹⁹⁷ Körner opposed the move sharply, insisting that soldiers required republican civic formation to ensure loyalty to the constitutional state rather than to pre-1918 professional norms. With his relationship with both Vaugoin and Hecht becoming increasingly untenable, Körner retired from the army in early 1924, earning a promotion to general in the process.¹⁹⁸

Körner's response was his *Denkschrift über das Heereswesen der Republik*.¹⁹⁹ This was read aloud by Deutsch in the Army Committee of the *Nationalrat* on 22 January 1924 and later published by the Social Democrat soldiers' newspaper '*Der Freie Soldat*'.²⁰⁰ The memorandum was not merely a technical critique but a political intervention that challenged the self-understanding of the officer corps. Körner's diagnosis of the *Bundesheer's* material deficits, chronic understaffing, obsolete equipment, inadequate border security, found broad acceptance, including within the conservative officer press. The *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* treated these assessments as painful but incontrovertible, urging officers, '*mit Überwindung einer verständlichen Abneigung*', to support the first part of the memorandum because it confronted the decisive questions of national defence.²⁰¹

It was the second part of the *Denkschrift* that provoked resistance. Here Körner argued that many officers continued to exhibit monarchist sentiments, cultivated a closed caste mentality, and clung to the symbolic markers of imperial service. He criticised pre-war barracks culture, lingering deference to dynastic memory, and the reproduction of monarchical professional

¹⁹⁶ Lelewer (ed.), *Das Wehrgesetz*, §25, 20–21.

¹⁹⁷ *Der Tag (Abendblatt)*, 5 February 1924.

¹⁹⁸ Martin Kitchen, 'Paramilitarism and Social Democracy: Theodor Körner and the Schutzbund', *Germany in the age of total war*, ed. Volker R. Berghahn and Martin Kitchen (London, 1981), 71.

¹⁹⁹ Theodor Körner, *Denkschrift über das Heerwesen der Republik* (2nd ed., Vienna, 1924).

²⁰⁰ *Der Tag (Abendblatt)*, 5 February 1924.

²⁰¹ 'even if it requires overcoming an understandable aversion'; 'the military question now decisively put on the agenda'. *Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 1 February 1924.

ethos within a republican army. He referred to the 'old Austrian' officer corps (of which he had once been part) as a '*monarchistisches Machtinstrument zur Beherrschung des Volkes*' and accused officers of being '*Volksfremd*' (isolated from the people).²⁰² These claims struck at the heart of the officer corps' emerging corporate defence of its historical identity. The rebuttal in a statement by the *Reichsverbandes der Offiziere* (Imperial Association of Officers) made the boundary clear: while Körner's technical analysis was affirmed as '*voll und ganz auf Richtigkeit beruhend*', his political critique was rejected as partisan, unjust, and harmful to cohesion.²⁰³ Officers, the statement insisted, had never been a caste, had always been socially open, and needed no instruction from Social Democrats on how '*Führer und Geführte den Weg zueinander finden*'.²⁰⁴

This rhetorical manoeuvre, endorsing Körner the expert while isolating Körner the political critic, served an important corporate purpose. It preserved the legitimacy of professional authority and wartime *Kamaradschaft* while quarantining republican political claims as illegitimate intrusions into military autonomy. The officer corps signalled that it would tolerate criticism of organisation and matériel, but not criticism of its own social identity, honour codes or political dispositions. This is the key analytical point: the Körner affair exposed the line officers drew between technical accountability and civic accountability. Once critique spilled into the latter, it became unacceptable.

Körner's removal eliminated the last significant Social Democratic presence at senior command level. Although not an ideological purge in the strict sense, it amounted to the neutralisation of a figure whose very presence challenged the conservative vision of a depoliticised yet socially homogeneous officer corps. Vaugoin's authority was strengthened, the rollback of Social Democratic reforms accelerated, and the *Bundesheer's* symbolic orientation shifted increasingly toward a conservative synthesis of professional autonomy and selective republican loyalty.

The Körner affair thus marks the moment when the political boundaries of republican officership were effectively fixed. Körner demonstrated the limit of acceptable political identity within the *Bundesheer*: republican loyalty was tolerable, Social Democratic affiliation

²⁰² 'monarchist instrument of power for the domination of the people'. (Körner, *Denkschrift*, 28).

²⁰³ 'wholly and entirely correct'. (*Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 1 February 1924).

²⁰⁴ 'Leaders and the led find their way to one another.' (*Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 1 February 1924).

was not. The army could accommodate professional diversity, but not ideological pluralism. In this sense, Körner's defeat was not a personal humiliation but an institutional verdict, a judgment on what forms of political presence the army would allow within its ranks.

2.3.2 Parliamentary and Press Narratives, 1923: The 'Sausage Debate' and the Politics of Religious Mobilisation

The reorientation of military authority under Vaugoin unfolded not only within the structures of the ministry and officer hierarchy, but also through highly charged parliamentary and press controversies. Nowhere was this more visible than in the *Nationalrat* debates of June 1923, held during deliberations on the army budget. These debates reveal how seemingly mundane questions of conduct, ritual, and provision became proxies for deeper conflicts over the political meaning of the *Bundesheer*.

Social Democratic deputies framed the condition of the army as one of uncontrolled officer dominance and failing discipline. Julius Deutsch, speaking as former state secretary for military affairs, accused a clique of officers of operating beyond ministerial oversight. He pointed to numerous disciplinary cases in which enlisted men were punished harshly while officers escaped sanction. In one incident, a major dismissed a Social Democratic soldiers' newspaper, *Der Freie Soldat*, as a '*Schundblatt*' (rag). When an enlisted man objected, the soldier was dismissed while the officer went unpunished.²⁰⁵ For Deutsch, this confirmed that sections of the officer corps remained, in his words, '*vollgesogen mit den Vorstellungen der alten Zeit*' and were incapable of adjusting to republican conditions.²⁰⁶ In this reading, imperial habits of authority had survived untouched within the *Bundesheer*.

The debate then shifted from discipline to tradition, religion and public ritual. The most explosive issue concerned the participation of soldiers in Corpus Christi processions (*Fronleichnamsprozessionen*). Social Democratic deputies argued that the presence of on-duty *Bundesheer* troops at these processions constituted a direct violation of the *Wehrgesetz*, which prohibited soldiers from participating in political demonstrations. The Christian Social deputy Anton Jerzabek rejected this interpretation by appealing to imperial precedent:

²⁰⁵ Österreichischer Nationalrat, *Stenographisches Protokoll*, 191. Sitzung, 7. June 1923, 5777 (Abg. Deutsch).

²⁰⁶ 'saturated with the assumptions of the old era', (Österreichischer Nationalrat, *Stenographisches Protokoll*, 191. Sitzung, 7. June 1923, 5777 (Abg. Deutsch)).

*[I]m alten Heer jede politische Betätigung auch geringster Art strenge gehandelt und verboten hat. Aber nichtsdestoweniger war es im alten Heer nicht nur den Offizieren, sondern auch der Mannschaft erlaubt, jederzeit in Uniform bei solchen Anlässen an Umzügen, auch bei Katholikentagen oder Fronleichnamsfeiern, teilzunehmen, ohne dass sie deshalb irgendeiner Verwarnung oder Bestrafung hätten, gewärtig sein müssen.*²⁰⁷

For Jerzabek and other conservative speakers, the permissibility of such participation under the strictly 'apolitical' imperial army proved that religious processions could not be classified as political. Here, the old army functioned not as a rejected past but as a normative benchmark for the present *Bundesheer*.

It was in this context that the so-called '*Würsteldebatte*' (sausage debate) emerged.²⁰⁸ The Social Democrats accused Christian Social networks of bribing rank-and-file soldiers with food and drink, notably sausages and beer, in order to induce them to participate in the Corpus Christi processions. From the Social Democratic perspective, this transformed a supposedly religious occasion into an organised political mobilisation in uniform and thus into a clear breach of the *Wehrgesetz*. The soldiers involved were mocked publicly as '*Würstelsoldaten*' (sausage soldiers), a term popularised by the press after jeering crowds confronted returning troops in working-class districts such as Ottakring.²⁰⁹

Christian Social deputies denied any organised coercion or bribery and countered that soldiers had participated freely out of religious conviction. When violence threatened to erupt during street confrontations, Christian Social speakers accused the Social Democrats of having pre-organised provocations. The Social Democratic deputy Albert Sever rejected these claims and instead argued that Corpus Christi processions had been transformed by the Christian Socials into demonstrations of '*Macht an der Straße*' using the army as a symbol of said power.²¹⁰ To rebut the claim that participation reflected purely Catholic devotion, he noted pointedly that:

²⁰⁷ 'In the old army every form of political activity, even of the slightest kind, was strictly prosecuted and forbidden. Nevertheless, in the old army not only officers but also enlisted men were at all times permitted to take part in processions in uniform on such occasions, including at Catholic Days or Corpus Christi celebrations, without having to expect any warning or punishment as a result.' (Österreichischer Nationalrat, *Stenographisches Protokoll*, 191. Sitzung, 7. June 1923, 5781 (Abg. Jerzabek)).

²⁰⁸ *Illustrierte Kronen-Zeitung*, 8 June 1923.

²⁰⁹ *Illustrierte Kronen-Zeitung*, 8 June 1923.

²¹⁰ 'Power on the street.' Österreichischer Nationalrat, *Stenographisches Protokoll*, 191. Sitzung, 7. June 1923, 5781 (Abg. Sever).

*‘in Meidling ein Jude und ein Evangelist mitgegangen sind. [...] Wohl auch, um ihre religiösen Gefühle voll und ganz bei der christlich-sozialen Prozession zum Ausdruck zu bringen.’*²¹¹

What made the sausage debate so politically revealing was not the material inducement itself, but the radically opposed definitions of what counted as ‘political.’ For the Social Democrats, the public mobilisation of soldiers in a confessional procession was inseparable from party politics and thus incompatible with republican neutrality. For the Christian Socials, religious ritual belonged to the realm of tradition and communal culture rather than partisan struggle, and its sanction under the imperial army was invoked precisely to demonstrate its non-political character. Both sides defended ‘neutrality’, but they defined it through wholly incompatible registers.

These controversies also exposed how imperial memory structured the political imagination of the early *Bundesheer*. For conservative speakers, the old army’s practices legitimised contemporary ritual participation. For Social Democrats, the persistence of these same practices confirmed that the officer corps had never fully broken with its monarchical social world. The army’s visibility in Catholic processions thus became a surrogate battlefield for unresolved conflicts over the legacy of the Habsburg state.

In this sense, the parliamentary fights over sausages and processions were not trivial sideshows but crystallisations of the deeper struggle over the *Bundesheer*’s symbolic place in the Republic. The attempt to depoliticise the army through the reassertion of hierarchy did not remove it from political contestation. It displaced that contest into the realm of ritual, visibility and everyday performance. The *Bundesheer* emerged from these debates more administratively stabilised, but also more deeply embedded in Austria’s confessional and ideological fault lines. This tension would define the practical limits of ‘depoliticisation’ in the years that followed.

2.3.3 ‘Tradition’ as a Conservative Instrument of Military Legitimation

By early 1924, the language of political neutrality had become increasingly inadequate as a means of legitimising authority within the *Bundesheer*. The removal of Theodor Körner had

²¹¹ ‘In Meidling [a district of Vienna], a Jew and a Protestant even took part. [...] No doubt also in order to give full expression to their religious feelings within the Christian Social procession.’ (Österreichischer Nationalrat, *Stenographisches Protokoll*, 191. Sitzung, 7. June 1923, 5781 (Abg. Sever)).

resolved the immediate institutional confrontation, but it did not eliminate the deeper problem of how a republican army, staffed overwhelmingly by former imperial officers, was to be symbolically grounded within the new state. In this context, 'tradition' emerged as a substitute vocabulary through which conservative actors could articulate continuity, cohesion, and moral authority without resorting to explicit dynastic or partisan claims. Far from being politically neutral, this discourse functioned as a conservative instrument for re-establishing professional identity and delimiting the boundaries of acceptable republican loyalty.

Disputes over tradition were not abstract. They centred on visible practices that had survived the collapse of the monarchy, including the continued wearing of imperial decorations, the carrying of sidearms and duelling sabres, and the persistence of pre-war ceremonial forms. Körner himself had criticised these practices as outward signs of an unresolved imperial habitus, arguing that they conflicted with the ethos of a republican army.²¹² His objections, however, represented only one pole in a broader struggle over the symbolic boundaries of military legitimacy, a struggle that extended well beyond his person.

