

The Austro-Hungarian Divisions on the Western Front, 1918

Undergraduate Research Thesis

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Glossary of Select Terms and Abbreviations

AEF – American Expeditionary Force.

Anlage – Annex/appendix.

Armee/Armeen – Army/armies.

Armee-Abteilung C – Army Detachment C, a German army-level command of H.G. Gallwitz.

Armeeoberkommando (AOK) – Austro-Hungarian High Command.

Divisionsausbildungsgruppe (DAG) – Divisional training group.

Etappenstelle West (EstW) – the Austro-Hungarian logistical apparatus for the Western Front.

Feldjägerbataillon (FJB) – Light infantry battalion.

Feldmarschalleutnant (FML) – Equivalent of a major general in the US Army, normally a divisional commander.

Gruppe – An ad-hoc, often temporary, and usually corps-level command.

Hauptwiderstandslinie (HWL) – the primary line of defense of a trench system.

Heeresgruppe (H.G.) - Army group.

Honvéd – the Hungarian home defense force; counterpart to the Austrian k.k. Landwehr.

ID. – Infantry division.

IR – Infantry regiment.

Kaiserlich und königlich (k.u.k.) – “imperial (Austrian) and royal (Hungarian);” appellation for the Austro-Hungarian Common Army (k.u.k. Armee).

Landsturm (Lst.) – Austro-Hungarian reserve/militia force.

Maas – the river Meuse.

Oberste Heeresleitung (OHL) – The Supreme Command of the German Army.

Op.Nr. – Operation file number.

ÖULK – *Austria-Hungary's Last War*, the official Austrian military history of the First World War.

Sturmbataillon (StBaon) – specialized assault battalion.

Westheer – German forces on the Western Front, as opposed to those in the East (the Ostheer).

I. Introduction

On November 5th, 1918, two days after the formal capitulation of the Habsburg military at Villa Giusti, a battery of Field Artillery Regiment 101 of the *k.u.k.* 1st Infantry Division fired the final Austro-Hungarian shot of the First World War. Surprisingly, this belated, rather anticlimactic conclusion of Austria-Hungary's last war did not occur in the hills of the Balkans or in the mountains of northern Italy, but around the small village of Vilosnes in the Meuse department of eastern France.¹ From July 1918 until the end of the war in November, four infantry divisions and a number of artillery units of the Austro-Hungarian Army participated in the desperate, increasingly futile struggle of the German Army on the Western Front against the inexorable advance of the Allied Hundred Days Offensive. As the Habsburg Monarchy itself disintegrated and the main body of the Austro-Hungarian field army collapsed in Italy, the soldiers of the 1st, 35th, 37th Honvéd, and 106th Infantry Divisions labored and fought under close subordination to the German forces in northeastern France, sequestered hundreds of miles away from the seminal political and military events of the dissolution of Austria-Hungary. Indeed, by the time that *k.u.k.* troops withdrew from their positions in Lorraine at the beginning of November, the state that they fought for had de facto ceased to exist.

Despite the centrality of Austria-Hungary in the outbreak and prosecution of the Great War, the Austro-Hungarian Army is a relatively obscure topic in the Anglosphere. However, even within the field of Habsburg military history, the presence of *k.u.k.* forces in the West is little-known. To be sure, the Habsburg military played a distinctively subordinate and mostly insignificant role on the Western Front. For one, the Western Front was never the primary theater

¹ Maximilian Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront 1914/1918" (Doctoral thesis, University of Vienna, 1974), 119.

of operations for the *k.u.k. Armee*; in September 1918, only two Austro-Hungarian divisions stood in France, while fifty-seven were stationed in Italy.² Likewise, even after the westward deployment of entire *k.u.k.* infantry divisions in July 1918, Habsburg troops constituted a minuscule proportion of the German *Westheer*; correspondingly, given that the military defeat of the Central Powers was a foregone conclusion by the summer of 1918, the contribution of these Austro-Hungarian divisions in military terms was negligible.

Although *k.u.k.* units did not have any meaningful impact on the final battles of the Western Front, the phenomenon of Habsburg forces fighting in France is significant in other ways. Firstly, the deployment of *k.u.k.* infantry divisions to France in 1918 represented the final stage of Austria-Hungary's intermittent but longstanding participation in the fighting in the West, a role largely forgotten in most histories of the Great War. Similarly, both the diplomatic and strategic background of the deployment of *k.u.k.* divisions to the West and their employment in northeastern France exemplified the culmination of the wartime relationship between the Austria-Hungary and Germany, specifically the political and military subordination of the Habsburg Monarchy to the German Reich. Lastly, the experience of the Austro-Hungarian divisions in France typified the wartime evolution of the *k.u.k. Armee*, exhibiting the progress made by the Austro-Hungarian military in organizational, technological, and tactical modernization. Yet, at the same time, the ultimate inability of the Habsburg forces in France to successfully resist the Franco-American onslaught demonstrated that the wartime adaptations of the Austro-Hungarian military could not overcome the immense superiority of the Entente forces or the progressive disintegration of the Habsburg military and state.

² Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1998), 214-215.

Note on Sources

The primary basis of this thesis is the collection of Austro-Hungarian military records located at the US National Archives at College Park, Maryland. Officers from the US Army War College collected these documents from the German Reichsarchiv in Potsdam and the Austrian Kriegsarchiv in Vienna in 1929. The collection includes war diaries, operational reports, official communiques, and other administrative documents from multiple echelons of the German and Austro-Hungarian armies, namely from the high command, corps, divisional, brigade, and occasionally regimental levels.³ Given the relative obscurity of the subject, very little scholarly literature exists regarding the Austro-Hungarian divisions in the West in 1918, virtually none of which is in English. The principal secondary source for this thesis and for this subject is “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront 1914/1918,” a 1974 doctoral dissertation written by Maximilian Polatschek at the University of Vienna. Polatschek utilized not only a variety of military and diplomatic documents from the Austrian State Archives, but also drew from the postwar memoirs of leading Austro-Hungarian and German military figures.⁴ Therefore, given the breadth of primary sources incorporated by Polatschek and the largely descriptive nature of his work, this thesis often utilizes Polatschek’s dissertation in a manner similar to a primary source. However, it must be noted that Polatschek seemingly utilized only the operations files and weekly reports of the *Armeeoberkommando* for his dissertation; thus, to the knowledge of this author, previous works on this subject have not incorporated many of the divisional operations documents utilized by this thesis.

³ The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, “Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, 1918 - 5/12/1947,” *The National Archives Website*, accessed February 25th, 2018, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/2544443>.

⁴ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 1-2.

II. Austro-Hungarian Units on the Western Front Prior to July 1918

Unlike the multinational character of the Entente forces in France and Belgium, the Western Front remained an overwhelmingly German affair for the Central Powers during the First World War. Basic geography, namely the great distance between France and the Habsburg Monarchy and the concomitant issues of supply and transportation played an important role in precluding the large-scale intervention of Habsburg forces in the West. Political and diplomatic considerations were also salient, as Austro-Hungarian leaders did not want to induce a greater Anglo-French intervention in the Monarchy's other theaters. Still, the greatest barriers to a significant Habsburg military presence in the West were the limited military capacity of the Habsburg Monarchy and the prioritization of the Eastern and Southwestern Fronts. Already by 1915, crippling losses in manpower and materiel had stretched the Habsburg state to the limit; given the existential threats posed by Russia and Italy, Austria-Hungary simply could not afford to commit large formations to the West.⁵ Nevertheless, the *k.u.k. Armee* did dispatch forces to the Western Front on four occasions from 1914 to 1918. The first Austro-Hungarian units to fight in the West arrived in August 1914, only weeks after the outbreak of the conflict.⁶ Thus, even before the deployment of entire Austro-Hungarian infantry divisions to France in summer 1918, there was a well-established precedent for the participation of *k.u.k.* units in the West.

Austro-Hungarian Artillery in Belgium and France, 1914-1915

The first instance of Habsburg troops fighting on the Western Front occurred from August 1914 to May 1915, during which Austro-Hungarian heavy siege artillery of the half-

⁵ Ibid., 3-4.

⁶ Wolfgang Etschmann, "Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung. K.u.k. Truppen an der Westfront," in *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, ed. Jörg Doppler, Gerhard P. Groß, 97-105 (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2009), 97-98.

battalions “Krakau” and “Görz-Wippach” provided effective fire support for several important operations of the initial German campaigns in the West.⁷ The difficulties encountered by Germans in reducing the fortifications of Liège during their advance through Belgium were the original impetus for this first deployment. On August 6th, 1914, reflecting on the German shortage of modern siege artillery, the Chief of the German General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, requested that his Austro-Hungarian counterpart, Chief of Staff of the *k.u.k. Armeoberkommando* Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, dispatch any available Austro-Hungarian 24cm and 30.5cm howitzers to the Western Front. Later that same day, the AOK responded that it could provide four batteries of 30.5cm siege howitzers along with 300 shells per gun.⁸

In contrast to the prevailing obsolescence of the Austro-Hungarian artillery arm in 1914, the Skoda 30.5cm *Mörser* M.11 was one of the most advanced heavy artillery pieces in the world at the time. In addition to possessing an unusual degree of mobility, courtesy of its innovative motorized chassis designed by Ferdinand Porsche, the M.11 design provided significant firepower for its relatively small caliber. Tests in January 1913 demonstrated that its 380kg shell, effective up to a range of 10km, could overcome the thickest steel plates and concrete walls utilized in modern fortress designs.⁹ On August 9th, Moltke thanked Hötzendorf for this assistance and for his part promised to expedite the German supply of Mauser rifles, ammunition, and airplanes to the Dual Monarchy. Two days later, an AOK order directly subordinated the westward-bound artillery units to the German *Oberste Heeresleitung*, the first instance of direct German command of Austro-Hungarian troops during the war.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 98.

⁸ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 7-8.

⁹ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7-8.

From August 12-13, the 3rd and 4th Batteries of *k.u.k. Festungsartillerieregiment* No. 2 (“*Halbbataillon* Krakau”) and the 7th and 8th Batteries of *k.u.k. Festungsartillerieregiment* No. 8 (“*Halbbataillon* Görz-Wippach”) entrained for Belgium with a total of four howitzers per half-battalion.¹¹ Notably, the German, Polish, Czech, and Slovene artillerymen of these batteries reacted to their westward deployment with jubilation, decorating their field caps with the customary oak leaves, renewing their military oaths to the Emperor, and greeting the sight of the Belgian border with a resounding “hurrah;” similarly, as the Austro-Hungarian batteries travelled through Germany en route to Liège, German civilians greeted them with great enthusiasm. On August 19th, both half-battalions arrived in Liège, but the last fortifications of the city had fallen three days earlier.¹² Instead, the *k.u.k.* siege artillery first saw action along the river Maas, shelling the forts of Namur from August 21-28. Interestingly, the *k.u.k.* artillery began to bombard Namur six days before the official Austro-Hungarian declaration of war on Belgium.¹³ *Halbbataillon* Görz-Wippach then proceeded to shell the fortifications of Maubeuge in France from August 29th to September 8th. Later, this unit participated in the siege of Antwerp from September 28th to October 9th and subsequently saw action at Ypres until January 1915; the 8th Battery was then transferred to East Prussia while the 7th Battery remained at Nieuwpoort until March 1915, when it finally returned to Austria. *Halbbataillon* Krakau bombarded the fortifications of Givet from August 28-31 and subsequently saw action at the Côtes Lorraines, shelling the forts of Troyon, Paroches, and Liouville until its removal in May 1915.¹⁴

Ironically, despite the small size of the Austro-Hungarian contingent – only eight howitzers in total – the actions of the *k.u.k.* heavy siege artillery in the operations of 1914-1915

¹¹ Peter Jung, *The Austro-Hungarian Forces in World War I (2): 1916-18* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 37.