Conservative responses sought to reframe such practices as expressions of professional continuity rather than political allegiance. This strategy was articulated most clearly through the language of 'tradition'. Writing in a special edition of the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* marking the reunion of veterans of the Edelweiß Corps (the 1st k. u. k. Army Corps) in Salzburg in May 1923, Minister Carl Vaugoin argued that the value of tradition lay not in reverent admiration of past heroes, but in drawing from them '*den Willen zu schöpfen, hinter dem Opfermüte der von uns verehrten Helden nicht zurückzustehen*'.²¹³ Imperial military memory was thus detached from its dynastic framework and repurposed as a source of discipline, sacrifice, and morale within the republican army. Vaugoin's formulation was careful and revealing. Tradition, he argued, could strengthen morale and instil professional seriousness, but it could not stand alone as the foundation of the new army. The minister opined that '*die neue Zeit fordert aber auch neue Impulse, die den Soldaten der Republik diese ebenso hingebungsvoll verteidigen lassen, wie der alte Soldat den alten Staat verteidigt hat*'.²¹⁴ Behind

²¹² Körner, *Denkschrift*, 10.

²¹³ '[...] the irresistible will not to fall short of the spirit of sacrifice of the heroes we honour.' (*Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 18 May 1923).

²¹⁴ 'But the new age also demands new impulses that allow the soldier of the republic to defend it just as devotedly as the old soldier defended the old state.' (*Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 18 May 1923).

the soldier, however, there had to stand a people who genuinely willed the state they had been compelled to form and who were prepared to defend it with equal commitment. This rhetoric performed a dual function. On the one hand, it acknowledged the formal legitimacy of the Republic and the necessity of constitutional loyalty. On the other, it located the emotional core of military identity firmly within inherited professional values rather than democratic political culture.

This rhetorical move was echoed by representatives of the officer corps. Major Gustav Wayer-Stromwell, chairman of the *Reichsverband der Offiziere*, rejected Social Democratic accusations of monarchism by asserting that '[k]ein Offizierskorps der ganzen Welt war demokratischer als das altösterreichische'. Access to advancement, he claimed, had depended neither on birth nor privilege and the corps had never been *Volksfremd*. According to Wayer-Stromwell, in the old army 'Es wurde nie gefragt: Stand deine Wiege in einem Palast oder in einer Hütte?'²¹⁵ Such assertions provoked sharp counterreactions on the left. The *Arbeiter-Zeitung* mocked this idealised portrait of imperial military culture in a widely circulated cartoon entitled 'Das demokratischste Offizierkorps', juxtaposing claims of social openness with scenes of officer cruelty, coercion, and hierarchy.²¹⁶ Competing interpretations of the imperial past thus crystallised around the same symbolic repertoire, revealing the extent to which tradition had become a contested political language.

These conflicts came to a head in struggles over public commemoration. While the Edelweiß reunion in Salzburg in 1923 proceeded with ministerial and ecclesiastical support, a planned follow-up event in the Upper Austrian city of Linz in June 1924 exposed the limits of conservative symbolic consolidation. Linz, a Social Democratic stronghold, became the site of a direct confrontation between municipal authorities and conservative organisers over the legitimacy of large-scale veterans' ceremonies. Social Democratic objections focused not only on the monarchist overtones of the event, but also on the anticipated participation of German nationalist veterans' groups, which the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* characterised polemically as 'Stoßtruppen' (shock troops) and 'Hakenkreuzlerdesperados' (swastika desperados).²¹⁷ In Social Democratic reporting, the planned reunion was framed as a 'groß angelegte

²¹⁵ 'It was never asked: was your cradle in a palace or in a hut?' (*Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 1 February 1924).

²¹⁶ 'The most democratic officer corps.' *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 5 February 1924.

²¹⁷ *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 11 June 1924.

monarchistische Propagandaveranstaltung’ conducted ‘*unter dem Deckmantel von Kameradschaft und Wohltätigkeit*’ with uniforms, weapons, field masses, and parades presented as symbols of a reactionary militarism incompatible with republican legitimacy.²¹⁸ When organisers refused demands to include war widows, orphans, and disabled veterans in the programme, the Social Democratic mayor banned public processions. Although the Christian Social provincial governor temporarily overturned the ban, the event ultimately collapsed amid threats of strike action by transport workers.²¹⁹ The episode demonstrated that tradition was not a neutral inheritance, but a politically charged practice that could still provoke resistance.

What mattered in these interventions was not how historically accurate the portrayals of the war and the empire were, but rather their political effect. Conservative actors redefined imperial military culture as democratic, meritocratic, and nationally inclusive, thereby transforming tradition into a legitimising narrative compatible with republican legality. Social Democratic counter-portrayals, which emphasised coercion, hierarchy, and the abuse of ritual for political mobilisation, were dismissed as partisan distortion. This asymmetry allowed conservatives to reject accusations of reactionary intent while simultaneously preserving the social and symbolic foundations of pre-1918 officer identity. Tradition thus became a means of defending corporate autonomy against external political scrutiny, particularly from the left, while avoiding explicit identification with monarchism.

By the mid-1920s, this reconfiguration of tradition had become a stabilising element of conservative military politics. It offered a language through which the army could present itself as loyal to the Republic while remaining insulated from democratic contestation. At the same time, it provided political actors such as Vaugoin with a means of consolidating authority after the Körner affair without provoking overt ideological confrontation. Tradition did not resolve the tension between imperial memory and republican legitimacy, but it rendered that tension manageable by recasting it as a matter of professional continuity rather than political allegiance. In this sense, tradition functioned less as a residue of the past than as an active instrument in the present. It allowed conservative elites to shape the moral economy of the

²¹⁸ ‘large-scale monarchist propaganda event’; ‘under the cover of comradeship and charitable activity’ (*Arbeiter Zeitung*, 11 June 1924).

²¹⁹ *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 11 June 1924.

Bundesheer in ways that preserved inherited hierarchies and solidarities, while formally accommodating the republican state. The success of this strategy helps explain why debates over neutrality increasingly revolved around symbols, rituals, and commemorative practices rather than explicit political programmes. By the end of the period covered in this chapter, tradition had become one of the central idioms through which military loyalty was articulated, contested, and ultimately stabilised within the First Republic.

Conclusion

The transformation of the Austrian military between 1920 and 1924 was neither a simple institutional transition nor a straightforward process of republican consolidation. It was a contested reordering of authority in which legal frameworks, parliamentary ambitions, professional cultures, and symbolic politics intersected in unstable ways. The creation of the *Bundesheer* stabilised the military in constitutional form, but it did not resolve the deeper conflict between democratic supervision and the inherited structures of an imperial officer corps. Instead, it translated that conflict into new institutional and cultural registers. The early Social Democratic attempt to embed civic education, political accountability, and parliamentary oversight within the military apparatus rested on the assumption that the army could be integrated into the republican order through law and institutional design. That assumption proved increasingly fragile. Fiscal austerity, coalition politics, and the administrative reliance of the state on the professional competence of ex-Habsburg officers all constrained the scope of meaningful reform. By the early 1920s, the language of military neutrality had begun to shift away from subordination to democratic authority toward the insulation of the officer corps from partisan intervention.

The crisis surrounding Theodor Körner made these tensions starkly visible. As army inspector and open Social Democrat, Körner embodied the unresolved contradiction between professional expertise and republican political loyalty. His removal from the command structure did not signal the disappearance of political conflict within the *Bundesheer*. It signalled its displacement. Parliamentary challenges were increasingly neutralised through proceduralism, corporate solidarity, and ministerial control, while symbolic disputes over ritual, tradition, and conduct became key sites in which political boundaries were drawn and enforced. The controversies over religious practice, humour, and tradition revealed that neutrality had ceased to operate primarily as a legal category and had instead become a

performative one. Out of these conflicts emerged a *Bundesheer* that was formally loyal to the Republic but increasingly insulated from direct parliamentary intervention. Imperial military traditions were not eradicated but reassembled as depoliticised heritage compatible with republican sovereignty. The officer corps retained its corporate cohesion and professional self-conception, while the participatory ambitions inherited from the *Volkswehr* period steadily receded. Depoliticisation thus did not remove politics from military life. It reorganised it in ways that privileged professional authority, executive discretion, and symbolic conformity over democratic contestation.

The developments traced in this chapter therefore mark a decisive moment in the reconfiguration of civil–military relations in the First Republic. By 1924, the struggle over the political character of the *Bundesheer* had not been resolved in favour of republican participation, but redirected into a conservative framework of neutrality, tradition, and professional autonomy. The implications of that shift would extend far beyond the early 1920s, shaping the political role of the officer corps in the increasingly unstable republic that followed.

Chapter Three: The *Bundesheer* in a Time of Crisis: Neutrality, Loyalty, and the Use of Force, 1927–34.

Introduction

This chapter examines the final decade of the First Republic, from the escalation of political violence after 1927 to the collapse of Austrian independence in 1938, focusing on the evolving relationship between the *Bundesheer*, the executive, and competing claims to political authority. It argues that the decisive transformation of the Austrian military during these years lay not in ideological radicalisation or overt politicisation, but in the consolidation of a particular understanding of neutrality. Increasingly, neutrality came to signify procedural obedience, executive loyalty, and institutional self-preservation, rather than subordination to parliamentary sovereignty or democratic guardianship. Neutrality, as used here, does not denote impartiality between competing constitutional orders or indifference to regime outcomes, but a professional stance that limited military responsibility to legality, hierarchy, and obedience to constituted authority.

The late 1920s marked a turning point in the political environment in which the *Bundesheer* operated. Paramilitary violence ceased to be episodic and became a structural feature of Austrian public life. The proliferation of armed organisations, the erosion of mutual political restraint, and the growing willingness of parties to mobilise force outside constitutional channels placed unprecedented strain on the republican state. In this context, the army did not emerge as a neutral arbiter or stabilising guardian of parliamentary order. Instead, it increasingly defined its role in negative terms, as an institution that sought to remain above partisan conflict while intervening only when state authority appeared directly threatened.

This posture reflected both institutional inheritance and deliberate policy. Imperial traditions of hierarchy, discipline, and separation from civilian politics continued to shape the professional self-understanding of the officer corps. At the same time, political leaders, particularly from the mid-1920s onwards, actively pursued strategies of depoliticisation that narrowed the army's relationship to representative institutions. Parliamentary oversight, soldiers' representation, and civic education were progressively marginalised in favour of

ministerial control and executive authority. Neutrality, once associated with democratic subordination, was recast as insulation from political contestation.

The consequences of this redefinition became increasingly visible as the republican order destabilised. The army's reluctance to intervene symmetrically in conflicts involving right-wing paramilitarism, its preference for legality understood in formal rather than substantive terms, and its orientation towards administrative continuity all contributed to an asymmetrical understanding of order. Parliamentary legitimacy depended on cooperation, procedural norms, and political restraint. Executive authority, by contrast, could be maintained through control of the coercive apparatus and the appearance of legal continuity. The *Bundesheer* was structurally aligned with the latter.

The parliamentary crisis of March 1933 exposed this alignment with particular clarity. The suspension of parliamentary government did not confront the army with an unmistakable constitutional rupture or a competing source of sovereign authority. Instead, it presented an executive that claimed continuity, legality, and administrative competence in the face of procedural dysfunction. The absence of military resistance was not accidental or merely passive. It reflected a professional culture in which political judgement had been systematically excluded from the remit of military responsibility. Neutrality had come to mean obedience to constituted authority rather than defence of a particular political order.

The full implications of this orientation were revealed in February 1934. The brief civil war forced the *Bundesheer* into direct combat against an organised domestic political movement for the first time since the foundation of the Republic. The army's conduct during the fighting, including the deployment of heavy weaponry in urban settings, demonstrated how a depoliticised military culture enabled decisive action without internal fragmentation. Officers acted as executors of executive authority rather than as ideological agents, crossing a critical threshold in the use of force while preserving institutional cohesion and professional discipline.

Yet the events of February did not resolve the crisis of the Austrian state. The subsequent challenge posed by National Socialism revealed the limits of procedural loyalty as a foundation for political reliability. Unlike the Social Democratic movement, National Socialism operated as an illegal, conspiratorial force supported by external power and capable of exploiting

personal and professional networks within the military milieu. The July Putsch of 1934 exposed these vulnerabilities, confronting the regime with the reality that an army trained to obey rather than to judge could remain disciplined while still harbouring divergent political loyalties beneath the surface.

By the mid-1930s, the *Bundesheer* stood as a disciplined, intact, and formally neutral institution whose loyalty was directed towards executive authority rather than parliamentary legitimacy. This configuration ensured short-term stability and enabled the authoritarian state to consolidate power. At the same time, it detached the army from the constitutional foundations of the Republic and limited its capacity to respond to competing claims of authority framed in legal form. The chapter that follows traces how this conception of neutrality shaped the army's conduct in moments of crisis, revealing both its effectiveness and its inherent fragility on the eve of the *Anschluss*.

3.1 Paramilitary Violence and Asymmetric Neutrality, 1927–31

The resurgence of paramilitary violence in the late 1920s did not transform the political orientation of the *Bundesheer*, nor did it radicalise an otherwise neutral institution. Rather, it exposed the practical consequences of the depoliticised military culture that had been consolidated earlier in the decade. As confrontations between the *Schutzbund*, the Social Democratic workers' militia, and the *Heimwehr*, a loose federation of right-wing paramilitary formations, escalated, the army was repeatedly required to define how neutrality would be enacted under conditions of internal disorder. Its responses revealed a consistent pattern: the avoidance of direct political arbitration, a preference for executive and police solutions, and an increasing tolerance of right-wing paramilitary mobilisation as a problem external to the military sphere. Paramilitary violence thus functioned less as a cause of authoritarian realignment than as a stress test of the army's institutional self-understanding. It demonstrated that neutrality had come to mean procedural restraint and obedience to constituted authority rather than symmetrical enforcement or democratic guardianship. In this way, the violence of the late 1920s did not politicise the *Bundesheer* anew but clarified the limits of its republicanisation and prepared the ground for its later deployment as an instrument of authoritarian order.

3.1.1 Neutrality under Pressure: The Return of Political Violence

The structural conditions for this response had been established well before violence returned to the streets. By the mid-1920s, the *Bundesheer* had been effectively insulated from parliamentary contestation and socialist mobilisation. The rollback of soldiers' representation, the narrowing of acceptable political identities within the ranks, and the reassertion of ministerial control under Vaugoin had produced an army that understood neutrality primarily as distance from party politics. This distance, however, did not imply political symmetry. It rested on a conception of order in which mass mobilisation, class-based organisation, and street politics were regarded as inherently destabilising, while conservative associations and nationalist veterans' formations appeared as misguided but familiar expressions of social discipline.

In the Burgenland town of Schattendorf on 30 January 1927, a minor confrontation between members of the Social Democratic *Schutzbund* and the right-wing *Frontkämpferverein* escalated into lethal violence.²²⁰ As a column of *Schutzbund* members passed a local inn, two *Frontkämpfer* opened fire, killing two bystanders, a disabled war veteran and a child. The perpetrators were arrested and brought to trial in Vienna. Their acquittal by a jury court in July 1927 provoked widespread outrage, culminating in mass demonstrations in the capital. During the ensuing unrest, protesters set fire to the Palace of Justice and clashed violently with the police. Vienna's Social Democratic mayor, Karl Seitz, refused to request the deployment of the *Bundesheer*. At the ministerial level, tensions emerged between Carl Vaugoin and Viennese Police President Johannes Schober over the arming of police with military equipment, with Schober ultimately succeeding in acquiring army carbines for use by police units.²²¹ Responsibility for restoring order thus remained with the now well-armed Viennese police force. Over the course of two days, eighty-five demonstrators and four policemen were killed.²²²

The delayed and limited deployment of the *Bundesheer* during the July 1927 unrest further illuminates the army's self-understanding in moments of internal crisis. Only after prolonged

²²⁰ The *Frontkämpfervereinigung* (Front Fighters' Association), was a right-wing Austrian veterans' organisation formed in 1919. Its membership consisted primarily of veterans of the Great War, including a significant number of former officers.

²²¹ Gerhard Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik* (Munich, 1976), 150.

²²² Boyer, *Austria*, 685.

violence and the intervention of Chancellor Seipel were troops deployed in Vienna, where they occupied symbolically significant sites including the Hofburg, the Arsenal, and the stock exchange. A small detachment was also dispatched to the Palace of Justice to assist fire crews and restore order.²²³ The officers' press retrospectively framed this intervention as decisive but restrained. The *Wehrzeitung* claimed that: '*Jedesmal, wenn die Truppen erschienen, trat sofort Ruhe ein. Die Menge vermied jede Berührung mit dem Militär*' and that it was '*Dank dieser starken moralischen Wirkung war es nicht notwendig, Waffen zu gebrauchen.*' These claims emphasised the army's moral authority and discipline rather than coercive force.²²⁴

Ministerial responses reinforced this interpretation. In a public statement following the events, Vaugoin praised the conduct of the Vienna garrison, asserting that the *Bundesheer* had justified the confidence placed in it through its '*entschlossenes und zielbewusstes Auftreten.*'²²⁵ The contrast with the paper's muted treatment of the Schattendorf shootings earlier that year is striking. Whereas right-wing paramilitary violence was minimised and reframed, the army's belated intervention in July was elevated as a lesson in order and authority. As Botz has suggested, the government's hesitation to deploy the army earlier may also have reflected lingering doubts about the political reliability of Viennese units, shaped by the legacy of Social Democratic influence within the garrison.²²⁶ The episode thus reinforced a conception of military authority rooted in symbolic presence and executive trust, while leaving the practical burden of repression to the police.

The asymmetrical character of military neutrality was also reflected in the way political violence was interpreted within the officer milieu. While the shootings at Schattendorf dominated the front pages of the national press, the sole discussion of the Schattendorf killings in the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* appeared not as front-page news but as a short article buried on page five of the paper's 4 February edition, framed through irony, moral equivalence, and the displacement of responsibility. Rather than reconstructing events, the article functioned as an exercise in narrative containment. Under the heading '*Die Bluttat in Burgenland*' (The bloody deed in Burgenland), the article described the victims as having been

²²³ *Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 22 July 1927.

²²⁴ 'Each time the troops appeared, calm immediately set in. The crowd avoided any confrontation with the military.'; 'Thanks to this strong moral effect, it was not necessary to use weapons.' *Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 22 July 1927.

²²⁵ 'resolute and purposeful conduct', *Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 22 July 1927.

²²⁶ Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik*, 135.

killed ‘*bei einem Kampfe zwischen Frontkämpfern und republikanischen Schutzbündlern*’, a formulation that deliberately suggested reciprocal violence and obscured the asymmetry between armed perpetrators and civilian bystanders.²²⁷ Responsibility was thereby diffused at the level of language before any factual assessment was offered.

This rhetorical strategy was reinforced through a combination of sarcasm and moral inversion. The *Schutzbund* was caricatured as a vast, quasi-military organisation under the leadership of ‘*eines erfahrenen Generalstäblers*’ (Körner), whose members were mockingly portrayed as innocent of the very existence of weapons, even as they were accused of provoking confrontation.²²⁸ Although the article referred to the *Frontkämpfer* and related groups as ‘*verruchte Organisationen*’ (unscrupulous organisations), this gesture of moral condemnation was immediately undercut by expressions of sympathy for the shooters and by the redirection of political blame toward the *Schutzbund* and its unnamed ‘*Drahtzieher*’ (puppet masters), who were accused of behaviour ‘*jedem Staatsbürgerrecht hohnsprechend*’.²²⁹ Individual culpability was formally acknowledged, yet collective responsibility was reassigned to the left. The effect was not to deny violence, but to reframe it as the inevitable outcome of Social Democratic mass politics rather than as an act of right-wing aggression. In contrast, right-wing paramilitary organisations were portrayed as one among many dangerous but reactive forces operating in an atmosphere of general disorder.

What is significant here is not the factual accuracy of the report, but its interpretive logic. By recoding a one-sided act of lethal violence as a mutual confrontation, the officers’ press reproduced a language of false equivalence that aligned closely with the *Bundesheer*’s institutional posture of abstention. Political violence was framed as the product of partisan excess rather than as a challenge to state authority requiring military judgement. This mode of interpretation allowed the army to maintain its distance from direct intervention while tacitly reinforcing an asymmetrical understanding of disorder in which left-wing mobilisation appeared as the primary source of instability.

For the officer corps, the July events did not present a clear-cut case of insurrection against the state. Rather, they appeared as an eruption of social disorder rooted in partisan conflict

²²⁷ ‘in a clash between Frontkämpfer and Republican Schutzbund members’, (ÖWZ, 4 February 1927).

²²⁸ ‘an experienced general staff officer.’ (ÖWZ, 4 February 1927).

²²⁹ ‘mocking every civil right’ ÖWZ, 4 February 1927.

and crowd violence. The deployment of the army against civilian demonstrators, particularly in the capital, risked entangling the *Bundesheer* directly in class politics and undermining its carefully cultivated neutrality. At the same time, the use of police forces, long perceived by the left as a bourgeois instrument of repression, allowed the army to remain above the fray while order was restored through other means. Neutrality was preserved not by even-handed enforcement, but by selective abstention.

3.1.2 Tolerance, Order, and the Limits of Republican Guardianship

This asymmetry in the enforcement of order became more pronounced as paramilitary organisations expanded their activities in the late 1920s. The Social Democratic militia, the *Republikanischer Schutzbund* (Republican Defence League), a centrally organised workers' defence force closely tied to party leadership and the *Heimwehr*, a loose federation of regionally based conservative paramilitary formations, were both legally constituted militias, tolerated within the ambiguous constitutional framework of the First Republic.²³⁰ This formal equivalence concealed a profound practical divergence in how order was enforced. Formally, the Republican *Schutzbund* defined itself not as a revolutionary force but as a defensive civic organisation operating within the constitutional order. As Martin Kitchen notes, its statutes pledged to 'defend the constitution, help the authorities maintain law and order, provide assistance in times of national crises, protect meetings held by republican organisations, and educate the minds and bodies of its membership.'²³¹ This self-description emphasised legality, cooperation with state authority, and civic discipline rather than insurrection.

The *Heimwehr*, by contrast, articulated a far more expansive understanding of its political role. As Jedlicka has shown, in 1928, Richard Steidle, a leading figure within the movement, openly described the *Heimwehr* as moving beyond self-defence toward explicit political ambition, declaring that 'from being an organization purely for defence it is becoming an organization with national and political aims,' and rejecting the idea that it should remain a subordinate auxiliary by insisting instead on 'having their share in the fashioning of the state.'²³² Despite this overt hostility to parliamentary democracy and increasingly authoritarian rhetoric, the

²³⁰ Naderer, *Der bewaffnete Aufstand*, 155.

²³¹ Martin Kitchen, 'Paramilitarism and Social Democracy' Germany in *The Age of Total War*, ed. Volker R. Berghahn and Martin Kitchen, 173.

²³² Ludwig Jedlicka, 'The Austrian Heimwehr', *Journal of Contemporary History*, i (1966), 136.

Heimwehr was more readily framed within official and military discourse as a patriotic force acting in defence of order against Bolshevism.

Unlike the *Schutzbund*, which was organisationally and politically tied to the leadership of the Social Democrats, the *Heimwehr* consistently presented themselves as a non-party force of national self-defence. As C. Earl Edmonson notes, the movement 'claimed throughout the 1920s to be nonpolitical or supraparty; that is, it did not seek votes but sought instead to support all nonsocialist political parties for which its members were free to vote'.²³³ The *Heimwehr's* insistence on being 'nonpolitical' was not a denial of political ambition, but a denial of parliamentary politics as a legitimate arena of authority.

The *Bundesheer* and its officer corps' posture toward these organisations reflected its institutional memory and professional habitus. Officers trained in the late imperial army were accustomed to viewing left-wing mass politics as a fundamental challenge to state authority, while right-wing voluntarism and nationalist activism could be accommodated within existing hierarchies. This was not a matter of explicit ideological alignment so much as of familiarity and perceived controllability. The *Heimwehr* could be imagined as an auxiliary force that might one day be integrated, disciplined, or neutralised. The *Schutzbund*, by contrast, represented an alternative locus of loyalty grounded in party organisation rather than state command.

Episodes such as the confrontation in Wiener Neustadt on 7 October 1928, when both the *Schutzbund* and *Heimwehr* had organised large-scale events in the city on the same day, illustrate this logic in practice. Although there had been great fear in the press of a major confrontation, the visible presence of the *Bundesheer* served to prevent escalation between rival paramilitary groups without requiring the army to engage directly in suppression.²³⁴ The *Wehrzeitung* praised the government with the headline: '*Die Staatsautorität als Sieger*'; showering praise on minister Vaugoin and his *Bundesheer*, it exclaimed:

*Oesterreich hat wieder eine Armee, eine kleine, durch das Diktat von St. Germain in ihrer Entwicklung gehemmte Armee, aber eine Armee, auf die der Bürger des Landes mit Zuversicht und mit ehrlichem Stolz blicken darf. Denn unter ihrem Schutze ist er wohlgeborgen...*²³⁵

²³³ C. Earl Edmondson, *The Heimwehr and Austrian politics, 1918-1936* (Athens, GA, 1978), 7.

²³⁴ *Reichspost*, 8 October 1928.