¹² Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 8-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁴ Jung, *The Austro-Hungarian Forces in World War I (2)*, 37-38.

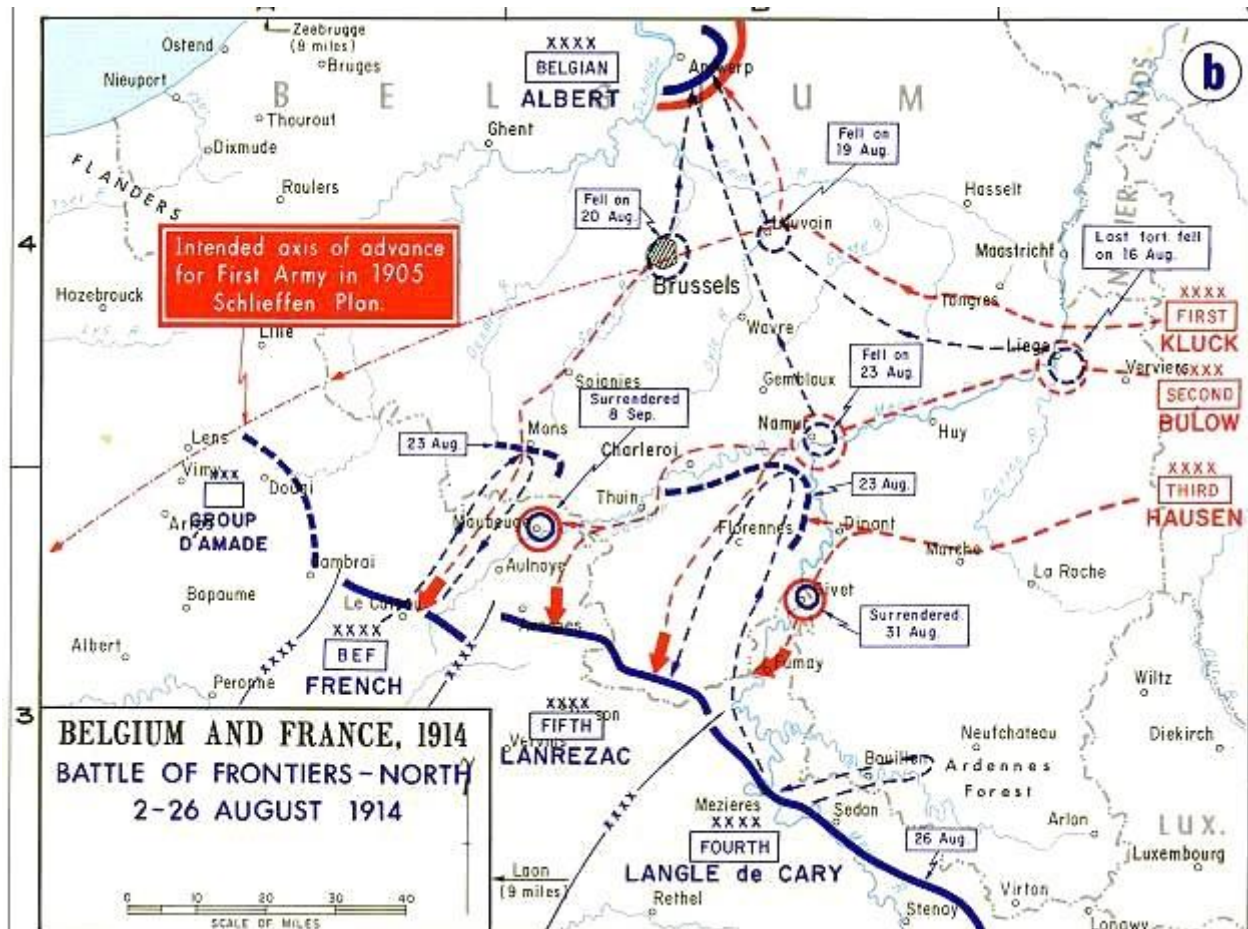
were probably the most decisive contribution of Austro-Hungarian forces to the fighting on the Western Front. In stark contrast to their typically low opinion of the Habsburg military, the Germans were effusive in their praise of the *k.u.k.* howitzer batteries. A German Army report of September 4th commended the excellent mobility and accuracy of the Austro-Hungarian motorized howitzers at Namur and Givet. Likewise, in a November 14th letter, Moltke himself expressed “great joy” in the performance of the Austro-Hungarian artillerymen, whom he had personally observed twice; he asserted that the officers, men, and materiel of the artillery units were of the highest quality and deserved “unreserved praise,” while their esprit de corps and impeccable conduct demonstrated the “beautiful comradely spirit of our alliance.”¹⁵

Indeed, the Skoda 30.5cm howitzers and their crews had shown the great efficacy of the Austro-Hungarian heavy siege artillery during their time in Belgium and France. French and Belgian fortresses, from the state-of-the-art fortifications of Antwerp to the sixteenth-century forts of Givet consistently proved no match for the M.11. At Fort Andoy along the Maas, the fortifications could not withstand the rapidity and power of the Austro-Hungarian bombardment and surrendered after less than a day of shelling; the aftermath was “a picture of the most thorough destruction” with thick iron bars “snapped like twigs”, heavy steel gates blasted off their hinges, thick armored cupolas penetrated deeply, and reinforced concrete walls reduced to heaps of rubble.¹⁶ The augmentation of firepower and flexibility afforded to the Germans by the *k.u.k.* siege howitzers was significant for expediting the course of German operations in 1914. The conquest of the fortresses of Namur freed the bulk of the German 1. and 2. *Armeen* to pursue and defeat the British at Mons, while the Austro-Hungarian bombardment of Maubeuge yielded

¹⁵ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 20-22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

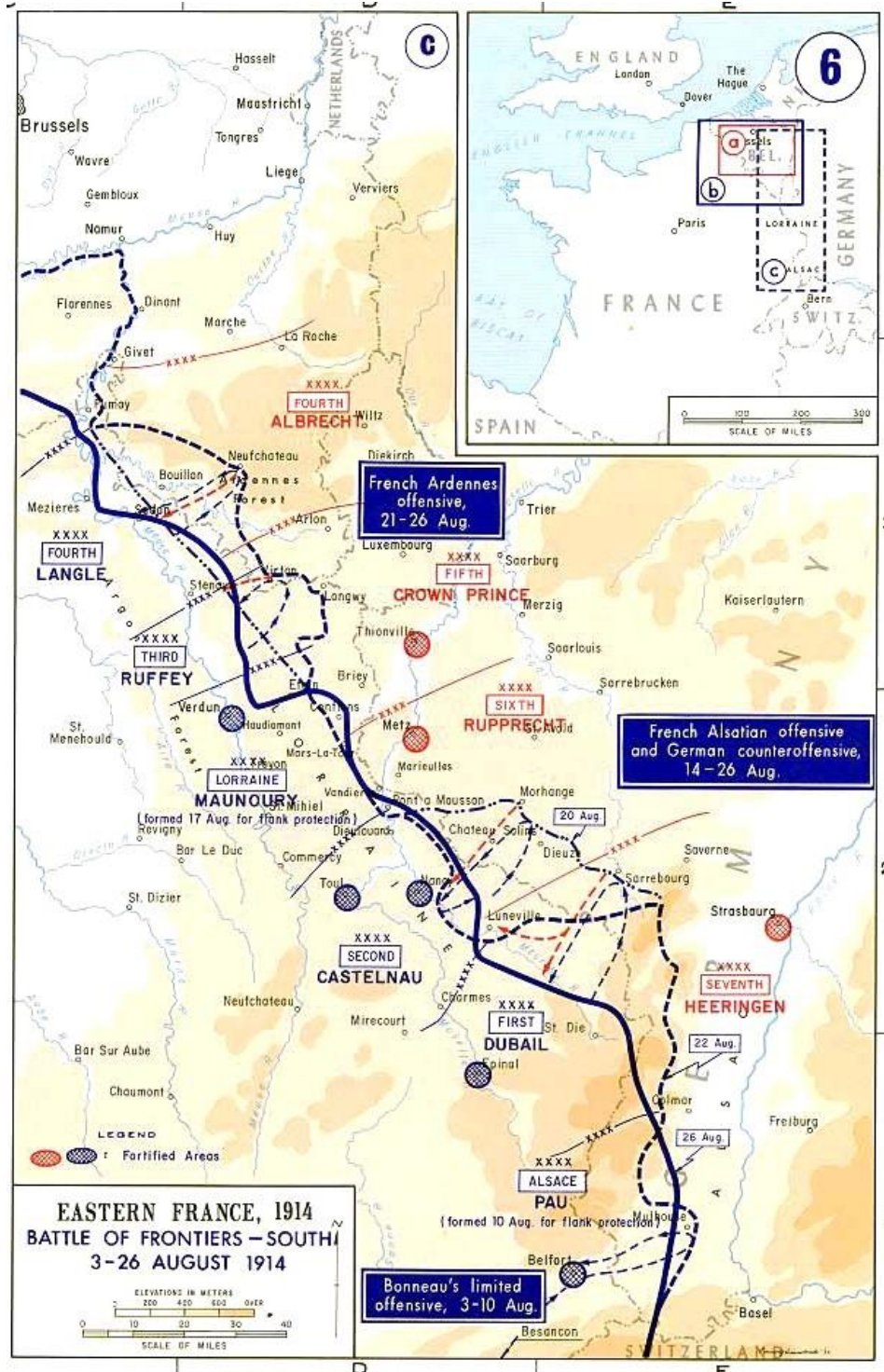
40,000 prisoners and 400 guns. Likewise the cooperation of *k.u.k.* M.11's with the German 42cm "Big Bertha's" hastened the capitulation of Antwerp, one of the most important ports in western Europe.¹⁷



The Battle of the Frontiers in northern France and Belgium, 1914.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 11-13.

¹⁸ Department of History, USMA at West Point, "Battle of the Frontiers - Map," *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed March 15th, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_Frontiers_-_Map.jpg.



The Battle of the Frontiers in eastern France, 1914.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid.



A Skoda 30.5cm M.11 siege howitzer in firing position.²⁰

²⁰ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront."



One of the destroyed fortresses at Maubeuge (Fort Sarts).²¹

Austro-Hungarian Artillery at Verdun, 1916

The second and most obscure instance of Austro-Hungarian troops on the Western Front occurred during the Battle of Verdun in the summer and autumn of 1916. On June 10th, nearly four months into the battle, Chief of the German General Staff Erich von Falkenhayn requested that the AOK send any heavy artillery units not in use in the Austro-Hungarian “*Strafexpedition*” offensive in Italy or preoccupied in Galicia to aid German units at Verdun. On June 16th, Conrad acquiesced and ordered the deployment of a heavy artillery group to the West; on June 21st, he notified Falkenhayn that the “*Artilleriegruppe Nadherny*,” consisting of three batteries of 30.5cm howitzers (*Mörserbatterien* 1, 2, and 14, each with two guns) and two batteries of 42cm coastal

²¹ Ibid.

howitzers (*Küstenhaubitzenbatterien* 2 and 3, each with one gun), would depart for France on June 23rd.