²³⁵ 'The Authority of the State as Victor'; '*Austria* once again has an army: a small army constrained in its development by the dictates of Saint-Germain, but an army upon which the citizen of the country may look

In framing the *Bundesheer* as a source of security and civic reassurance, the article explicitly recalled the self-image of the Habsburg army as a stabilising force above political conflict. The *Wehrzeitung* reinforced this continuity by contrasting the events of 1928 with the uncertainties of 1919, when, in the event of political riots, observers wondered if the *Volkswehr* would ‘*mit den Radaubrüdern gemeinsame Sache machen, oder werden sie doch - der günstigste Fall - hübsch beiseite bleiben?*’²³⁶ Officers later interpreted such interventions as evidence of the success of depoliticisation. The army had maintained order without taking sides, and without becoming embroiled in partisan violence. Yet this self-assessment overlooked the extent to which neutrality had already been defined in ways that privileged conservative actors and marginalised socialist mobilisation.

Throughout this period, the army’s reluctance to intervene decisively against right-wing paramilitarism was reinforced by political calculations at the ministerial level. Vaugoin remained deeply wary of deploying the *Bundesheer* in ways that might fracture its internal cohesion or provoke resistance within the ranks. Given the erosion of Social Democratic influence and the strengthening of conservative networks, intervention against the *Heimwehr* risked alienating officers whose loyalty the regime increasingly depended upon. Tolerance, even when accompanied by surveillance and rhetorical condemnation, was often the safer option.

The Pfrimer Putsch of September 1931, an abortive coup attempt led by the Styrian *Heimwehr* leader Walter Pfrimer, marked the outer limit of this strategy. Although the putsch collapsed within hours without significant military support, it underscored the dangers inherent in prolonged indulgence of paramilitary activism.²³⁷ Contemporary commentary in the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* dismissed the uprising as little more than a *Streich* (prank), while simultaneously presenting the *Bundesheer*’s conduct as proof of the enduring value of the much maligned ‘*schwarz-gelbe Tradition der völligen Unparteilichkeit des Heers*’.²³⁸ However, this framing revealed the reactive nature of military authority. As Gerhard Botz has shown, the *Bundesheer* responded hesitantly to the putsch, allowing *Heimwehr* units ample time to

with confidence and honest pride. For under its protection, he is secure...’ *Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 12 October 1928.

²³⁶ ‘make common cause with the rabble-rousers, or would they instead - in the best case - remain nicely on the sidelines?’ *Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 12 October 1928.

²³⁷ Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik*, 184-5.

²³⁸ ‘The army’s black and yellow tradition of complete political neutrality.’ (ÖWZ, 18 September 1931).

disperse and conceal their armaments.²³⁹ The *military* intervened only when state sovereignty was unmistakably challenged, not to prevent the gradual erosion of democratic norms or the normalisation of extra-parliamentary force.

By the early 1930s, the cumulative effect of these choices was clear. The *Bundesheer* had succeeded in preserving its institutional autonomy and avoiding internal politicisation. It had not become a paramilitary actor, nor had it fractured along party lines. At the same time, its conception of neutrality had narrowed the range of political outcomes it was prepared to defend. Parliamentary democracy, increasingly associated with deadlock and disorder, no longer commanded the same instinctive loyalty as executive authority and administrative continuity.

Paramilitary violence, then, did not radicalise the army. It clarified its priorities. Faced with competing claims to legitimacy and order, the *Bundesheer* consistently chose restraint over arbitration, legality over participation, and executive authority over democratic engagement. These choices were shaped by institutional memory, professional norms, and the legacy of depoliticisation traced in chapter two.

By 1931, the army stood formally neutral, politically insulated, and socially conservative. It had not been mobilised as a weapon of authoritarianism, but it had ceased to function as a guarantor of democratic balance. When parliamentary government finally collapsed in 1933, this posture would prove decisive. The *Bundesheer* did not need to be transformed to serve an authoritarian state. It needed only to remain what it had already become.

3.2 From Parliamentary Breakdown to Military Compliance, 1933

The constitutional crisis of March 1933 marked a decisive turning point in the political history of the First Austrian Republic. Unlike the revolutionary ruptures that had accompanied the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918, the transition toward authoritarian rule unfolded not through mass mobilisation or overt military intervention, but through procedural manipulation and executive improvisation. The paralysis of the *Nationalrat*, following the resignation of its three presiding officers during a disputed vote count on 4 March 1933,

²³⁹ Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik*, 185.

created a constitutional vacuum that Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss exploited to suspend parliamentary activity indefinitely. Governing by emergency decree under the War Economy Enabling Act, the executive claimed continuity with legality while effectively dismantling parliamentary sovereignty. Crucially, this legal rupture occurred in a political environment already shaped by years of asymmetric neutrality and institutional restraint, in which the absence of military resistance appeared neither anomalous nor alarming.

This mode of regime change is essential for understanding the position of the *Bundesheer* in 1933. The army was not confronted with a revolutionary seizure of power, nor with a direct challenge to constitutional order in the form of a coup. Instead, it faced an executive assertion of authority that was framed as the preservation of state order against procedural breakdown. In this respect, the events of March 1933 represented not a rupture with legality, but its strategic reconfiguration. For an officer corps shaped by legalism, hierarchy, and a professional understanding of obedience, this distinction was crucial.

The absence of military resistance to the parliamentary shutdown was therefore not the product of apathy or ideological enthusiasm for authoritarianism. It reflected the culmination of a longer process through which political neutrality had been redefined as procedural loyalty to constituted authority. As Chapter 2 has shown, this redefinition had its origins in the early 1920s, when efforts to subject the army to parliamentary oversight were gradually displaced by a conception of neutrality centred on discipline, professional autonomy, and insulation from partisan contestation. By 1933, the *Bundesheer* was institutionally and culturally prepared to accept executive rule so long as it was cloaked in legal continuity.

3.2.1 The Parliamentary Shutdown and the Legalisation of Executive Rule

The crisis of March 1933 emerged from the mechanics of parliamentary procedure rather than from street violence or insurrection. When the three presidents²⁴⁰ of the *Nationalrat* resigned in succession in order to participate in a contested vote, the chamber was left without a presiding officer capable of continuing proceedings.²⁴¹ The final sitting on 4 March collapsed over a dispute concerning the formal validity of a ballot, with deputies and presiding officers unable to agree whether a vote constituted a legally effective act. Parliamentary authority

²⁴⁰ The *Nationalrat* of the First Republic had three Presidents representing the three main parties. These acted in the same fashion as the speaker in other houses of parliament.

²⁴¹ 125. Sitzung der N. R., der Republik Österreich, IV G. B. – 4. März 1933

fractured over procedure rather than policy, rendering the chamber incapable of further deliberation.

Dollfuss seized upon this procedural impasse to argue that parliament had rendered itself incapable of functioning. Rather than convening the chamber or seeking a constitutional resolution, the government treated the paralysis as justification for suspending parliamentary activity altogether and governing by emergency decree. What distinguished this moment from earlier constitutional confrontations was the insistence that no fundamental legal order had been violated. Emergency powers were invoked not as exceptional measures preceding a return to parliamentary normality, but as a substitute for representative government itself. The executive framed its actions as a defence of constitutional order against procedural chaos, even as it neutralised the representative institution at its core. Authority was justified through legality, administrative competence, and continuity of function, rather than through parliamentary consent. Rule by decree was presented not as a rupture, but as a stabilising necessity.

The cabinet's handling of the immediate aftermath of the parliamentary shutdown illustrates the administrative logic through which executive authority was consolidated. When the Social Democratic deputy Dr. Straffner sought to convene a session of the *Nationalrat*, the matter was discussed in the *Ministerrat* on 15 March 1933. Dollfuss reported on the '*behördlichen Verfügungen*' issued in response, a formulation that reduced parliamentary initiative to an object of administrative regulation rather than political deliberation.²⁴² The cabinet merely took the matter '*zur Kenntnis*' (under consideration), without engaging the question of parliamentary sovereignty. At the same meeting, the government authorised the mobilisation of the *Beurlaubtenstand* (those men on leave) at the request of Vaugoin, explicitly grounding the measure in § 20 of the *Wehrgesetz*.²⁴³ Parliamentary claims were thus neutralised through administrative decision-making, while military readiness was enhanced through statutory authority rather than political mandate.

This framing was particularly significant for the *Bundesheer*. Officers were not asked to suppress parliament by force, disperse deputies, or enforce an openly unconstitutional seizure

²⁴² Beschlussprotokolle über die 858. Sitzung des Ministerrates vom 15. März 1933. OeStA, AdR.

²⁴³ 125. Sitzung der N. R., der Republik Österreich, IV G. B. – 4. März 1933.

of power.²⁴⁴ Instead, they were confronted with an executive authority that continued to operate through established administrative channels, invoked existing legal instruments, and claimed to embody continuity of state sovereignty. In the absence of a clear competing authority or an overt suspension of legality, the army was not placed in a position that demanded active political judgment. To oppose the government would have required officers to interpret constitutional legitimacy independently of the executive, a role fundamentally at odds with their professional self-understanding and with the logic of depoliticisation that had taken hold during the 1920s.

Cabinet discussions in the days following 4 March framed the situation as one of '*Handlungsunfähigkeit des Nationalrates*' (a claimed incapacity of the National Council to act), to be managed through administrative substitution rather than constitutional arbitration.²⁴⁵ Parliamentary functions were provisionally replaced by committees for constitutional, economic, and social affairs, with legislative measures to be implemented by decree. From the perspective of the state apparatus, authority did not disappear but was reorganised within the executive sphere, preserving the appearance of uninterrupted governance despite the absence of parliamentary deliberation.

Contemporary reactions in the officers' press reflected this procedural understanding. Rather than framing the events of March 1933 as a constitutional crisis, the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* interpreted them as the orderly resolution of a political deadlock. Under the heading '*Zur Lage*' (On the Situation), the paper announced on 17 March that '*[I]etzten Mittwoch ist nun die Entscheidung gefallen nach der politischen Hochspannung*,' presenting the suspension of parliamentary activity as outcome of accumulated tension rather than as an act of executive usurpation.²⁴⁶ Parliament itself was characterised as an assembly '*ungesetzlich einberufen*', placing it outside the sphere of authority to which soldiers understood themselves to owe allegiance.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ It was the police who had stopped deputies led by the German National Parliamentary President, Sepp Straffner, from reconvening the *Nationalrat* on 15 March. Manfred Rauchensteiner, *Unter Beobachten: Österreich seit 1918* (Vienna, 2021), 117-8.

²⁴⁵ Beschlussprotokoll über die 853. Sitzung des Ministerrates am 9. März 1933.

²⁴⁶ 'Last Wednesday the decision was finally made after the period of political tension' (ÖWZ, 17 March 1933).

²⁴⁷ 'Illegally convened' (ÖWZ, 17 March 1933).

The March crisis thus exposed a structural asymmetry within the republican system. Parliamentary sovereignty depended upon political cooperation, procedural norms, and the willingness of actors to sustain deliberative authority. Executive power, by contrast, could be maintained through administrative continuity and control of coercive institutions, even in the absence of parliamentary consent. The legalisation of executive authority in March 1933 did not confront the *Bundesheer* with a choice between democracy and dictatorship. It confronted it with a claim of lawful continuity that aligned closely with the institutional habits and professional norms forged in the preceding decade.

3.2.2 Officer Silence and the Politics of Procedural Loyalty

The silence of the officer corps in March 1933 was not only the product of institutional depoliticisation but was reinforced by the manner in which executive authority was rendered culturally intelligible within a military frame of reference. Dollfuss was not perceived within military circles as a civilian usurper acting outside the established order. As a former frontline officer of the *Tiroler Kaiserschützen*,²⁴⁸ he belonged to the wartime *Frontgeneration* and was legible to the officer corps as a figure shaped by shared experiences of discipline, command, and service.²⁴⁹ This symbolic proximity did not determine political outcomes, but it eased the acceptance of executive authority at a moment when parliamentary legitimacy appeared exhausted.

The legitimisation of executive authority was further reinforced through explicitly military symbolism. Dollfuss was referred to approvingly as the *‘tapfere Kaiserschützenoffizier vom Pasubio’*, a formulation that situated him within a shared tradition of wartime service rather than within the contested arena of party politics.²⁵⁰ In this register, authority derived not from parliamentary representation, but from hierarchy, sacrifice, and proven reliability under command. Such language did not amount to ideological endorsement of authoritarianism. It framed executive leadership in terms familiar to an officer corps trained to value discipline and continuity over deliberation.

This cultural framing mattered because it interacted directly with the professional norms established during the 1920s. As neutrality came to be defined as withdrawal from political

²⁴⁸ Tirolean Emperor’s Rifles. This was an elite formation within the k.u.k. military.

²⁴⁹ Kurt Bauer, ‘Engelbert Dollfuß’, ed. Stefan Karner, *Die umkämpfte Republik* (Innsbruck, 2017), 365.

²⁵⁰ ‘The brave Kaiserschützen officer from the Pasubio.’ ÖWZ, 17 March 1933.

contestation rather than subordination to democratic institutions, officers were discouraged from developing a language of constitutional judgement. Political silence was increasingly equated with professionalism. Within this framework, the symbolic identification of the chancellor as a fellow officer reduced the likelihood that the suspension of parliamentary life would be experienced as a rupture requiring military intervention.

The absence of resistance within the *Bundesheer* should therefore be understood as the convergence of institutional habit and cultural reassurance. Officers were neither ordered to act against parliament nor compelled to defend it. Instead, they encountered an executive authority that appeared procedurally continuous and culturally familiar. Silence functioned as a professional reflex, not as a political statement. Loyalty was expressed through obedience to constituted authority, while constitutional deliberation remained beyond the perceived remit of the military.

The events of March 1933 thus revealed the extent to which neutrality had been redefined within the officer corps. Parliamentary sovereignty depended upon procedures and political cooperation that had already collapsed. Executive authority, by contrast, could be sustained through administrative continuity and reinforced through military symbolism. For an army oriented toward stability, hierarchy, and legal form, this configuration did not present a choice between democracy and dictatorship. It presented a claim of authority that aligned with the institutional habits and cultural assumptions forged over the preceding decade.

3.2.3 The *Bundesheer* as Executive Instrument

The practical consequences of the army's stance in March 1933 became visible in the months that followed. As the Dollfuss government consolidated power through decree, banned political organisations, and curtailed civil liberties, the *Bundesheer* increasingly functioned as an instrument of executive authority.²⁵¹ This did not require a formal redefinition of the army's constitutional role. Its effectiveness lay in the fact that it could be deployed in support of the executive without abandoning its claim to political neutrality or assuming responsibility for the direction of policy.

²⁵¹ John W. Boyer, *Austria, 1867-1955* (New York, 2022), 763.

The availability of the *Bundesheer* as an executive instrument rested, first and foremost, on institutional alignment. Ministerial control over the army had been firmly established during the 1920s, while parliamentary oversight and soldiers' representative bodies had been progressively weakened or eliminated. After March 1933, there were no effective veto points through which military resistance to government measures could be articulated. Cabinet discussions throughout 1933 treated questions of internal security and enforcement as matters of routine executive competence rather than as issues requiring parliamentary or military consultation.²⁵² The chain of command remained intact, and orders issued in the name of state authority encountered neither procedural obstruction nor competing claims of legitimacy.²⁵³ This institutional alignment was reinforced by the legal environment created after the suspension of parliamentary life. Executive authority was increasingly exercised through decree, with the *Bundesgesetzblatt* serving as the primary vehicle for the production of law.²⁵⁴ Within this framework, legality was generated by executive act rather than parliamentary deliberation. The *Bundesheer* operated as a subordinated instrument within this legal order, enforcing measures whose validity derived from administrative continuity rather than democratic consent.

The Austrian historiography confirms that this shift did not entail a corresponding transformation of the army's political identity. Jedlicka argues that 1933 marked a decisive rupture in civil-military relations. Military questions that had appeared to have been settled '*plötzlich, nach einem fast zehnjährigen Stillstand, aufbrachen*', placing the *Bundesheer* once again at the centre of constitutional and political conflict.²⁵⁵ He characterised the transition to a system of government based on emergency decrees as '*reibungslos*' (smooth), an interpretation that captured the absence of institutional resistance rather than the preservation of democratic legitimacy. The army was thus drawn into the enforcement of executive authority without acquiring a deliberative or oppositional role within the political system.

²⁵² 125. Sitzung der N. R. der Republik Österreich, IV G. B. – 4. März 1933

²⁵³ Ortner, 'Von Volkswehr bis Bundesheer', 132.

²⁵⁴ *Bundesgesetzblätter für 1933*, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, ALEX Historische Rechts- und Gesetzestexte, (<https://alex.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/alex?apm=0&aid=bgb&datum=1933>) (accessed 14 Dec 2025).

²⁵⁵ 'suddenly, after an almost ten-year standstill, re-emerged' (Jedlicka, *Heer im Schatten*, 104).

This development corresponded to a broader transitional phase within the Austrian military system. As Broucek has noted, the years from 1928/29 to the end of 1933 constituted a period of transition marked by preparation for a reorientation of the army's role rather than by overt ideological realignment.²⁵⁶ This periodisation helps to explain why the *Bundesheer* could be integrated into an authoritarian order after March 1933 without a rupture in its professional self-understanding or institutional structure.

The wider political context further reinforced the army's executive orientation. The continued existence of paramilitary organisations, escalating street violence, and deepening social polarisation sustained a pervasive perception of instability. Within this environment, the executive's claim to act as the final guarantor of order resonated with military priorities centred on stability, discipline, and control. The prospect of renewed parliamentary paralysis or uncontrolled civil conflict appeared more threatening than the progressive restriction of democratic procedures.

By the end of 1933, the *Bundesheer* had been incorporated into an authoritarian system without undergoing ideological transformation. It remained formally neutral, professionally disciplined, and institutionally intact. Yet this neutrality now operated within a political order that no longer rested on parliamentary sovereignty. Loyalty was directed toward the executive state as the operative embodiment of legality and order. This transformation did not in itself determine the army's actions in subsequent crises. February 1934 would present a far more direct test of military loyalty, requiring the active deployment of force against internal opponents. Nevertheless, the events of March 1933 established the conditions under which such deployment became conceivable. When the *Bundesheer* was later called upon to act, it did so not as an ideological vanguard, but as a disciplined instrument of a state that had already dispensed with parliamentary democracy.

3.3 February 1934 and the Test of Military Loyalty

The armed confrontation of February 1934 constituted the most severe internal crisis of the Austrian state since 1918. For contemporaries and later commentators alike, the brief civil war appeared to mark the decisive collapse of parliamentary democracy and the violent triumph

²⁵⁶ Peter Broucek, 'Heerwesen', *Österreich, 1918-1938*, ed. Erika Weinzierl and Kurt Skalník (Vienna, 1983), 209.

of authoritarian rule. From the perspective of the *Bundesheer*, however, February did not represent a sudden rupture in institutional orientation. Rather, it functioned as a moment of activation, in which patterns of obedience, legality, and executive loyalty that had been consolidated over the preceding decade were put into practice under conditions of direct internal conflict.

By the time fighting broke out, the institutional context of civil–military relations had already been decisively transformed. Carl Vaugoin, who had served as *Heeresminister* since 1921 and had been the principal architect of military depoliticisation, was no longer in office. Following his resignation in September 1933, responsibility for the army was concentrated directly in the hands of the chancellor.²⁵⁷ The *Bundesheer* therefore entered the February crisis without ministerial mediation and under conditions of unambiguous executive authority. This concentration of control narrowed the range of political judgement available within the military and aligned neutrality ever more closely with obedience to the executive state.

The outbreak of violence did not confront the army with a choice between democracy and dictatorship in the abstract. It confronted it with a concrete claim of state authority defining the conflict as an armed challenge to public order. The central question was not whether the *Bundesheer* would intervene, but how it would do so, and on what terms. February 1934 thus provides a uniquely revealing test case for assessing the consequences of depoliticisation as an institutional strategy. It exposes the extent to which neutrality had been redefined from democratic subordination into procedural loyalty, and how an army trained to withdraw from political deliberation could nevertheless be deployed decisively against an internal political movement.

Seen in this light, February 1934 stands less as the origin of authoritarian military power than as its confirmation. The *Bundesheer* did not seize political initiative, nor did it articulate an ideological project of its own. It acted as the executor of authority defined elsewhere, crossing a threshold that would permanently alter its relationship to society while preserving its internal cohesion and professional self-understanding. The sections that follow examine how this activation unfolded, how it was justified, and what it revealed about the meaning of military loyalty in the final phase of the First Republic.

²⁵⁷ Jedlicka, *Heer im Schatten*, 108.

3.3.1 From Police Action to Armed Conflict

The immediate trigger for the February 1934 fighting was the government's attempt to enforce the ban on the *Schutzbund* through targeted police action. On 12 February, police searches of Social Democratic premises in Linz ordered by the Vice-Chancellor and security chief, Major Emil Fey, encountered armed resistance from local *Schutzbund* units.²⁵⁸ As John W. Boyer notes: 'Fey's searches were deliberately provocative, and meant to trigger a response by hot-headed Socialist cadres.'²⁵⁹ What had been labelled as a security operation rapidly escalated into open fighting, exposing the limits of police authority and transforming a question of enforcement into an armed confrontation. The violence in Linz was quickly echoed elsewhere. In Vienna and several industrial centres, clashes broke out between police forces and armed *Schutzbund* detachments, who occupied workers' housing complexes and other defensible positions.²⁶⁰ Communications were disrupted, barricades erected, and sporadic fighting spread across multiple districts. Although the *Schutzbund* lacked central coordination and suffered from uneven preparation, the scale of resistance was sufficient to overwhelm local police units in key areas.

As the situation deteriorated, the government concluded that police forces alone were incapable of restoring control. Responsibility for suppressing the uprising was therefore transferred to the *Bundesheer*. This decision marked a qualitative shift. For the first time since the founding of the Republic, the army was deployed directly and systematically against an organised domestic political movement. The transition from police action to military intervention signalled that the conflict had crossed a critical threshold.²⁶¹

The deployment of the *Bundesheer* proceeded through established chains of command. Troops were ordered into contested districts in Vienna and other centres, securing key infrastructure and supporting police and gendarmerie units.²⁶² In several cases, resistance was concentrated in large municipal housing complexes that proved difficult to neutralise

²⁵⁸ Fey, a decorated former Habsburg officer and editor of the *ÖWZ*, had become a *Heimwehr* leader after his discharge from the army in the early 1920s.

²⁵⁹ Boyer, *Austria*, 783.

²⁶⁰ Kurt Bauer, *Die Februar Aufstand: Fakten und Mythen* (Vienna, 2019), 31-46.

²⁶¹ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ÖStA), AdR, Ministerratsprotokolle, Beschlussprotokoll über die 923. Sitzung des Ministerrates vom 16 und 17 Februar 1934.

²⁶² *Der Februar-Aufbruch 1934: Das Eingreifen des österreichischen Bundesheeres zu seiner Niederwerfung* (Vienna, 1935), 3-4.

through conventional policing methods. The use of heavy weapons against fortified urban positions marked a clear escalation in the government's use of force. Rather than relying primarily on police-led disarmament operations and close-quarters assaults, the authorities increasingly employed *Bundesheer* units and artillery to overcome entrenched *Schutzbund* resistance. In several key engagements, the shelling of defensive strongholds contributed to the rapid collapse of organised resistance, signalling the shift from a coercive policing action to a domestic military operation.²⁶³

After two days of intense street fighting, organised resistance collapsed. By 14 February, the *Schutzbund* had been decisively defeated, its leadership killed, imprisoned, or forced into exile, and the Social Democratic Party outlawed soon thereafter.²⁶⁴ Only isolated figures such as the *Schutzbund* commander, Eifler, escaped immediate punishment due to prior imprisonment.²⁶⁵ The human cost was substantial. Drawing on Kurt Bauer's figures, the conflict claimed the lives of approximately 100 soldiers, police and *Heimwehr* members, eighty-nine *Schutzbund* fighters, and more than 100 civilians.²⁶⁶ The military defeat and suppression of the Social Democrats removed the last organised mass opposition capable of legal opposition to the authoritarian regime and normalised the use of military force in resolving domestic political conflicts.²⁶⁷

This brief outline of events provides the necessary context for assessing the conduct of the *Bundesheer* during February 1934. The decisive analytical questions do not lie in the chronology of the fighting itself, but in how the army understood its role, how its actions were justified, and what this episode reveals about the meaning of military neutrality and loyalty in the final phase of the First Republic.

3.3.2 Executive Framing, Legality, and the Definition of the Conflict

The outbreak of violence in February 1934 was framed by the executive not as a political confrontation or social crisis, but as a matter of state security and legality. From the government's own perspective, the decisive issue was not the political origins of the conflict,

²⁶³ Bauer, *Februar Aufstand*, 220-3.

²⁶⁴ Boyer, *Austria*, 785-6.

²⁶⁵ Rauchensteiner, *Unter Beobachten*, 127.

²⁶⁶ Bauer, *Februar Aufstand*, 74.

²⁶⁷ Bauer, *Februar Aufstand*, 64-70.

but the assertion of authority against what was defined as an armed challenge to the state. This framing was established immediately and consistently, shaping both the justification for coercive action and the terms under which the *Bundesheer* would be deployed.