Unfortunately, nothing is known about the operations of *k.u.k.* artillery at Verdun other than the fact that this artillery group departed for the West on the aforementioned date. According to Polatschek, neither the AOK operations files, which display great deficiencies concerning this matter, nor the secondary literature offer any more information on this phenomenon.²² Thus, with the exception of this possible deployment of artillery at Verdun, the presence of *k.u.k. Armee* personnel on the Western Front between 1915 and 1918 was limited to liaison officers, observers, and the participation of individual officers and soldiers in German training exercises.²³ Nevertheless, given Falkenhayn's request, the earlier intervention of *k.u.k.* troops on the Western front had not only impressed upon the Germans the utility of Austro-Hungarian heavy artillery, but had also established a clear precedent for the employment of Habsburg forces in the West.

Austro-Hungarian Artillery in the German Spring Offensive, 1918

Until the dispatch of *k.u.k.* infantry divisions to France later that same year, the participation of Austro-Hungarian artillery formations in the German Spring Offensive of 1918 constituted the largest deployment of Habsburg troops to the Western Front. On February 8th, the AOK consented to the request of Erich Ludendorff, First Quartermaster-General (*Generalquartiermeister*) of the OHL and de facto military dictator of Germany, for fifty Austro-Hungarian artillery batteries to support the impending German offensive in France.²⁴ In spite of

²² Ibid., 26-27.

²³ Etschmann, "Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung," 98.

²⁴ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 42-43.

the preparations for their own offensive in Italy, the AOK was anxious to bring the artillery units earmarked for the West up to their full complement of men, equipment, and ammunition in order to ensure their optimum performance in France; particular attention was given to the provision of gas masks in anticipation of the combat conditions there. However, the OHL insisted multiple times on the earliest possible deployment of the *k.u.k.* artillery and refused to extend the period of preparation beyond March 1st. In total, the AOK allocated to the Western Front ten heavy field artillery regiments (*schwere Feldartillerieregimenter* 1, 2, 11, 25, 30, 45, 54, 59, 72, 206), each of which consisted of three four-gun 15cm howitzer batteries and one four-gun 10.4cm cannon battery. Additional batteries of 24cm cannons and 30.5cm, 38cm, and 42cm howitzers were also provided.²⁵ Altogether, 152 *k.u.k.* artillery pieces were deployed for the Spring Offensive. The first two regiments departed for France on March 2nd and arrived there on March 11th, while the remainder departed after March 12th and had arrived by March 19th.²⁶

Although Ludendorff had considered deploying all of the *k.u.k.* artillery as a single cohesive group at one section of the front, logistical concerns precluded this notion and the regiments and batteries were parceled out individually among four German armies. Interestingly, in order to maintain the combat effectiveness of the *k.u.k.* artillery and to offset probable materiel shortages, the OHL ordered that two of the *k.u.k.* artillery regiments relinquish their equipment and ammunition as a reserve for the other Austro-Hungarian units and rearm with German weapons. Thus, strangely enough, the artillerymen of *schwere Feldartillerieregimenter* 30 and 59 merely served as crews for German artillery pieces during the Spring Offensive.²⁷ Operation Michael, the first operation of the German Spring Offensive, began on March 21st. *K.u.k.* heavy

²⁵ Ibid., 53.

²⁶ Ibid., 55-56.

²⁷ Ibid., 54-55.

and super artillery played a notable role in providing fire support both for the diversionary “demonstration” actions of Heeresgruppe Gallwitz as well as for the main thrust of the German attack; around half of all Austro-Hungarian artillery on the Western Front was allocated to the 17. and 18. *Armeen* of the Heeresgruppen Kronprinz Rupprecht and Deutscher Kronprinz, which formed the focal point (*Schwerpunkt*) of the offensive. Because the artillery had to be moved forward to support the surprise infantry attacks, the Austro-Hungarian artillery units fought under very difficult conditions in exposed positions.²⁸

Despite these circumstances, the Austro-Hungarian heavy artillery once again accorded itself well, with German officers and infantrymen comparing the precision and coordination of the *k.u.k.* artillery units favorably with the German artillery. Both divisional reports and the statements of individuals highlighted the contributions of the *k.u.k.* artillery, often singling out individual batteries for praise. *Generalfeldmarschall* Paul von Hindenburg, the Chief of Staff of the German Army, likewise informed the AOK in a telegram of March 27th that that the Austro-Hungarian artillery “have done their duty in full measure.”²⁹ The French were quite surprised to encounter Austro-Hungarian artillery during the Spring Offensive, as they believed that the Habsburg Monarchy was already defunct; they were similarly impressed by the skill of the Austro-Hungarian gun crews, particularly their ability to accurately adjust their artillery fire.³⁰

However, even while the fighting of the initial German offensive in the West still raged, a large proportion of the *k.u.k.* artillery had already expended their limited supply of ammunition and had to be withdrawn from the front on March 27th. After the failure of the German thrust towards Amiens and the cessation of Operation Michael on April 5th, almost all of the Austro-

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

Hungarian artillery on the Western Front departed France for the Habsburg Monarchy.³¹ At this point, the only *k.u.k.* artillery remaining in the West were three heavy howitzer batteries with Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz and one heavy field artillery regiment (*schweres Feldartillerieregiment* 11) along with two 30.5cm howitzer batteries with Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht. Beginning on April 9th, during Operation Georgette, eighteen *k.u.k.* heavy and super-heavy guns supported the attack of the 6. *Armee* of H.G. Kronprinz Rupprecht between the La Bassée Canal and Armentières. Yet, even before the renewed German offensive ground to a halt on April 19th, all of the individual *k.u.k.* batteries had been withdrawn from the frontlines on April 15th on account of their lack of ammunition. As it still possessed 3500 shells on April 18th, *schweres Feldartillerieregiment* 11 remained at the front for the longest, only withdrawing on April 20th after it had completely expended its ammunition. On April 21st, all of the remaining Austro-Hungarian artillery units left France for the Italian Front.³²

³¹ Ibid., 57-58.

³² Ibid., 58-59.



Austro-Hungarian artillerymen on the Western Front.³³



An Austro-Hungarian 38cm howitzer on the Western Front.³⁴

³³ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront."

³⁴ Ibid.

III. The Political and Military Context for the *k.u.k.* Divisions in France 1916-1918

Thus, the utilization of Austro-Hungarian forces on the Western Front was by no means a new phenomenon by the summer of 1918. Although the involvement of *k.u.k.* artillery units in the fighting in France and Belgium was sporadic and relatively brief, Austro-Hungarian artillerymen played a notable role in at least two of the three major German offensives in the West. Yet, the deployment of the *k.u.k.* 1st and 35th Infantry Divisions to France in July/August 1918 represented a distinct escalation of Austria-Hungary's involvement on the Western Front. Hitherto, the Austro-Hungarian presence in the West was limited to individual artillery batteries and regiments dispersed ad hoc amongst different German armies to besiege important enemy strong points and lend additional firepower to German offensives. Now, entire Austro-Hungarian infantry divisions, comprised of thousands of riflemen supported by significant complements of machine guns, artillery, assault troops, and technical formations, arrived to occupy and defend sectors of the German frontlines. During the final two years of the Great War, particularly after the successful Austro-German offensive at Caporetto in October/November 1917, three prevailing and interconnected trends increasingly militated in favor of the deployment of Austro-Hungarian infantry to the Western Front. Specifically, the progressive collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy and the changing strategic outlook of the Central Powers resulted in the culmination of Austro-Hungarian political and military subordination to Germany, which in turn made the commitment of *k.u.k.* infantry divisions to France almost unavoidable.

Alliance Politics and Military Developments in 1916

The notion of a greater role for the *k.u.k. Armee* on the Western Front first arose in 1916 amidst the strategic discussions between the German and Austro-Hungarian military leadership.

In late 1915 and early 1916, as the realities of a protracted conflict against a superior enemy coalition became manifest, deliberations between the OHL and AOK increasingly dwelled upon the idea of concentrating the forces of the alliance to comprehensively defeat one of their opponents. In theory, the departure of one enemy nation from the hostile alliance would significantly reduce the overextension of the Central Powers' forces; more importantly, thinning the ranks of the Entente could precipitate a decisive confrontation that would ideally result in a favorable peace settlement.³⁵

However, fundamental disagreements arose between the two Chiefs of Staff as to which enemy the Central Powers should eliminate.³⁶ While Falkenhayn conceived of an attritional strategy and a limited offensive in the West directed towards exhausting the French army, Conrad envisioned a sweeping offensive in the Trentino to encircle and annihilate the forces of Italy.³⁷ Interestingly, according to Falkenhayn's memoirs, Conrad was the first to articulate the idea of an Austro-Hungarian intervention in the West, despite his great personal aversion to Falkenhayn and his determination to assert Habsburg military independence vis-à-vis Germany. Still, given his great confidence in an Austro-Hungarian victory over Italy at the time, Conrad apparently expressed his willingness to deploy 400,000 Habsburg troops for the final showdown in France.³⁸ However, while Falkenhayn was skeptical of the potential success of the Austro-Hungarian "*Strafexpedition*," he was also contemptuous of the combat capabilities of the *k.u.k. Armee* and its utility on the Western Front. Thus, Falkenhayn initially dismissed the idea of a major joint action in the West. In a letter to Conrad on December 16th, 1915, he merely requested

³⁵ Ibid., 23.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 194.

³⁸ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 23.

that Austro-Hungarian units to take over certain sections of the Eastern Front to free up more German forces for his planned offensive in the West.³⁹

Ultimately, the German and Austro-Hungarian armies failed to agree upon a common course of action. Just as the forces of the Entente began to coordinate their operations more closely, the Central Powers further dissipated their strength in the unsuccessful, uncoordinated offensives at Verdun and Asiago.⁴⁰ However, as the German and Austro-Hungarian offensive plans began to encounter difficulties during the first half of 1916, the idea of greater Austro-Hungarian participation on the Western Front gained further currency in the minds of German and even some Austro-Hungarian officers. The German offensive at Verdun began on February 21st, but heavy snowfall in the mountains of northern Italy repeatedly postponed Conrad's Asiago offensive. Consequently, the *Strafexpedition* did not actually begin until May 15th, by which point any element of surprise had been lost.⁴¹ Beginning in May, Falkenhayn seemingly changed his tune regarding Austro-Hungarian assistance in the West, a conversion likely induced not only by the repeated delays of the Austro-Hungarian operation, but also by the deteriorating situation at Verdun. Falkenhayn instructed August von Cramon, the OHL plenipotentiary assigned to the AOK, to carefully gauge the willingness of the Austro-Hungarian high command to alternative operations if the *Strafexpedition* were cancelled.⁴²

Yet, when Cramon questioned Conrad on the feasibility of his operational plans and suggested that Austro-Hungarian forces should instead reinforce the German efforts in the West,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 279-280.