In its internal deliberations, the government characterised the events as a '*gegen den Bestand des Staates gerichtete systematisch vorbereitete grosse Aktion*'.²⁶⁸ The language is revealing. By presenting the fighting as a premeditated assault on the existence of the state itself, the executive foreclosed interpretations that might have treated the escalation as the result of political repression, miscalculation, or mutual radicalisation. The conflict was conceptually removed from the realm of politics and repositioned within a legal register of defence against insurrection. Contemporary military reporting similarly described the events as an '*offenen bewaffneten Angriff gegen die Regierung und Exekutive*' and emphasised that artillery and mortars '*eingesetzt werden mußten*' (had to be used), thereby framing the escalation of force as a necessary response to insurrection rather than a political decision.²⁶⁹ Questions of proportionality or responsibility were displaced by a claim of necessity.

This definition carried immediate institutional consequences. Once the situation was framed as an attack on the state, responsibility for its suppression was transferred to the organs charged with enforcing public order. The *Bundesheer* was not called upon to arbitrate between competing political forces or to assess the legitimacy of government policy. It was incorporated into a unified executive response to what was presented as a direct threat to lawful authority. In this framework, neutrality no longer implied restraint, but obedience to the executive's determination of legality.

Cabinet protocols from February 1934 demonstrate the extent to which this logic structured decision-making. The *Ministerrat* repeatedly referred to the actions of the security forces as the defence and eventual '*Sieg der gesetzlichen Gewalten*'.²⁷⁰ The emphasis on legality is striking for its banality. There is no language of constitutional emergency or moral dilemma. Military and police action is treated as the routine execution of lawful authority rather than

²⁶⁸ 'large-scale action systematically prepared and directed against the existence of the state.' (Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ÖStA), AdR, Ministerratsprotokolle, Beschlussprotokoll über die 923. Sitzung des Ministerrates vom 16 und 17 Februar 1934).

²⁶⁹ 'an open armed attack against the government and the executive' (ÖWZ, 16 February 1934).

²⁷⁰ 'Victory of legal authority.' (Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ÖStA), AdR, Ministerratsprotokolle, Beschlussprotokoll über die 923. Sitzung des Ministerrates vom 16 und 17 Februar 1934).

as an exceptional departure from normal governance. Violence was normalised through legal form.

Within this executive narrative, the *Bundesheer* was explicitly subsumed into a collective conception of the coercive apparatus. Cabinet statements praised the '*einträchtige Zusammenarbeit*' (concerted cooperation) of army, police, and gendarmerie, supported by '*freiwillige Formationen*' (volunteer formations).²⁷¹ This rhetorical fusion blurred institutional boundaries and retrospectively legitimised the deployment of military force in an internal political conflict. The army appeared not as a reluctant last resort, but as an integral component of state security acting in concert with other executive organs.

The legal framing of February 1934 thus removed the possibility of meaningful military non-intervention. To abstain would have required officers to challenge the executive's definition of legality and to assume an independent constitutional role. Such a position was fundamentally incompatible with the professional norms cultivated within the *Bundesheer* since the early 1920s, in which neutrality had been redefined as withdrawal from political judgement and loyalty to constituted authority. By the time troops were deployed, the political meaning of the conflict had already been settled within the executive sphere.

In this sense, February 1934 marked not the politicisation of the army, but the legalisation of internal violence. The conflict was rendered intelligible to the *Bundesheer* through legal categories that aligned coercive action with professional duty. What followed was not a contest over authority, but the execution of an executive decision whose legitimacy had been asserted in advance.

3.3.3 Obedience without Enthusiasm: Officer Behaviour in February 1934

The armed confrontation of February 1934 represented the most severe internal crisis faced by the Austrian state since the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy. For contemporaries and later commentators alike, the brief civil war appeared to mark the decisive breakdown of the First Republic and the triumph of authoritarian rule by force of arms. Yet from the perspective of the *Bundesheer*, February did not constitute a rupture in institutional orientation so much as a moment of activation. The army was not radicalised in February 1934. It was called upon

²⁷¹ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ÖStA), AdR, Ministerratsprotokolle, Beschlussprotokoll über die 923. Sitzung des Ministerrates vom 16 und 17 Februar 1934.

to act in accordance with patterns of obedience, legality, and executive loyalty that had already been established over the preceding decade.

The conduct of the officer corps during the events that the Ministry of Defence would later label the '*Februar-Aufuhr*' (February Upheaval) was marked less by ideological commitment than by disciplined compliance.²⁷² There is no evidence of organised resistance to the deployment of the *Bundesheer*, no recorded refusals to carry out orders, and no attempts by senior officers to assert an independent constitutional role. This absence of dissent is striking, but it should not be interpreted as enthusiasm for authoritarian repression. Rather, it reflected a professional culture in which obedience to constituted authority had come to define military loyalty.

Contemporary military and official sources offer little insight into the private attitudes of individual officers, but their collective silence is itself revealing. February 1934 does not appear in these accounts as a moment of political choice or moral dilemma. Once the executive had defined the conflict as an armed uprising against the state, the space for independent judgement narrowed sharply. Officers were not invited to deliberate on legitimacy or proportionality. Their task was to execute orders within an established chain of command. This understanding was explicitly affirmed in the army's own post-hoc representation of its conduct. In its official account of the fighting, published by the *Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung* the following year, the intervention of the *Bundesheer* was summarised as the fulfilment of duty. The publication claims to record the '*von treuester Pflichtauffassung getragene Befriedungsarbeit der an der Niederwerfung der Aufruhrbewegung [...] heldenmütig beteiligten Truppen*.'²⁷³ The language reduces the army's role to professionalism and loyalty, elevating duty to a self-justifying principle. By grounding legitimacy solely in obedience to the lawful state, the text deliberately evacuates questions of political intent, ideological alignment, or moral accountability. What remains is a conception of military action in which legality substitutes for legitimacy, and duty displaces judgment.

Alfred Jansa's recollections of February 1934 are revealing not for doctrinal clarity but for their emotional and institutional preoccupations. Writing from Berlin, he described the outbreak of

²⁷² *Der Februar-Aufuhr 1934* (Vienna, 1935)

²⁷³ 'The pacification work, borne of the most loyal sense of duty, carried out by the troops who took part heroically in the suppression of the uprising.' (*Der Februar-Aufuhr*, 4).

fighting as a '*tragische[r] Kampf um die Macht in Österreich*' that caused acute personal anxiety, particularly for the safety of his children in Vienna.²⁷⁴ His response to the events was not detached or indifferent, but shaped by fear, strain, and vigilance. At the same time, Jansa's overriding concern was the reputation and cohesion of the *Bundesheer*. He reacted sharply to National Socialist press claims that the army was unreliable or that parts of it had defected, describing such allegations as intolerable. He therefore sought immediate confirmation from Vienna that '*das Bundesheer seine schwere Pflicht tadellos versah*' and intervened through German military contacts to force a retraction.²⁷⁵ In this way, February appears in Jansa's account less as a moment of political judgement than as a test of institutional credibility under external pressure. The absence of reflection on dissent within the army does not signal emotional detachment, but rather the internalisation of a professional logic in which loyalty was measured by cohesion and performance, and in which the principal danger lay not in the use of force itself but in the politicisation of the army's conduct by competing regimes.

This pattern was the product of long-term institutional conditioning. Since the early 1920s, officers had been encouraged to regard political conflict as inherently corrosive and parliamentary intervention as a threat to discipline and cohesion. Neutrality had been redefined not as subordination to democratic institutions, but as withdrawal from partisan contestation and adherence to executive authority. Within this framework, refusal to act would have constituted a breach of professionalism rather than an act of constitutional conscience.

Even the escalation of violence did not disrupt this logic. The deployment of artillery against urban targets represented a moral threshold, but it did not generate visible fractures within the officer corps. Decisions were taken hierarchically, justified in tactical and legal terms, and implemented without public protest. Where doubts existed, they remained private and institutionally irrelevant. The coherence of the *Bundesheer* was preserved precisely because political deliberation had been excluded from the sphere of military action.

In this sense, February 1934 confirmed the effectiveness of depoliticisation as an institutional strategy. The army acted decisively, remained unified, and fulfilled the expectations placed

²⁷⁴ 'Tragic struggle for power in Austria' (Jansa, *Ein General gegen Hitler*, 552).

²⁷⁵ 'The Bundesheer carried out its difficult duty impeccably.' (Jansa, *Ein General gegen Hitler*, 552).

upon it by the executive. Its loyalty was demonstrated not through ideological alignment, but through disciplined obedience. The *Bundesheer* neither seized political initiative nor resisted it. It functioned as an instrument of authority defined elsewhere, revealing both the strength and the limits of a military culture grounded in procedural loyalty rather than political conviction.

3.4 Nazism, the *Bundesheer*, and the Limits of Executive Loyalty

The consolidation of authoritarian rule after February 1934 did not resolve the problem of political loyalty within the Austrian state. While the *Bundesheer* had demonstrated its reliability as an instrument of executive authority during the suppression of the Social Democratic movement, this loyalty remained procedural rather than ideological. The months that followed exposed a new and more ambiguous challenge. National Socialism emerged as the principal organised opponent of the regime, operating simultaneously as a mass movement, a clandestine network, and a vehicle for German influence. This section examines the relationship between the Austrian Nazi movement and the *Bundesheer* in the aftermath of February, focusing on the July Putsch of 1934 and the selective purges that followed. It argues that the army's depoliticised culture, while effective in ensuring obedience, also limited its capacity to resist ideological penetration, revealing the structural vulnerabilities that would shape its conduct in the final years of the First Republic.

3.4.1 The National Socialist Challenge to the Austrian State

By the early 1930s, National Socialism in Austria had ceased to be a marginal political current and had become a sustained challenge to state authority. Austrian National Socialism developed out of longer-standing German nationalist traditions and social conflicts that predated the First Republic, but it was only in the context of economic crisis and political polarisation after 1928 that these currents acquired real political traction.²⁷⁶ The erosion of parliamentary legitimacy, rising unemployment, and social dislocation created conditions in which the *NSDAP* could expand beyond its earlier subcultural milieu and assume the characteristics of a mass movement.

²⁷⁶ Botz, *Nationalsozialismus in Wien*, 19-20.

This expansion was reflected in both organisational growth and electoral performance. While the Austrian Nazis remained politically marginal throughout most of the 1920s, their support increased markedly in regional and municipal elections in the early 1930s. By 1932 the *NSDAP* had secured representation in a number of provincial assemblies and achieved notable results in Vienna, signalling that National Socialism had become a significant factor in Austrian political life.²⁷⁷ Although it never achieved national power through elections, its growth was sufficient to alarm the government and rival political movements alike. As Jedlicka notes, the Nazi movement increasingly appeared not simply as another party within a pluralist system but as a destabilising force capable of undermining the already fragile authority of the state itself.²⁷⁸

Alongside this electoral advance, political violence intensified. National Socialism in Austria relied increasingly on organised terror as both a mobilising strategy and a means of political pressure. After the banning of the *NSDAP* in June 1933, '*eine verstärkte Sabotage- und Terrortätigkeit der Nationalsozialisten einsetzte*', including bomb attacks, the sabotage of infrastructure, and systematic intimidation.²⁷⁹ In some periods the scale of this violence was striking. According to a report in the *London Times* on 12 January 1934: 'Nazi Outrages in Austria since the beginning of the year have averaged 20 a day.'²⁸⁰ This was later corroborated by Gerhard Botz who states that '*Allein Anfang Jänner [1934] wurden 140 Bombenexplosionen gezählt*' underscoring the extent to which National Socialism had shifted from open political mobilisation to clandestine warfare against the state.²⁸¹

Illegality did not weaken the Nazi movement in the short term. On the contrary, repression accelerated its radicalisation and strengthened its conspiratorial character. These actions were deliberately organised and aimed at the systematic destabilisation of the existing state order.²⁸² The banning of the party transformed National Socialism from a political competitor into an underground security threat, increasingly linked to external support from the German

²⁷⁷ Erwin A. Schmidl 'Die NSDAP in Österreich bis zum „Anschluss“ 1938', *Die umkämpfte Republik: Österreich von 1918-1938*, ed. Stefan Karner (Innsbruck, 2017), 193.

²⁷⁸ Jedlicka, *Heer im Schatten*, 115-6.

²⁷⁹ 'an intensified campaign of sabotage and terrorist activity by the National Socialists began' (Bolz, *Gewalt in der Politik*, 225).

²⁸⁰ *The Times*, 12 January 1934.

²⁸¹ 'In January [1934] alone, 104 bomb explosions were counted.' (Bolz, *Gewalt in der Politik*, 225).

²⁸² Bolz, *Gewalt in der Politik*, 225.

Reich. Large numbers of activists fled across the border, where they were reorganised in exile formations such as the so-called Austrian Legion, while clandestine networks continued to operate inside Austria.²⁸³

The events of February 1934 did not resolve this challenge. During the armed suppression of the Social Democratic movement, Nazi terrorist activity temporarily subsided, but this pause was tactical rather than decisive. As Botz notes, '*während der blutigen Niederwerfung der sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterschaft brachen diese Aktionen ab*', yet the organisational capacity of the *NSDAP* remained intact.²⁸⁴ Party membership continued to grow in the months that followed, even as the authoritarian regime consolidated its power. The elimination of the *Schutzbund* removed one internal enemy of the state but left another, more ambiguous one in place.

For the Austrian authorities, and particularly for the *Bundesheer*, this situation posed a challenge fundamentally different from that represented by either the Social Democrats or the *Heimwehr*. National Socialism combined mass appeal, clandestine organisation, systematic violence, and external backing. It could not be neutralised through parliamentary exclusion, nor easily contained by conventional policing alone. By 1933–34, the Nazi movement had become not merely a political opposition but a security problem with direct implications for military loyalty and state sovereignty. It was against this backdrop that the July Putsch of 1934 would unfold.

3.4.2 The July Putsch and the *Bundesheer*

The National Socialist putsch of 25 July 1934 confronted the Austrian state with a fundamentally different kind of internal threat from that posed by the Social Democratic movement in February. Whereas the suppression of the *Schutzbund* had been framed as the restoration of internal order against an armed uprising rooted within the Republic, the July Putsch represented a conspiratorial seizure of state power backed by external forces and embedded networks within Austrian society itself. For the *Bundesheer*, this distinction mattered. The army was not mobilised as the primary instrument of repression, but it was

²⁸³ Jedlicka, *Heer im Schatten*, 107.

²⁸⁴ 'during the bloody suppression of the Social Democratic workers, these actions ceased.' (Bolz, *Gewalt in der Politik*, 225).

nonetheless drawn into a crisis that directly raised questions of military loyalty, infiltration, and institutional reliability.

The putsch itself was militarily limited but politically explosive. Small groups of National Socialist insurgents seized important buildings in Vienna, including a radio station and the Federal Chancellery in the Ballhausplatz, fatally wounding Chancellor Dollfuß, while parallel actions were undertaken in the provinces.²⁸⁵ These included attacks on government buildings, attempts to seize radio infrastructure, and efforts to trigger wider uprisings through false announcements of regime change. Unlike February 1934, however, the putsch failed to generate sustained armed resistance or mass participation. The rapid collapse of the coup owed much to the continued effectiveness of the police and the *Heimwehr*, as well as to the lack of coordinated support beyond isolated cells.

The role of the *Bundesheer* during the events of July 1934 was therefore paradoxical. On the one hand, the army did not act as the decisive force in suppressing the putsch, and its units were not universally deployed in direct combat.²⁸⁶ On the other hand, the crisis unfolded against the backdrop of growing concern about National Socialist penetration of the officer corps. The absence of large-scale army engagement did not reassure the regime. Rather, it heightened anxieties about whether the *Bundesheer* could be relied upon unconditionally in the event of a more coordinated insurrection.

These concerns were sharpened by the composition of the insurgent forces themselves. Some of the putschists were former soldiers, including men with prior service in the *Bundesheer*. Contemporary investigations and later accounts consistently pointed to the existence of informal networks linking National Socialist activists, discharged officers, and sympathetic elements within the broader military milieu.²⁸⁷ While the scale of this penetration should not be exaggerated, its very plausibility undermined the assumption that professional military culture alone constituted a sufficient barrier against political radicalisation.

The deaths of two serving officers during the suppression of the putsch further complicated the regime's interpretation of military loyalty. Major Johann Charvát and Major Rudolf Smolle were killed in combat against National Socialist insurgents and were publicly honoured as

²⁸⁵ Boyer, *Austria*, 794-5.

²⁸⁶ Wolfgang Etschmann, *Die Kämpfe in Österreich im Juli 1934* (Vienna, 1984), 20-47.

²⁸⁷ Etschmann, *Die Kämpfe in Österreich*, 12.

fallen defenders of the state. Yet even these cases were not immune from suspicion. A report by the German military attaché in Vienna, Generalleutnant Muff, dated 9 August 1934, claimed, on the basis of informal conversations, that both officers had been '*überzeugte Nationalsozialisten*'.²⁸⁸ This assertion was explicitly described as vague and remained uncorroborated by Austrian investigations or party documentation. Its significance therefore lay less in its factual reliability than in what it revealed about the climate of uncertainty surrounding military loyalty in the aftermath of the putsch. Even officers who died fighting the regime's enemies could retrospectively become objects of ideological doubt.

For the Fatherland Front regime, the July Putsch thus exposed the limits of depoliticisation as a guarantee of security.²⁸⁹ The *Bundesheer* had demonstrated its institutional discipline in February, but July revealed that obedience alone could not resolve the problem of clandestine allegiance. National Socialism did not challenge the state as an openly organised mass movement within the Republic, but as an illegal, conspiratorial force operating across borders and exploiting personal, professional, and ideological ties that were difficult to police.

The regime's response reflected this assessment. In the months following the putsch, the emphasis shifted toward surveillance, selective purges, and loyalty vetting within the officer corps. Unlike the post-February period, there was no attempt to mobilise the army symbolically as the embodiment of state authority. Instead, the *Bundesheer* was treated as a potentially vulnerable institution whose cohesion had to be protected through administrative control rather than political trust. Officers suspected of National Socialist sympathies were retired, transferred, or placed under observation, while others were required to make formal declarations of loyalty.

The July Putsch therefore marked a critical inflection point in civil–military relations. It did not lead to the politicisation of the *Bundesheer* in ideological terms, but it decisively undermined the assumption that professional habitus and procedural obedience were sufficient safeguards against subversion. The army remained intact, disciplined, and formally loyal. Yet

²⁸⁸ 'Convinced National Socialists.' (Etschmann, *Die Kämpfe in Österreich*, 62).

²⁸⁹ The Fatherland Front (*Vaterländische Front*) was founded in May 1933 as a regime-sponsored mass organisation intended to unite non-socialist political forces under the leadership of Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß. After the suppression of the Social Democratic Party in 1934 and the banning of political parties, it became the sole legal political organisation of the Austrian authoritarian state and functioned as the political framework of the *Ständestaat* (corporate state) regime.

it now operated under the shadow of suspicion, as an institution whose reliability could no longer be taken for granted. This tension would continue to shape the regime's relationship with the military in the final years of the Austrian state.

3.4.3 Asymmetry of Language and Military Narration

The failed National Socialist putsch of 25 July 1934 confronted the Austrian state with a challenge fundamentally different in character from that of February. Whereas the armed suppression of the *Schutzbund* had been framed as a decisive internal victory, the July crisis was narrated with marked restraint. This tonal shift is immediately apparent in the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* of 27 July 1934, the first issue to appear after the assassination of Dollfuß. Despite the gravity of the event and the death of the Chancellor, the paper avoided triumphalist language or claims of military vindication.²⁹⁰ Instead, it adopted a sober, administrative register that emphasised legality, order, and controlled response.

The official communiqué reproduced in the paper described the putsch in strictly operational terms. The assault on state institutions was presented as a coordinated but limited action rather than as the opening of a civil conflict. It reported that *'Kurz vor 13 Uhr wurde gleichzeitig mit dem Überfall auf die Sendestation der Ravag ein Handstreich gegen das Bundeskanzleramt verübt. Ein starker Trupp Nationalsozialisten in militärischen Uniformen fuhr auf Lastautos in das Gebäude auf den Ballhausplatz ein.'*²⁹¹ The emphasis lay not on ideological confrontation but on tactical execution and the immediate threat posed to state authority. Unlike February, there was no attempt to cast the events as a foundational moment for the armed forces or as a moral trial successfully overcome.

Equally revealing was the justification offered for the government's initial restraint. Decisive force was presented as having been delayed not out of hesitation but out of responsibility towards civilian life. The communiqué explained that *'eine sofortige energische Aktion [...] war am Ballhausplatz unmöglich, weil die Aufrührer das Leben so vieler Menschen in der Hand hatten.'*²⁹² This language framed the response as measured and professional, reinforcing an

²⁹⁰ *Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 27 July 1934.

²⁹¹ 'Shortly before 1 p.m., simultaneously with the attack on the RAVAG broadcasting station, a coup-style assault was carried out against the Federal Chancellery. A strong contingent of National Socialists in military uniforms drove into the building on Ballhausplatz [the Austrian chancellery] in lorries.' (*Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, 27 July 1934).

²⁹² *ÖWZ*, 27 July 1934.

image of the state and its armed organs as disciplined custodians of order rather than instruments of retribution. The *Bundesheer* appeared here not as a victorious actor but as a reserve of coercive force held back until legality and necessity aligned.

Notably absent from the ÖWZ coverage was the rhetoric of moral purification or national renewal that had characterised official commentary after February. Instead, responsibility for political violence was rhetorically dispersed. Alongside repeated references to National Socialist terrorism, communist and socialist violence were invoked in parallel statements, collapsing distinct political enemies into a single category of criminal extremism. This strategy diluted the singularity of the Nazi threat and avoided framing July as a moment of existential confrontation comparable to the civil war of February. The assassination of Dollfuß was commemorated solemnly in this issue and again on 3 August, but without the exaltation of armed force or the glorification of repression.

This restrained narrative in the officer press was mirrored and reinforced in the *Bundesheer's* own institutional publications. The *Militärwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen*, an official journal produced under the auspices of the *Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung* and staffed by serving and retired officers, published accounts of both armed conflicts in 1934. The February fighting appeared under the title *Die Niederwerfung der Februarrevolte 12.–15. Februar 1934: Ausschlaggebendes Eingreifen des Bundesheeres*.²⁹³ The framing was explicit. February was defined as a *Revolte*, its outcome as a *Niederwerfung* (suppression), and the army's role as *ausschlaggebend* (decisive). Before any operational detail was offered, the reader was presented with a clear hierarchy of legitimacy, agency, and authority.

By contrast, the July Putsch was treated under the markedly neutral title *Die Juliereignisse und das Bundesheer*.²⁹⁴ The attempted overthrow of the government, the seizure of state institutions, and the killing of the Chancellor were reduced linguistically to *Ereignisse* (events). No revolt was named, no decisive intervention claimed. This rhetorical restraint is striking given that both conflicts involved armed violence, resulted in casualties among government

²⁹³ 'The Suppression of the February Revolt 12-15 February 1934: The Decisive Intervention of the Bundesheer.' (Emil Ratzenhofer, *Die Niederwerfung der Februarrevolte Ausschlaggebendes Eingreifen des Bundesheeres*. (Vienna, 1934))

²⁹⁴ 'The July events and the Bundesheer.' (Emil Ratzenhofer *Die Juliereignisse* (Vienna, 1934)).

forces, and posed direct challenges to the authority of the state. Yet only one was elevated, linguistically and conceptually, to the level of a decisive military confrontation.

That both publications were supervised by the same individual, Emil Ratzenhofer, a retired officer of the *Bundesheer*, underscores the significance of this asymmetry. The divergence cannot be explained by differences in authorship or institutional context. It reflects instead a hierarchy of perceived threats within the military milieu. The Social Democratic uprising could be conceptualised as a coherent internal enemy whose defeat validated the army's role as guarantor of order. The National Socialist putsch resisted such narrative closure. It involved actors who overlapped socially and professionally with the army, drew on familiar nationalist vocabularies, and were entangled with external pressures beyond Austria's control.

The language of official military narration thus reveals an important institutional boundary. The *Bundesheer* was willing to present itself as the decisive instrument of the state when acting against the Social Democratic movement. When confronted with National Socialist violence, it adopted a more cautious, descriptive register that avoided framing the conflict as a revolt requiring suppression. In doing so, it preserved an image of professionalism and legality, but also exposed the limits of its conceptual readiness to confront the Nazi challenge as an equivalent internal enemy.

3.4.4 Loyalty, Infiltration, and the Limits of Reliability

The failure of the July Putsch fundamentally altered how the Austrian state evaluated the *Bundesheer* as an institution. Unlike February 1934, when the army's role had been defined by clear executive authority and the suppression of a declared internal enemy, July exposed a more ambiguous and unsettling reality. National Socialism was no longer simply an external threat to be countered by military force. It had penetrated elements of the officer corps itself, revealing the limits of depoliticisation as a guarantee of political reliability.

Operationally, the *Bundesheer* was not the decisive instrument in defeating the putsch. The initial suppression of the uprising relied primarily on police forces and *Heimwehr* units, while key army formations, including the Vienna garrison, were absent from the capital. Although regular army units were subsequently deployed to restore order in affected regions, the regime's reliance on non-army forces during the critical early phase reflected a latent mistrust. The Nazis themselves were convinced that a portion of the army would join them once the

Putsch began.²⁹⁵ The executive could not be entirely certain that the army would act with unity or decisiveness in a confrontation involving National Socialist insurgents.