⁴¹ Richard Bassett, *For God and Kaiser: The Imperial Austrian Army* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 500-501.

⁴² Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 24.

Conrad summarily and brusquely rebuffed the German plenipotentiary. However, somewhat surprisingly, Cramon noted that some of the younger staff officers of the AOK disagreed with their chief of staff and supported the German proposition.⁴³ Thus, in his reply to Falkenhayn on May 4th, Cramon reported that the Austro-Hungarians were determined to go through with Conrad's plan, but speculated that in the event of an Austro-Hungarian failure, *k.u.k.* units could be available for a common action.⁴⁴ On May 12th, Falkenhayn expressed this notion more concretely in a letter to Cramon, noting that the continued delay of the Austro-Hungarian offensive seemed to increase the likelihood of small-scale Austro-Hungarian support in the West, specifically that of *k.u.k.* heavy artillery.⁴⁵

After Cramon reported the beginning of the Asiago Offensive to Falkenhayn, the German Chief of Staff expressed his best wishes for the Habsburg operation while simultaneously instructing Cramon that in the event of an Austro-Hungarian failure, he should punctually suggest to the AOK a joint offensive in another theater, specifically the Western Front.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, during a meeting between Conrad and Falkenhayn on May 24th, at which point the Asiago Offensive had made some progress and the French attempts to recapture Fort Douaumont had failed, Falkenhayn did not raise the issue of deploying *k.u.k.* units to the West en masse. In light of the suspected imminent British offensive on the Somme and Russian activity in Galicia, the two chiefs of staff agreed to raise the issue of a joint offensive after the conclusion of operations against Italy.⁴⁷ However, the momentous events of the summer of 1916 quickly overtook Austro-Hungarian and German planning. The Russian Brusilov Offensive in Galicia,

⁴³ Manfred Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2014), 514.

⁴⁴ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 24.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

beginning on June 4th, not only precipitated the premature end of the stalled Austro-Hungarian operations in Italy, but also nearly shattered the Austro-Hungarian Army on the Eastern Front. Habsburg forces yielded significant territory in Galicia and Bukovina to the Tsarist advance and suffered an estimated 750,000 casualties in the process.⁴⁸

The consequences of the Brusilov Offensive in alliance-political terms were similarly disastrous for Austria-Hungary. The intensification of German involvement on the Eastern Front necessitated by the Russian onslaught and the failure of the Habsburg military leadership on all fronts resulted in the further subordination of the Habsburg Monarchy to its German ally. On September 6th, all Central Powers forces in the East were subordinated to the United Supreme Command (*Oberste Kriegsleitung*) under the formal leadership of Kaiser Wilhelm II. This measure, coupled with the appointment of German officers to Austro-Hungarian command positions and the proliferation of German advisors and liaison officers throughout the Habsburg army, exemplified a more cohesive, centralized alliance in which Austria-Hungary was clearly a junior partner.⁴⁹

The exigencies of other fronts and the near collapse of the Habsburg military precluded any significant Austro-Hungarian involvement on the Western Front in 1916. Yet, the events of that year not only witnessed the first conception of an Austro-Hungarian intervention in the West, but also established the preconditions for such an event. For one, the apparent correlation between Falkenhayn's opinion of utilizing Austro-Hungarian forces in the West and the fortunes of the German operations at Verdun suggest that the German military leadership were willing to set aside their disdain for the *k.u.k. Armee* when military necessity demanded as such. The

⁴⁸ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 195-197.

⁴⁹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 327.

disagreements between the OHL and the AOK over strategic priorities in 1916 demonstrated that despite their many common enemies, neither the immediate nor the long-term interests of Austria-Hungary and Germany were identical. At the same time, Conrad's acquiescence to Falkenhayn's request for *k.u.k.* artillery at Verdun in June, concomitant with the failure of the Asiago Offensive and the catastrophe in Galicia, not only demonstrated Austria-Hungary's increasing reliance on German military power, but also set a precedent in the Austro-German military relationship. The abortive *Strafexpedition* in Italy represented the last major independent Austro-Hungarian offensive until the June Offensive of 1918; other than its defense of Italy, Austria-Hungary conducted all subsequent campaigns, namely in Romania and Russia, with significant German support and under German leadership.⁵⁰ Austro-Hungarian military failure critically undermined both the Monarchy's capability for independent military action and the ability of the AOK to justify such independent operations.

Therefore, after 1916, Austro-German military planning was heavily colored by alliance politics as the AOK struggled to assert its independence and interests vis-à-vis those of the OHL.⁵¹ Indeed, after 1916, the relationship between Austria-Hungary and Germany was increasingly characterized by a strange dialectic of dependence and dissension. On one hand, the military disasters and economic hardships of 1916 had placed Austria-Hungary in a state of unprecedented dependence on Germany.⁵² However, beginning in 1917, the interests of the Habsburg Monarchy were also increasingly at odds with those of the German Reich. Given Germany's growing military and economic hegemony in central Europe and the widening asymmetry between Habsburg and Hohenzollern power, many figures in Austria-Hungary saw a

⁵⁰ John A. Dredger, *Tactics and Procurement in the Habsburg Military, 1866-1918* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 259-261.

⁵¹ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 28.

⁵² Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 586.

German victory as an existential threat to the Monarchy's independence.⁵³ The events of 1917 and 1918 witnessed the progression of both of these trends; the eventual utilization of Austro-Hungarian divisions in the West was one of the ultimate outcomes of Austria-Hungary's inability to solve this paradox.

Austro-Hungarian Internal and External Challenges, 1916-1917

The figure of Emperor Karl I/IV, the last monarch of Austria-Hungary, looms large in the background of the Austro-Hungarian deployment to the Western Front. Ascending to the throne after the death of Franz Joseph on November 21st, 1916, the new monarch was young, idealistic, and determined to extricate his empire from both the ravages of the Great War and from Prussian-German domination. However, despite his best efforts, both the internal and the international status of Austria-Hungary declined from early 1917 to mid-1918; ironically, many of Karl's actions directly contributed to this decline.⁵⁴

To be sure, the challenges that Karl faced were enormous, as the Habsburg Monarchy was in a state of unprecedented crisis. Deprivation, especially the lack of food, was perhaps the most serious problem facing the Monarchy. Labor and fertilizer shortages, the loss of valuable agricultural land in Galicia, the Allied blockade, extensive corruption, and the complicated federal structure of the Empire combined to yield critical food shortages in 1916, with Austria-Hungary witnessing its first food riots in Vienna that May.⁵⁵ Widespread deprivation in 1916 and 1917 critically undermined both support for the war effort and imperial unity. Anger, mutual recrimination, and competition for scarce resources, when coupled with pre-existing political and

⁵³ Daniel J. Hughes and Richard L. DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War, 1871-1918* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 315.

⁵⁴ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 643-645.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 499-500.

ethnic tensions, served to further fragment the Monarchy, shattering the already weak horizontal bonds linking Habsburg subjects; anti-Habsburg nationalists increasingly took advantage of these divisions to whip up support for separatism.⁵⁶ At the same time, the heavy losses suffered by the *k.u.k. Armee* in the field and the continuing material shortages on the home front precipitated growing resentment towards a Habsburg state that seemed capable of neither provisioning food nor concluding the war. Public discontent with the government was manifest in both the proliferation of riots and demonstrations in 1917 and, most alarmingly, in the assassination of Austrian prime minister Karl von Stürgkh by a radical socialist in October 1916.⁵⁷

While these developments were alarming enough in Austria-Hungary, a state long troubled by internal divisions, the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in March 1917 provided an added urgency for the Austro-Hungarian government to ameliorate the discontent of its subjects. The Revolution, coupled with the entry of the US into the war in April 1917, added a hitherto-absent ideological element to the war.⁵⁸ Indeed, in contrast to the food riots one year earlier, the widespread strikes and protests in May 1917, while initially triggered by resource shortages, quickly assumed an overtly political character, colored by socialist and nationalist critiques of the government and war effort.⁵⁹ Both external enemies and internal dissidents cast the divide between governments and people in the autocratic Central Powers in the framework of universal ideals, namely those of popular sovereignty and the self-determination of peoples. In Austria-Hungary, these appeals had a particularly receptive audience in the nationalities disadvantaged by the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (*Ausgleich*) of 1867, specifically the Poles,

⁵⁶ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 368-369.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 372-374.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 450-451.

⁵⁹ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 726-727.

Czechs, Slovaks, and South Slavs.⁶⁰ Thus, the fundamental aim of Karl's reforms in 1917 was to revitalize the Monarchy by giving its peoples a greater and more equitable stake in the future of the Habsburg state.⁶¹

Unfortunately, Karl's liberalizing reforms only served to further weaken imperial authority. The reconvoation of the Austrian parliament (*Reichsrat*) in May 1917, the relaxation of state repression, a general amnesty for political prisoners, and the regional devolution of many administrative responsibilities stimulated regional factionalism, emboldened anti-Habsburg nationalists, and discredited the Emperor in the eyes of the government bureaucracy and military.⁶² The growing political and economic crisis of the Habsburg Monarchy on the home front was accompanied by similarly deteriorating military situation. Although the outbreak of the March Revolution threw the Russian war effort into confusion, the *k.u.k. Armee* suffered heavy casualties in Italy during the Tenth and Eleventh Isonzo Battles. Consequently, the army experienced an increasing number of large-scale desertions in 1917, which were primarily a symptom of war-weariness and the deteriorating supply situation.⁶³ Likewise, given the immense losses suffered by Austro-Hungarian forces since 1914, manpower shortages unsurprisingly developed over the course of 1917; of the approximately two million replacements needed by the *k.u.k. Armee* at the beginning of 1917, the replacement apparatus could satisfy only two thirds of this requirement by the autumn of that year.⁶⁴ Thus, it was clear to the Emperor that any

⁶⁰ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 450-451.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 471-473.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 204-205.

⁶⁴ Edmund Glaise-Horstenau (ed.), *Österreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg 1914-1918*, vol. 7 (Vienna: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1938), 29.

prolongation of the war constituted a grave threat not only to the military capabilities of the Habsburg Monarchy, but to its very existence.

Correspondingly, in the diplomatic sphere, both Karl and the Austro-Hungarian Common Foreign Minister, Ottokar von Czernin, were anxious to secure a peace deal with the Entente in 1917. For one, given the dire internal situation of Austria-Hungary, the continuation of the conflict obviously threatened to precipitate a collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy. At the same time, a German total victory as envisioned by the Third OHL under Hindenburg and Ludendorff essentially entailed the reduction of Austria-Hungary to a German satellite.⁶⁵ Indeed, Karl's deep ambivalence towards his German ally profoundly influenced Austro-Hungarian diplomacy in 1917 and 1918. Karl regarded the alliance with Germany as a wartime necessity and prioritized the integrity and independence of the Monarchy above all; his wife, Empress Zita of Bourbon-Parma, was also a firm opponent of German influence in Austria-Hungary.⁶⁶ Thus, the desire in Austria-Hungary for a speedy, negotiated peace and the maintenance of Habsburg sovereignty conflicted with both the preoccupation of the Third OHL with a decisive "peace through victory" and the ever-increasing reliance of the Habsburg Monarchy on German military and economic aid. Already by 1916, the German Army had become the primary force propping up the Central Powers in the East and in the Balkans, both of which were formerly Austro-Hungarian theaters.⁶⁷ Likewise, the continued rule of the German and Magyar elites over their Slavic, Italian, and Romanian compatriots in Austria-Hungary largely depended on continued

⁶⁵ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 466-467.