This uncertainty was reinforced by revelations that followed the collapse of the coup. Investigations uncovered that a number of serving officers had maintained illegal ties to the NSDAP despite the party ban of June 1933. These connections varied in intensity, ranging from ideological sympathy and financial support to organisational involvement. The regime's response was selective rather than comprehensive, exposing the tension between political security and institutional continuity.

Several prominent cases illustrate this pattern. Colonel Lothar Rendulić, then serving as military attaché in Paris, claimed to have severed his ties with the Nazi Party after July 1934. Subsequent investigations, however, revealed that he had continued to pay party dues covertly through intermediaries. When this became known in 1935, Rendulić was recalled to Austria and dismissed from the *Bundesheer* in 1936.²⁹⁶ The bureaucratic phrasing of his service record, which framed his removal as a matter of retirement under existing pension regulations, reflected the regime's preference for administrative solutions over public political reckoning.²⁹⁷

Other cases were handled with greater leniency. Major Maximilian de Angelis, a leading figure in the Nazi Soldiers' union the *Nationalsozialistische Soldatenring* (National Socialist Soldiers' Circle), was not dismissed despite his known political affiliations.²⁹⁸ Nor was Lieutenant Colonel Julius Ringel, another prominent participant in the same network.²⁹⁹ Both officers were required to distance themselves formally from National Socialist organisations, but they were allowed to remain in service. This disparity in outcomes highlighted the absence of a consistent standard for assessing political disloyalty within the officer corps.

Generalmajor Mauritz Wiktorin represents a further variant. Employed within the Ministry of the Army, he was retired in 1935 on the grounds of unlawful contact with German authorities.³⁰⁰ As in the case of Rendulić, the official rationale emphasised administrative

²⁹⁵ Kurt Bauer, *Hitler's Zweite Putsch: Dollfuß, die Nazis und der 25. Juli 1934* (Vienna, 2014), 2006-10.

²⁹⁶ Marcel Stein, *Österreichs Generale im Deutschen Heer* (Bissendorf, 2002), 170.

²⁹⁷ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, OeStA, AdR, Personalblatt Lothar Rendulic.

²⁹⁸ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, OeStA, AdR, Grundbuchblatt Maximilian de Angelis.

²⁹⁹ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, OeStA, AdR, Grundbuchblatt Julius Ringel.

³⁰⁰ Marcel Stein, *Österreichs Generale*, 170.

impropriety rather than ideological betrayal. The regime thus avoided framing these removals as evidence of systemic National Socialist infiltration, even as it acted to neutralise individuals deemed particularly risky. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that the regime's concern after July 1934 was not ideological purification but functional reliability. Officers were removed when their behaviour threatened diplomatic stability or operational security, not simply because of political belief. The *Bundesheer* was too small, too specialised, and too institutionally central to permit large-scale purges without undermining its effectiveness.

Jedlicka's assessment helps clarify this dilemma. He emphasised that the army's value to the authoritarian state lay in its professionalism and cohesion rather than ideological commitment.³⁰¹ The events of July confirmed that this professionalism could coexist with divergent political loyalties beneath the surface. Depoliticisation had succeeded in preventing overt factionalism within the ranks, but it had not eradicated political conviction. Instead, it displaced it into private networks and informal associations that were difficult to police. By late 1934, the *Bundesheer* had once again demonstrated its usefulness as an instrument of state authority, but the confidence it inspired was conditional. The army could be relied upon to obey orders in moments of open confrontation, but its internal political homogeneity could not be assumed. July 1934 thus revealed a central paradox of Austrian civil-military relations. An army shaped to be obedient rather than ideological was stable in the short term, yet vulnerable to external political forces in the long run. This unresolved tension would remain a defining feature of the *Bundesheer's* position within the authoritarian state until the final crisis of 1938.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the transformation of the Austrian *Bundesheer* from a formally republican institution into a disciplined instrument of executive authority between the late 1920s and the mid-1930s. It has shown that this transformation did not occur through ideological radicalisation, sudden militarisation, or overt political alignment, but through a gradual redefinition of neutrality. What emerged over this period was not a politically

³⁰¹ Jedlicka, *Herr im Schatten*, 117-8.

mobilised army, but one increasingly insulated from parliamentary contestation and oriented toward legality, hierarchy, and administrative continuity.

The resurgence of paramilitary violence after 1927 did not politicise the *Bundesheer* but clarified the limits of its republican role. Faced with escalating disorder, the army consistently avoided acting as an arbiter between competing political forces. Neutrality was enacted through selective abstention, symbolic presence, and reliance on police authority, rather than through symmetrical enforcement or democratic guardianship. This posture normalised an asymmetrical understanding of order in which left-wing mass mobilisation appeared as the primary source of instability, while right-wing paramilitarism was treated as a manageable, if troubling, phenomenon external to the military sphere.

The parliamentary crisis of March 1933 represented a decisive test of this institutional orientation. The army was not confronted with an overt coup or a revolutionary seizure of power, but with an executive assertion of authority framed in legal and procedural terms. The absence of military resistance reflected neither apathy nor enthusiasm for authoritarianism, but the culmination of a longer process through which political judgement had been excluded from the professional remit of the officer corps. Neutrality had come to mean obedience to constituted authority rather than subordination to democratic institutions. Silence functioned as a professional reflex.

February 1934 confirmed the practical consequences of this redefinition. The *Bundesheer* was deployed decisively against an organised domestic political movement without internal fracture or visible dissent. Officers acted not as ideologues, but as executors of executive authority, justified through legal categories and professional duty. The army crossed a moral and political threshold in the use of force against civilians, while preserving its internal cohesion and institutional autonomy. February did not create authoritarian military power. It revealed the extent to which it had already become conceivable.

The July Putsch of 1934 exposed the limits of this model. While the army's procedural loyalty had proven reliable in suppressing the left, it offered no guarantee against clandestine ideological penetration. National Socialism posed a qualitatively different challenge, operating through illegal networks, external support, and personal affiliations within the military milieu itself. The regime's response was cautious and selective. Rather than politicising the

Bundesheer or transforming it into an ideological instrument, it relied on surveillance, administrative purges, and loyalty vetting, seeking to preserve professional stability while containing perceived risks.

Taken together, the events examined in this chapter demonstrate that the Austrian *Bundesheer* was neither a victim of authoritarian manipulation nor an independent political actor. It was an institution shaped by imperial legacies, post-war depoliticisation, and executive strategies of control. Its loyalty was procedural rather than ideological, legal rather than constitutional, and executive rather than parliamentary. This configuration ensured short-term stability, but it also created structural vulnerabilities. An army trained to obey rather than to judge could function effectively under competing claims of authority, provided those claims were framed in legal form.

These vulnerabilities would become decisive in the final crisis of the Austrian state. Having demonstrated its reliability as an instrument of executive order, the *Bundesheer* entered the late 1930s intact, disciplined, and formally neutral. Yet the very qualities that had enabled it to serve an authoritarian republic would complicate its response to the collapse of that republic altogether.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the evolution of the Austrian officer corps from the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 to the authoritarian consolidation of the First Republic in 1934, focussing on how notions of neutrality, professionalism, and institutional continuity shaped the role of the army in a rapidly changing political environment. Rather than presenting the *Bundesheer* as either a passive instrument of political actors or an inherently anti-democratic institution, it has demonstrated how inherited professional cultures interacted with new political structures to produce forms of military behaviour that were neither ideologically predetermined nor politically neutral in outcome.

The dissolution of the Habsburg state represented not simply a constitutional rupture but a profound institutional and cultural dislocation. Officers whose professional identity had been grounded in hierarchy, dynastic loyalty, and administrative service confronted a political order that no longer existed. The early years of the Republic exposed a structural tension. The state required experienced military professionals, yet those professionals had been socialised within an imperial framework. Attempts to integrate the army into the new republic through soldiers' representation and politicised notions of citizenship reflected efforts to resolve this contradiction. For many officers, however, such reforms appeared less as integration than as challenges to professional authority and institutional coherence.

The creation of the *Bundesheer* under the constraints of the Treaty of Saint-Germain reshaped this tension. The imposition of a small, professional force dependent on continuity of expertise eliminated the possibility of a mass, politically participatory military and reinforced administrative hierarchy. These conditions recast imperial traditions rather than simply preserving them. Professionalism was redefined less through dynastic loyalty than through procedure, legality, and institutional survival. Neutrality increasingly signified not democratic subordination but insulation from party politics and the preservation of corporate autonomy.

During the 1920s, the consolidation of ministerial authority deepened this shift. As the influence of soldiers' representatives receded and overt mechanisms of democratic participation declined, political influence moved into executive and administrative channels. The army's leadership increasingly operated within bureaucratic frameworks rather than public arenas. This did not render the military apolitical. Instead, it displaced political conflict

into questions of legality, competence, and institutional prerogative. Neutrality came to mean obedience to constituted authority rather than engagement with the constitutional substance of political change.

By the late 1920s, paramilitary violence and political polarisation tested this institutional culture. The *Bundesheer* responded with restraint and selective intervention, avoiding the role of arbiter between competing movements. In doing so, it preserved institutional cohesion while aligning itself more closely with executive authority than with parliamentary sovereignty. As political conflict increasingly moved beyond parliamentary channels, neutrality came to function less as a defence of democratic institutions than as a commitment to order defined by legality and hierarchy.

The suspension of parliamentary government in the early 1930s did not appear within the officer corps as a rupture demanding intervention. It was interpreted through an institutional logic forged over the previous decade: authority resided in legality as articulated by the executive, and military responsibility lay in disciplined obedience. The suppression of the *Schutzbund* in February 1934 was therefore not a sudden ideological realignment but the culmination of this evolution. Officers acted as executors of state authority, maintaining discipline and cohesion while avoiding overt political identification. What appeared externally as alignment with authoritarianism was, from within the *Bundesheer's* institutional framework, understood as procedural duty.

This interpretation challenges narratives that frame the military as either the saviour or betrayer of the Republic. The actions of the *Bundesheer* cannot be reduced to monarchist nostalgia, fascist sympathy, or conspiratorial anti-democratic. They reflected instead the unintended consequences of a professional culture that equated neutrality with withdrawal from political judgement. By separating military authority from parliamentary legitimacy while tying it to executive legality, the Republic created an army capable of operating across divergent political systems but less capable of distinguishing between democratic and authoritarian forms of rule when legality itself became contested.

A central finding of this study is the progressive narrowing of military agency. In the immediate post-imperial years, individual officers, like Theodor Körner, articulated competing visions of military identity within a period of institutional fluidity. As the Republic stabilised, those

individual dynamics became increasingly subordinate to structural and administrative constraints. The shift from personal adaptation to institutional consolidation was itself part of the historical process under examination. The officer corps did not withdraw from politics. Instead, its capacity for independent political agency was mediated and ultimately constrained by the legal and organisational frameworks within which it functioned.

Beyond the Austrian case, these findings contribute to wider debates in civil-military relations. The experience of the First Republic suggests that depoliticisation should not automatically be equated with democratic stability. A military that defines neutrality as procedural obedience may remain cohesive and professionally effective while becoming structurally aligned with executive authority. Under conditions of constitutional strain, such an institution may facilitate authoritarian consolidation not through ideological extremism but through disciplined adherence to legality and order. The Austrian example underscores the need to distinguishing between neutrality as democratic subordination and neutrality as institutional insulation.

The endurance of imperial legacies proved equally significant. The *Bundesheer* inherited more than personnel from the Habsburg army: it inherited assumptions about hierarchy, authority, and the relationship between military service and statehood that proved survived regime change. These legacies did not determine outcomes, but they structured the range of responses that appeared legitimate or conceivable to those within the institution.

By 1934, the *Bundesheer* stood as a disciplined, professional, and formally neutral force whose loyalty was directed toward executive authority rather than parliamentary sovereignty. This configuration ensured short-term stability and institutional coherence, yet it also detached the army from the democratic foundations of the state it served. The First Republic's experience reveals how military neutrality, far from being a fixed principle, could evolve into an institutional logic that stabilised authority while narrowing the political horizons within which that authority was interpreted.

The consequences extended beyond 1934. By favouring legality, hierarchy, and administrative continuity over political judgement, the army entered the later 1930s equipped to adapt to shifting regimes but constrained in its ability to evaluate competing claims to legitimacy. The erosion of Austrian independence, which culminated in the *Anschluss* of March 1938, cannot

be understood solely through ideological conflict or external pressure. It was also shaped by an institutional culture forged in the republic's formative crises, one that prioritised obedience and cohesion even as the constitutional order it had been created to serve was transformed.

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