⁶⁶ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 654-655.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 458.

food imports from Germany, without which Habsburg subjects would starve and most likely revolt.⁶⁸

At the same time, the peace feelers circulated by both the Germans and the Austro-Hungarians in late 1916 were doomed to failure. For one, as previously mentioned, the military dictatorship of the Third OHL was not interested in a peace in which Germany would have to surrender all of its hard-won gains; at the same time, the Entente powers themselves were no more interested in a compromise settlement.⁶⁹ Therefore, in late 1916, in an effort to circumvent the confines of the German alliance, Karl decided to attempt secret, direct negotiations with the Entente through the intermediary of his brother-in-law, Prince Sixtus of Bourbon-Parma, who was an officer in the Belgian army. This undertaking eventually proved to be one of Karl's most fateful decisions of the entire war and exercised a decisive influence on the question of Austro-Hungarian participation on the Western Front. By February 1917, Karl was engaging in indirect negotiations with French leaders concerning a possible separate peace between the Entente and the Habsburg Monarchy. In a letter of March 24th, Karl promised to support France's claims to Alsace-Lorraine as well as Belgian and Serbian independence. Initially, French and British leaders were quite enthused, at one point even suggesting the cession of Silesia and Bavaria by a defeated Germany to the Habsburg Monarchy.⁷⁰

However, the realities of alliance politics quickly put an end to these deliberations. For one, considering the great disparity in power between Germany and Austria-Hungary, Karl had no means with which to compel his ally to accept these terms. Likewise, Karl's basic aim of preserving the integrity of the Habsburg Monarchy conflicted with the interests of the Entente. In

⁶⁸ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 315.

⁶⁹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 490.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 466-467.

particular, the Italians vehemently refused to compromise on the significant swathes of Austro-Hungarian territory promised to them by the 1915 Treaty of London. Moreover, Britain and France ultimately did not value peace with Austria-Hungary more than their treaty-bound obligations to Italy, Romania, Serbia, and Russia. Hence, Austro-Hungarian efforts to obtain a desperately-needed peace with their opponents came to naught in the face of ultimate Austro-Hungarian impotence on the world stage.⁷¹ Yet, the real consequences of what would eventually be known as the “Sixtus Affair” would not manifest for another year, after which the subjugation of the Monarchy to external forces reached its climax.

Austro-German Strategy and Alliance Politics from Caporetto to the Spring Offensive

The Austro-German offensive on the Italian Front at Caporetto in October/November 1917 and its aftermath simultaneously demonstrated the tremendous tension in the Dual Alliance and the Habsburg Monarchy’s reliance on German military power. At the same time, the employment of Austro-Hungarian infantry divisions on the Western Front first emerged during this period as a serious and recurring topic of deliberation. The negotiations leading up to the offensive were steeped in disagreement and mutual suspicion between the two allies. Although both the AOK and the OHL agreed that Italy was the weakest link in the enemy coalition after the collapse of Russia, the two staffs once again disputed the potential utility of its defeat. The Austro-Hungarians naturally saw Italy as their hereditary enemy and the last real opponent of the *k.u.k. Armee*, while Ludendorff initially dismissed the significance of an Italian defeat for the successful conclusion of the wider war.⁷² Ultimately, the German decision to support the *k.u.k. Armee* in Italy stemmed more from political considerations than strategic calculations. In 1917,

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 28.

the ever-deteriorating internal situation of the Monarchy, Karl's commitment to a moderate negotiated peace, and continuing Austro-Hungarian diplomatic ties to the now-hostile United States⁷³ had raised serious German doubts as to the reliability of their ally. The OHL therefore reckoned that a joint Austro-German offensive against the hated enemy of the Habsburg Monarchy would revive Austro-Hungarian enthusiasm for the war and strengthen the Habsburg commitment to the Dual Alliance.⁷⁴

In contrast, the OHL believed that an independent Austro-Hungarian offensive was unlikely to succeed on account of the perceived incompetence of the *k.u.k. Armee*. Similarly, even if the Austro-Hungarians were somehow successful, the defeat of Italy could allow the Habsburg Monarchy to quit the alliance.⁷⁵ Ludendorff also seemingly hoped that Austro-Hungarian gratitude for German assistance in Italy would translate into concrete support for the German forces on the Western Front.⁷⁶ Thus, after agreeing to the joint offensive in Italy, Ludendorff gloated in the crown council of September 11th that "Austria-Hungary would be quite shackled to us for the next few months."⁷⁷ Notably, this German conception of ensuring the continued allegiance of Austria-Hungary through joint military operations remained one of the primary German motivations for seeking the deployment of *k.u.k.* divisions to France.

For his part, Karl also nurtured major reservations regarding a joint Austro-German offensive in Italy. On the grounds of prestige, the Emperor worried that German support in Italy would eclipse the accomplishments of the *k.u.k. Armee* and place a hitherto Austrian-dominated

⁷³ While formal hostilities between the United States and Germany began in April 1917, the US did not declare war on Austria-Hungary until December of that year.

⁷⁴ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 776-777.

⁷⁵ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 206.

⁷⁶ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 782.

⁷⁷ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 29.

theater under German control. Likewise, Karl also feared inducing an Anglo-French intervention on the Italian Front. However, *Generaloberst* Arthur Arz von Straussenburg, Conrad's successor as Chief of Staff of the AOK, eventually convinced the Emperor that German support was necessary for the operation.⁷⁸ The Central Powers' subsequent offensive at Caporetto, incorporating innovative German artillery and infiltration tactics and the prodigious use of poison gas, yielded tremendous success, inflicting over 300,000 casualties on the Italians and driving them back in disarray to the Piave river.⁷⁹

The close cooperation of Austro-Hungarian and German units at Caporetto convinced many officers in both armies of the desirability of further Austro-German military collaboration. Although Hindenburg and Ludendorff continued to hold the capabilities of the *k.u.k. Armee* in low regard, several German troop commanders noted the battle-worthiness of certain *k.u.k.* units and advocated for their use on the Western Front. Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen, the commander of the elite German mountain troops (the *Alpenkorps*), noted that a portion of the Austro-Hungarian Army, namely the Austrian-German divisions, was quite capable and could be useful in the West.⁸⁰ Likewise, many AOK staff officers, particularly those who had attended German training courses in France, vigorously supported a greater Austro-Hungarian role in the West. These officers saw close cooperation with the Germans in the West as an ideal situation in which the *k.u.k. Armee*, supported by the full might of the *Westheer*, could prove its combat capabilities in favorable conditions and thereby contribute decisively to the conclusion of the war.⁸¹ Most notably, Arz himself, enthused by the Austro-German success and grateful for

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 207.

⁸⁰ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 33-34.

⁸¹ Ibid., 40.

German assistance, indicated to Cramon in October that he was willing to send all disposable *k.u.k.* forces to aid the Germans on the Western Front.⁸²

Yet, in many ways, the results of the Austro-German offensive in Italy did not bode well for the future prospects of the Habsburg Monarchy or its military. Although Habsburg troops constituted a majority of the attacking forces, the achievements at Caporetto stemmed mostly from the influence of German tactics and leadership, not to mention the participation of seven crack German divisions.⁸³ Thus, in light of previous Habsburg failures in Italy, the Battle of Caporetto demonstrated the overwhelming reliance of the *k.u.k. Armee* on German tactics, supplies, and troops to achieve significant offensive gains. Moreover, the reconstitution of the Italian frontlines on the Piave, a far more secure and defensible position, significantly reduced the chances of success for a renewed offensive against the Italians, much less one undertaken by Austria-Hungary alone.⁸⁴ Even more ominously, the military success of Caporetto had been achieved at the expense of the Austro-Hungarian hinterland. The logistical demands of the Austro-German offensive had overtaxed the Austro-Hungarian railway network, resulting in the near total collapse of food provisioning in the Monarchy. In some areas, particularly in Bohemia, the population was reduced to near-starvation. This marked deterioration of the food situation deeply and abidingly alienated large segments of the population, especially the Czechs.⁸⁵

Hence, the victory at Caporetto proved to be largely transient for the Habsburg Monarchy, instead sowing the seeds for further internal disintegration and external reliance. At the same time, the Austro-German success in Italy in November and the armistice with Soviet

⁸² Ibid., 29.

⁸³ Dredger, *Tactics and Procurement in the Habsburg Military*, 262.

⁸⁴ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 30.

⁸⁵ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 785-786.

Russia one month later represented a favorable shift in the strategic situation of the Central Powers. The essential conclusion of hostilities in the East and the stabilization of the Italian Front presented a final window of opportunity for the Central Powers to conclude the war in their favor. The ever-increasing numerical and material superiority of the enemy coalition, particularly the inevitable large-scale military intervention of the United States, as well as the deterioration of domestic political and economic conditions in Germany and Austria-Hungary made a decisive campaign in early 1918 imperative.⁸⁶ Thus, in late 1917, the OHL began to prepare for a large-scale offensive on the Western Front, intending to concentrate all available German offensive strength there, preempt an American intervention, achieve an annihilating blow against the Anglo-French armies, and compel the enemy coalition to sue for peace.⁸⁷ While still capable of offensive action, growing concerns of morale and manpower meant that the German Army had passed the peak of its effectiveness. Unable to pursue offensives on multiple fronts, the Germans therefore scaled down their commitments on other fronts in favor of the West, withdrawing forty divisions from Russia and eight from Venetia. Likewise, given the fleeting favorability and overwhelming gravity of the strategic situation, the OHL now expected that Austria-Hungary would directly contribute to the decisive battle in the West.⁸⁸

Strategic considerations seemingly justified and, indeed, necessitated such concentration and coordination. Indeed, in a December 15th note to the AOK, Ludendorff asserted that “the outcome of this battle will determine the fate of Germany and Austria-Hungary.”⁸⁹ However, complex alliance politics and major disagreements between Austro-Hungarian and German military and political figures ultimately precluded the participation of Austro-Hungarian

⁸⁶ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 514-515.

⁸⁷ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 408-410.

⁸⁸ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 30-31.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

divisions in the German Spring Offensive. Initially, discussions of such a deployment were informal. In the first week of November 1917, Ludendorff met with Generalmajor Alfred von Waldstätten, the Chief of the Operations Department of the AOK, and informed him of the OHL's plans for a major offensive in the spring, noting that the participation of *k.u.k.* units, above all artillery, would be welcome.⁹⁰ One month later, in a speech to representatives of the Hungarian government, Czernin proclaimed the Habsburg commitment to the German alliance, notably asserting that Austria-Hungary would defend Alsace-Lorraine just as Germany had defended Galicia and Trieste; although mostly a sentimental expression of unity, this statement indubitably connoted Austro-Hungarian involvement on the Western Front.⁹¹ Sure enough, in a message to the AOK on December 23rd, Ludendorff reminded Arz of his earlier promise of support and on his own part, reiterated his willingness to gladly accept Austro-Hungarian assistance on the Western Front, especially in the form of heavy artillery. Now that the *Generalquartiermeister* of the German Army had more or less requested Habsburg support on the Western Front, the Austro-Hungarians were obliged to respond.⁹²

Surprisingly, Emperor Karl promptly consented to Ludendorff's request on December 26th and two days later, Arz conveyed the Austro-Hungarian acquiescence to Hindenburg. In his message, Arz assured the German Chief of Staff that the Austro-Hungarian military would readily participate in the battle on the Western Front and that the size of the Habsburg contingent would depend on the outcome of the ongoing peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk. He likewise requested that the OHL communicate its specific desires regarding the employment of *k.u.k.* troops in the West.⁹³ On December 30th, Ludendorff responded with his sincere thanks,

⁹⁰ Ibid., 32.

⁹¹ Ibid., 33.

⁹² Ibid., 35.

⁹³ Ibid., 35-36.

expressing satisfaction in the apparent strategic consensus between the OHL and the AOK. However, other than stating that the OHL would accept any available battle-worthy *k.u.k.* divisions and heavy artillery, he refused to commit himself to any concrete stipulations.⁹⁴ Thus, by the beginning of 1918, the question of greater Austro-Hungarian participation on the Western Front was seemingly resolved. Yet, it soon became apparent that these promises were without any real substance. In mid-January, at the instruction of the OHL, Cramon asked Arz how many divisions the AOK could spare for the West. Arz was evasive, claiming that the situation in the East had not been sufficiently resolved and thus he could not offer any particulars. However, Cramon was suspicious and upon further questioning, Arz revealed to him in confidence the real impediment to a definitive Austro-Hungarian commitment to the Western Front: the opposition of the Emperor himself.⁹⁵

Indeed, despite his nominal consent in December to the employment of Habsburg troops in the West, Karl remained extremely reluctant to provide the Germans with concrete support. There were many reasons behind Karl's aversion to sending Habsburg troops to France. In addition to his own personal anti-German sentiments, the Empress Zita was known to be wholeheartedly opposed to Austro-Hungarians fighting in France; Cramon himself attributed much of the Austro-Hungarian unwillingness to commit to the pernicious influence of the Bourbon Empress.⁹⁶ In military terms, Karl also dreaded exposing his poorly supplied, war-weary troops to the material and numerical superiority of the Entente. He feared not only the loss of prestige that would accompany an Austro-Hungarian failure on the Western Front, but also the risk of a renewed Italian offensive in Venetia upon a westward redeployment of *k.u.k.* forces.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 38-39.

Domestic political concerns also militated against Austro-Hungarian involvement in the West. The non-German peoples of the Monarchy, as well as the Social Democrats, vocally opposed any unnecessary sacrifices to German interests.⁹⁷ Indeed, by 1918, many of the peoples of the Habsburg Monarchy, particularly the Czechs, not only felt threatened by the prospect of German hegemony in central Europe, but also deeply resented the Germans for supposedly prolonging the conflict in pursuit of aggressive war aims.⁹⁸ Subsequent negotiations revealed the clear fault lines between the German and Austro-Hungarian positions on the matter of the deployment. When Cramon, under orders from the OHL, urged a more definitive Austro-Hungarian agreement for assistance in the West, Arz retorted that before the conclusion of peace with Russia and Romania, nothing other than artillery units would be available. Moreover, for reasons of prestige, the AOK requested that any Austro-Hungarian divisions sent to the West should be deployed as a unified, coherent formation under Habsburg command. The Germans, unwilling to risk assigning a large section of the Western Front to an army whose capabilities they fundamentally doubted, flatly refused, which in turn only aggravated Austro-Hungarian reluctance.⁹⁹

As previously mentioned, not all Austro-Hungarian officers were so averse to close cooperation with the Germans in the West. Waldstätten in particular disagreed with the position of the Emperor. In discussions with Cramon and other German liaison officers, the Operations Chief of the AOK lamented the baneful impact of the Empress and other courtiers on the Emperor, opining that such interference seriously impeded the planning and decisions of the AOK.¹⁰⁰ To some extent, the views of Waldstätten and other like-minded Habsburg staff officers

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 475.

⁹⁹ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 39.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 40-41.

exemplified the growth of German influence over the AOK. While the experience of training under and collaborating with German officers did produce pro-German sentiments among many officers, Karl's restructuring of the AOK in 1917 and the appointment of new, less experienced officers like Arz and Waldstätten had in itself accentuated the AOK's reliance on German decision-making.¹⁰¹ Urged by Waldstätten to insist on concrete Austro-Hungarian assistance in the West, Cramon, with the agreement of the OHL, officially requested later in January that the AOK dispatch three reliable, battleworthy divisions to France. Arz recapitulated the Austro-Hungarian objections, additionally noting concerns about the condition of the Austro-Hungarian troops and the necessity of concentrating Habsburg forces in Italy. Most importantly, Arz finally explicitly stated that the employment of Austro-Hungarian forces in the West was unacceptable to the crown.¹⁰² Thus, by the beginning of February, the AOK had definitively ruled out the participation of Austro-Hungarian divisions in the Spring Offensive. For their part, the Germans accepted the Austro-Hungarian refusal and concentrated on securing Austro-Hungarian artillery support; by February 5th, Waldstätten had indicated to Ludendorff that both the Emperor and the AOK approved of such a measure.¹⁰³

Unlike Hindenburg and Ludendorff, Cramon did not take the Austro-Hungarian refusal so lightly and blamed himself for not asserting the German position more forcefully. In his mind, the temporary alienation of the Austro-Hungarian Emperor would have been offset by the value of *k.u.k.* divisions as a reserve for the offensive in the West, a circumstance which could have freed up more German units for the attack.¹⁰⁴ Yet, the German requests for Austro-Hungarian divisions for the Spring Offensive lacked vigor and ultimately failed because the German

¹⁰¹ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 688-689.

¹⁰² Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 41-42.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

considerations were largely political rather than military in nature. Ludendorff's nonchalance regarding specific Austro-Hungarian troop commitments and the Germans' clear disdain for Habsburg fighting capabilities demonstrated that the OHL saw an Austro-Hungarian deployment to the West primarily as an instrument with which to bind the Habsburg Monarchy more tightly to the Dual Alliance. Thanks to the armistice in the East, the Germans already possessed a numerical advantage in the West and did not really require *k.u.k.* divisions there. Therefore, the large-scale deployment of Habsburg troops to the Western Front would principally serve to ensure the continued involvement of Austria-Hungary in the war.¹⁰⁵ In military terms, the OHL was far more concerned with securing Habsburg auxiliary support in the West in the form of *k.u.k.* heavy artillery and labor forces.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the Austro-Hungarian offensive in Italy planned for spring 1918 not only aligned with Austria-Hungary's immediate interests, but also served German purposes as well. As outlined by Hindenburg in a March 15th telegram to Arz, a renewed Habsburg offensive in Italy would invariably divert Entente and American forces away from the Western Front and thereby relieve pressure on the German Army.¹⁰⁷

The Decision to Deploy *k.u.k.* Divisions to France, April – June 1918

Rather than commit large infantry formations to the fighting in France for the Spring Offensive, Austria-Hungary provided only artillery units and labor forces to the Western Front while indirectly aiding the German operations with its own offensive in Italy.¹⁰⁸ In the minds of both Austro-Hungarian and German decision-makers, this arrangement was more efficacious in addressing the Central Powers' strategic dilemma. Up to this point, Habsburg opposition to

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 46-47.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 43-44.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 48-49.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 62.

greater involvement on the Western Front and German confidence in their own forces rendered the employment of *k.u.k.* divisions in France counterproductive for the health of the alliance and militarily superfluous. Likewise, although the armistice in the East permitted the AOK to devote the majority of its forces elsewhere, the average manpower and materiel allotment of Austro-Hungarian divisions was low; a simultaneous large-scale commitment on two fronts was impractical.¹⁰⁹ However, contrary to appearances, the issue of Austro-Hungarian participation on the Western Front was not in fact resolved. Indeed, beginning in April 1918, rapid changes in the diplomatic, economic, and military situation of the Habsburg Monarchy, coupled with the deteriorating German position on the Western Front, wrought a fundamental shift in this regard. Specifically, the political fallout from the Sixtus Affair, the desperate economic situation in the Habsburg Monarchy, the failure of the Austro-Hungarian June Offensive in Venetia, and the defeat of the German Army in the Spring Offensive not only rekindled the German desire for *k.u.k.* divisions, but also made it impossible for Emperor Karl to continue to refuse this demand.

In his book *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, the Austrian historian Manfred Rauchensteiner characterized the Sixtus Affair of April 1918 as “small cause, big effect.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, while Karl’s indirect negotiations with the French in the spring of 1917 had accomplished nothing at the time, the exposure of the Emperor’s clandestine peace overtures one year later had immediate and profound ramifications for the international standing of Austria-Hungary. On April 2nd, Czernin gave a speech to the Viennese municipal council in which he castigated the Entente powers for their unwillingness to negotiate a peace settlement; in particular, he singled out France and its obstinacy over the Alsace-Lorraine issue as an obstacle

¹⁰⁹ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 213.

¹¹⁰ Manfred Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 897.

to peace. Infuriated, the French prime minister Georges Clemenceau promptly publicized Karl's letter of March 24th, 1917 in which the Emperor expressed his support for France's "just" claim to Alsace-Lorraine.¹¹¹ Although Karl strongly denied penning the letter, the ensuing scandal further eroded the Emperor's tenuous position both within Austria-Hungary and in the context of the Dual Alliance. In the domestic sphere, many Habsburg officials, particularly military officers, were outraged by Karl's supposed perfidy and saw the Sixtus Affair as further evidence of the Emperor's basic incompetence; in a conversation with Cramon, even Arz expressed dismay at the Emperor's duplicity. Thus, the scandal greatly contributed to the continuing erosion of the legitimacy of the Habsburg Monarchy not only in the eyes of the wider populace, but also in those of its ruling circles.¹¹²

The consequences of the Sixtus Affair for the Austro-German alliance were even more severe. After the scandal broke out, Karl's initial reply to the insinuations of disloyalty to the Dual Alliance was "Our further response are My cannons in the West," an allusion to the *k.u.k.* heavy artillery fighting in the Spring Offensive.¹¹³ The Germans, long harboring suspicions regarding the reliability of the Habsburg Monarchy, were not convinced. Influential German political and military circles were infuriated by their ally's posited treachery and demanded that the Reich government take a hard line against Austria-Hungary. Notably, the German outrage brought about a particularly uncomfortable situation for the *k.u.k.* artillery personnel in France, who now had to confront the constant inquiries and recriminations of their German comrades.¹¹⁴ For the OHL, the Sixtus Affair presented a perfect opportunity to justify the further subjugation of Austria-Hungary to the Reich. Indeed, in an April 14th letter to Hindenburg, Cramon proposed

¹¹¹ Ibid., 900-901.

¹¹² Ibid., 901-903.

¹¹³ Etschmann, "Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung," 98.

¹¹⁴ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 62-63.

that Karl travel to the German general headquarters (*großes Hauptquartier* or GHQ) at Spa to personally apologize to Kaiser Wilhelm and “place all measures of political and military nature under German control.” The altered nature of the Austro-German relationship in the wake of the Sixtus Affair is best summarized by Cramon’s subsequent assertion that “one can no longer have trust, and we must therefore demand guarantees.”¹¹⁵

Faced with little alternative, Karl duly journeyed to Spa and on May 13th, signed an agreement that entailed the closest military, political, and economic cooperation between Germany and Austria-Hungary, including the proposed integration of the Austro-Hungarian economy and military with that of Germany. To be sure, much of the agreement was provisional and, consequently, not immediately binding.¹¹⁶ However, the convention did in effect abrogate much of the independence of the Habsburg Monarchy in military and diplomatic affairs. In addition to tying major foreign policy decisions to the approval of the German Kaiser, the agreement at Spa also involved Hindenburg and Arz signing a military convention (*Waffenbund*). Although Habsburg and German military officials did discuss Austro-Hungarian participation on the Western Front (or lack thereof) at Spa, they concluded no specific arrangements as the OHL still believed that the planned Habsburg offensive in Venetia would be of greater utility. Nevertheless, the basic principles of the *Waffenbund*, in which the Habsburg military was subject to a “joint” command dominated by the OHL, left an Austro-Hungarian deployment to the West a distinct possibility.¹¹⁷

The Sixtus Affair also had repercussions outside of Austria-Hungary and the Dual Alliance. For one, the bad blood between Austria-Hungary and France prompted by Czernin’s

¹¹⁵ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 903.

¹¹⁶ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 212.

¹¹⁷ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 64.

speech and Clemenceau's subsequent revelation proved that the Monarchy had nothing more to hope for in negotiations with the French.¹¹⁸ Moreover, the damage dealt to the prestige of the Emperor and the ensuing submission of the Monarchy to Germany greatly contributed to the hardening of the Allied position towards Austria-Hungary. Previous Allied statements on postwar Europe, while not exactly beneficial to Habsburg interests, had left open the possibility of the Monarchy's continued existence. In his initial proclamation of the Fourteen Points in January 1918, US President Woodrow Wilson had essentially proposed a federal Austria-Hungary in which all of the peoples of the Monarchy would be free to pursue "autonomous development."¹¹⁹ However, one month after the meeting at Spa, the Allied powers shifted their position and now advocated that self-determination necessarily entailed full independence. The subsequent recognition of Czechoslovakia as an Allied co-belligerent by Britain, France, and the United States confirmed that the enemy coalition now unequivocally sought the destruction of the Habsburg Monarchy as a war aim.¹²⁰ Thus, if Austria-Hungary still possessed some degree of autonomy in military and foreign affairs prior to the Sixtus Affair, this had now evaporated. Ironically, contrary to Karl's original intention of securing a negotiated settlement, the fate of Austria-Hungary was now completely contingent on a German "peace through victory."¹²¹

The internal conditions of Austria-Hungary were no more auspicious than the Monarchy's diplomatic situation. Indeed, by the summer of 1918, the Habsburg Monarchy was in a state of impending collapse. Only the existence of a relatively coherent Austro-Hungarian Army and the hope of a German victory in the West continued to stave off total dissolution; in this way, the existence of the Habsburg Monarchy was inextricably tied to international

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 63.

¹¹⁹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 537.

¹²⁰ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 906.

¹²¹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 535.

events.¹²² Again, the increasingly severe shortages of most resources, above all food, were perhaps the most fundamental cause of the immense political and social upheaval in Austria-Hungary. The so-called “Bread Peace” at Brest-Litovsk in March, which the Austro-Hungarian authorities hoped would ensure the steady flow of Ukrainian grain into the Monarchy, totally failed to address the shortages wrought by falling agricultural production, the Allied blockade, and the demands of total mobilization.¹²³

The pervasive lack of essential goods and soaring inflation shattered the multi-ethnic society of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918. Throughout the Empire, the ubiquity of strikes, protests, increasingly violent inter-ethnic conflict, and banditry signaled social and political disintegration at every level, both in major cities like Vienna and Prague as well as in rural areas like Galicia and Croatia-Slavonia. The task of governing the disparate Habsburg lands, while never easy or straightforward, became increasingly impossible.¹²⁴ In January, a massive wave of industrial strikes erupted throughout Austria-Hungary; on January 19th, there were 600,000 strikers in the Austrian half of the Empire alone. The strikes were initially prompted by deprivation and adverse working conditions, in particular the reduction of rations in Austria earlier that month, but the strikes were intensified by both nationalist and Bolshevik agitation.¹²⁵ Even after the strikers were ameliorated by government and Social Democratic representatives, food shortages and concomitant unrest, above all protests for peace, continued into the summer. The climax of the Monarchy’s desperate food situation in the spring of 1918 occurred when mass

¹²² Ibid., 535-537.

¹²³ Ibid., 501-502.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 505-506.

¹²⁵ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 871-874.

starvation in the imperial capital itself was averted only by the seizure of German grain transports travelling up the Danube.¹²⁶

As the Austro-Hungarian home front disintegrated, the Habsburg military launched its final and largest offensive of the war in June 1918. Although the Austro-Hungarian offensive on the Piave appears decidedly ill-advised in retrospect, several considerations impelled the AOK to undertake such an operation. For one, the AOK had already promised its German ally to go on the offensive in Italy and relieve pressure from the German Western Front; at the Spa meeting in May, as German operations in the West languished, the OHL naturally insisted that Karl renew and solidify this pledge.¹²⁷ At the same time, Erz and the AOK believed that a successful offensive operation à la Caporetto would counteract the deteriorating condition of the army and allow the Monarchy to continue the war effort.¹²⁸ However, given the significant defensive advantages of the Italian position, the numerical and material superiority of the Italian, British, and French forces, the sorry condition of Habsburg logistics, the inability of the AOK to execute a unified plan, and the utter lack of surprise generated by repeated delays, the Austro-Hungarian offensive on the Piave was doomed from the beginning.¹²⁹ Launched on June 15th, the Habsburg June Offensive witnessed little territorial gains and massive Austro-Hungarian losses – 115,000 men in ten days – and on June 20th, Karl ordered a general withdrawal across the Piave. Although the army retreated in good order and remained more or less intact, the failure of the June Offensive dealt a decisive blow to the manpower, materiel, and morale of the Habsburg Army and rendered it incapable of any further offensive action.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Ibid., 915.

¹²⁷ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 212.

¹²⁸ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 910.

¹²⁹ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 213.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 213-214.

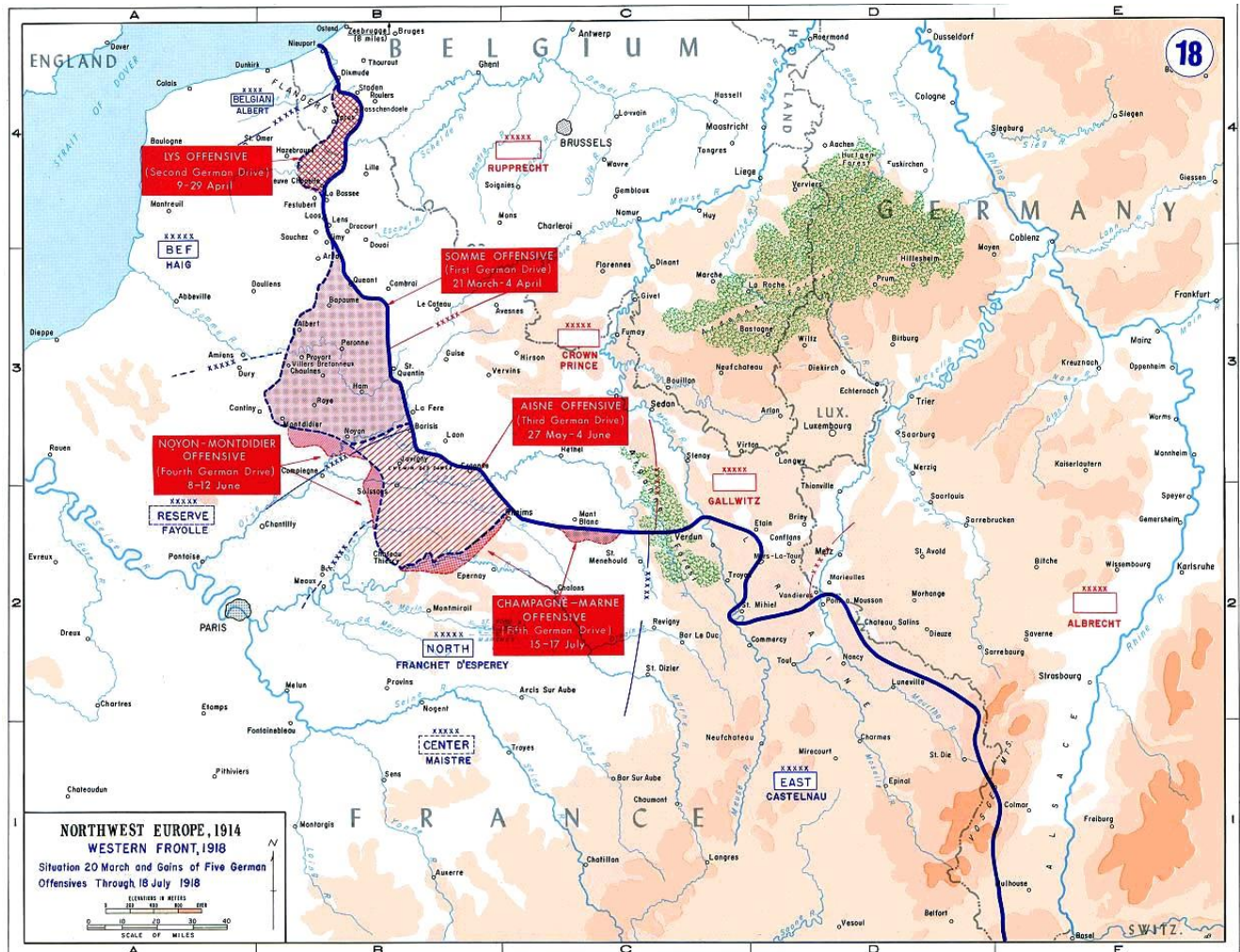
Thus, the predictable Austro-Hungarian failure in Italy vindicated Ludendorff's assertion that the decisive battle for the fate of the Central Powers would be in the West. However, despite impressive gains in the initial phase of the German attack, the Spring Offensive had failed to live up to the grandiose expectations of the OHL. By the conclusion of Operation Michael on April 5th, the Germans had gained 12,000 square miles of territory and 90,000 prisoners, shattering the British Fifth Army in the process.¹³¹ Yet, these victories were largely illusory. The Germans had lost nearly 240,000 men in the assault, many of whom were experienced, irreplaceable officers and troops of the elite assault formations (*Sturmbataillone*). Likewise, most of the territory gained was worthless, devastated countryside.¹³² Subsequent German operations in Flanders, on the Marne, and in Champagne stretched the manpower and logistical capacity of the German Army - not to mention the physical and psychological endurance of German troops - to the breaking point, while Allied forces could readily replace their losses in men and materiel. Moreover, the German operations lacked concrete operational goals and real coordination; Ludendorff essentially dispersed and exhausted the offensive strength of the *Westheer* without achieving any strategic objectives.¹³³ On July 18th, after halting the final German operation of the Spring Offensive, the French launched the first Allied counter-offensive of 1918 near Soissons, which marked the beginning of the end for the German Army in the West.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Christoph Mick, "1918: Endgame," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War Volume I Global War*, ed. Jay Winter, 133-171 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 148-149.

¹³² Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 520-521.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 521-522.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 522-523.



The German Spring Offensive, 1918.¹³⁵

A renewed German request for Austro-Hungarian divisions for the Western Front largely coincided with Austria-Hungary's definitive fiasco on the Italian Front and the impending failure of the German Spring Offensive. In mid-June, as the Austro-Hungarian offensive on the Piave foundered, the concurrent German drive on Rheims and Compiègne had similarly ground to a halt. Though facing the evident failure of the German operations in the West, Ludendorff refused to give up the offensive and planned for another assault on Rheims for July.¹³⁶ On June 16th,

¹³⁵ Department of History, USMA at West Point, "Western Front 1918 German," *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed March 15th, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Western_front_1918_german.jpg.

¹³⁶ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 65-66.

Feldmarschalleutnant Alois Klepsch-Kloth von Roden, the Austro-Hungarian plenipotentiary at the OHL, sent an encrypted message to Arz in which he reported that Ludendorff would soon request six Austro-Hungarian divisions for assistance in the West. Furthermore, Klepsch indicated that the OHL believed that these divisions should be under the control of German staff officers, as only they could be trusted to command competently on the Western Front. That same day, Ludendorff informed Cramon that, given the clear failure of the Piave Offensive and the growing presence of American forces in France, he should discuss with the AOK the possible deployment of five or six reliable *k.u.k.* divisions to the Western Front.¹³⁷ Initially, Arz was once again equivocal on the issue, claiming that such a measure depended on the Emperor's approval and that the situation in Italy was as yet unresolved. Even after Cramon repeated his demands on June 17th, Arz persisted in his prevarication.¹³⁸

Yet, unlike in earlier negotiations on the subject, the Germans were not prepared to give up so easily. On June 19th, Ludendorff wrote directly to Arz, repeating his concerns regarding the Americans and the long-term inadequacy of German forces to hold the Western Front alone. He duly requested five or six Austro-Hungarian divisions – explicitly specifying that no Czech troops be dispatched – as well as additional artillery and labor units. In order to maximize the utility of these divisions in the West, Ludendorff planned to train them for the local combat conditions and rearm the Austro-Hungarian batteries with German equipment to avoid logistical difficulties.¹³⁹ One day later, Arz replied that the outcome of the operations in Italy would determine the Austro-Hungarian response. Of course, by that point, the failure of the June Offensive had been clear for days; on June 20th, *Feldmarschall* Svetozar Borojević, commander

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

of one of the Habsburg Heeresgruppen in Italy, convinced Karl to halt the offensive.¹⁴⁰ On June 21st, Hindenburg presented Arz with an official request by the OHL for an Austro-Hungarian deployment to the Western Front. In his message, Hindenburg reiterated the longstanding German argument in favor of utilizing *k.u.k.* divisions in the West, though now he invoked the authority of the Supreme War Command, recognized by the Austro-Hungarians at Spa, to lend weight to his request.

The precipitation of an overall decision against an enemy that is continuously being reinforced in France means that we also must bring together everything that can possibly be spared elsewhere... From the perspective of the Supreme War Command, I therefore express my opinion that the Austro-Hungarian army should halt its attacks in Italy and, as a result, bring all forces that are made available to the Western theater of the war.¹⁴¹

Arz and Waldstätten recognized the truth of Hindenburg's statement; much like the *Strafexpedition* two years earlier, Austro-Hungarian military failure critically undermined the AOK's ability to justify its independent operations. Still, the Emperor continued to vacillate just as he had half a year earlier. In a June 23rd report to the OHL, Cramon lamented the Emperor's indecision, once again attributing his prevarication to the influence of the Empress Zita. And yet, two days later on June 25th, Karl finally gave his consent for the deployment of Austro-Hungarian infantry divisions to the Western Front.¹⁴²

Consequently, two years after the issue had first arisen, the question of greater Austro-Hungarian participation in the West had finally been resolved. The immediate causes of the renewed German requests and ultimate Austro-Hungarian acquiescence were practical military and economic concerns. On the German side, the intensified desire for *k.u.k.* divisions on the

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹⁴¹ Etschmann, "Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung," 99-100.

¹⁴² Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 71-72.

Western Front stemmed largely from the rapidly deteriorating manpower situation of the German Army. From the beginning of the Spring Offensive on March 21st to the end of June, the German Army in the West suffered around 800,000 casualties, including more than 100,000 fatalities. The total strength of the German Army declined from 5.1 million in March to 4.2 million in July, only 3.6 million of which were stationed in the West. Personnel shortages were pervasive, especially among infantry formations; by July, many German infantry divisions had an average battalion strength of only 600 men.¹⁴³ Thus, the German motivations for a greater Austro-Hungarian involvement on the Western Front had evolved from alliance-political concerns, namely attempting to guarantee continued Habsburg allegiance to the Dual Alliance, to an issue of pure military necessity; the OHL needed as many men as possible to buttress the hemorrhaging German front and slow the looming Allied juggernaut.¹⁴⁴

For the Austro-Hungarians, the pressing practical matter in June 1918 was the food situation. By the middle of June, the food supply of the Habsburg Monarchy was once again on the brink of collapse, in large part thanks to the logistical demands of the June Offensive.¹⁴⁵ On June 21st, the Common Food Minister, Prinz Ludwig Windisch-Grätz, informed the Emperor that the Hungarian summer harvest would not provide any significant quantity of food to the Austrian half of the Monarchy for several weeks. As a last resort, Windisch-Grätz and an Austro-Hungarian delegation travelled to Spa to discuss the crisis with Kaiser Wilhelm, who predicated any German alimentary assistance on an Austro-Hungarian commitment to the Western Front. Indeed, one day after Karl acquiesced to sending *k.u.k.* divisions to France, the Germans agreed to dispatch a bulk shipment of flour to Austria-Hungary.¹⁴⁶ To be sure, there was certainly an

¹⁴³ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 447.

¹⁴⁴ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 73.

¹⁴⁵ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 914.

¹⁴⁶ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 72.

element of reciprocity in Karl's eventual acquiescence to sending his divisions to the West. After all, given the considerable military support provided by Germany to Austria-Hungary on multiple occasions throughout the war, the German request for assistance in the West was hardly unfair, especially since the *k.u.k. Armee* had failed in its own operations in Italy.¹⁴⁷

Still, the fact that German blackmail exploiting the food crisis in Austria-Hungary was probably the key factor in Karl's submission to German demands exemplifies the larger trend at work, namely the overwhelming subordination of Austria-Hungary to Germany by the summer of 1918. The full extent of the Austria-Hungary's relegation to near-satellite status vis-à-vis Germany is best illustrated when one considers that by June 1918, almost all of the Habsburg Monarchy's fundamental war aims had been fulfilled; Serbia, Romania, and Russia had been conquered and Italy had been driven back into its own territory.¹⁴⁸ The Austro-Hungarian submission to and dependence on Germany, while most obvious in the area of resource asymmetry, was ultimately far more profound. In the realm of diplomacy, as the Allies had resolved on a partition of Austria-Hungary by mid-1918, Emperor Karl was forced to pin the survival of his realm on a "peace through victory." Yet, in the military sphere, the Austro-Hungarian Army was incapable of achieving a decisive result on the Italian Front; given the secondary status of that theater, decisive victory could only come about on the Western Front anyways. Correspondingly, Karl had no real choice other than submission to a closer alliance with Germany in the aftermath of the Sixtus Affair, as his country's fate was now inextricably tied to that of the Reich. Therefore, while the issue of food was the immediate catalyst for the deployment of Austro-Hungarian divisions to the Western Front in 1918, larger structural forces

¹⁴⁷ Etschmann, "Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung," 99.

¹⁴⁸ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 316.

in Austria-Hungary's strategic and political situation strongly militated in favor of such an action. Unfortunately for the thousands of Habsburg troops arriving in France in July 1918, the interests of their disintegrating state compelled them to fight a distant battle whose unfavorable outcome was already decided.

IV. The Austro-Hungarian Divisions in France, July – November 1918

Just as the history of the Habsburg Monarchy in the last two years of the First World War can be described as a period of progressive political and social dissolution, the chronicle of operations on the Western Front after midsummer 1918 was essentially the protracted collapse of the German Army. Although nearly four months of bitter fighting elapsed between the beginning of the Allied counter-offensive on July 18th and the conclusion of the armistice on November 11th, the final battles of the Great War constituted the aftermath of the Allied defensive victory earlier that year. In this period of denouement, the victorious Allied armies, possessing decisive advantages in manpower, materiel, and tactics, gradually but effectively finished off a German Army critically weakened and demoralized by its previous losses.¹⁴⁹ Hence, despite previous aspirations for a decisive concentration of Austro-German forces in the West, the four Austro-Hungarian infantry divisions sent to France in July and September 1918 had absolutely no impact on the course of the war. Two of the Austro-Hungarian formations – the 35th and 1st Infantry Divisions – participated in combat actions as more or less coherent formations. In contrast, only individual units of the 106th Infantry Division took part in any fighting and the 37th Honvéd Division remained in reserve for the entire period. The *k.u.k.* units on the Western Front experienced the same prevailing phenomena in the waning months of the war as their German

¹⁴⁹ Mick, "1918: Endgame," 152.

comrades: highly unfavorable combat conditions, overwhelming enemy superiority, and heavy casualties. Despite local, temporary tactical successes and the not insignificant losses inflicted upon the enemy, the bravery and tenacity of individual units could not compensate for the total bankruptcy of the German strategic position.

The Deployment of *k.u.k.* Divisions to France, July 1918

On June 26th and 27th, a major of the German General Staff met with the AOK to discuss the particulars of an Austro-Hungarian deployment to the Western Front. The AOK agreed to deploy a total of six divisions to the West, starting with two divisions as the beginning of July; likewise, the Austro-Hungarians pledged to dispatch a further forty-eight batteries of heavy artillery with the requisite ammunition. For their part, the Germans promised to initially employ the divisions in a quiet sector for a four-week training period, intending to acclimatize the Habsburg forces to the conditions of the Western Front before sending them to the primary sectors.¹⁵⁰ In subsequent correspondence between Arz and Hindenburg in late June/early July, the Habsburg Chief of Staff promised that Austria-Hungary would contribute as much as possible to the Western Front, noting that the AOK would send only battle-tested, combat capable divisions to the West. Hindenburg thanked the Arz for the assistance in the West, expressing the quixotic hope that the *k.u.k.* divisions would be able to participate in the decisive battle on the Western Front. Naturally, the German Chief of Staff also expressed his desire for the soonest possible deployment of the remaining four divisions and the dispatch of additional formations.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 74.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

The AOK faced a dilemma in selecting the first two divisions to send to France. On one hand, the Austro-Hungarians wanted to deploy competent troops who would do honor to the reputation of the *k.u.k. Armee* and, through their actions, repudiate the typical German contempt for the Habsburg military. Yet, at the same time, the AOK did not want to denude the increasingly tenuous Italian Front of battleworthy formations; for that same reason, the AOK was reluctant to make any concrete commitments beyond the two divisions promised for July.¹⁵² Eventually, the AOK decided to send the 1st and 35th Infantry Divisions, both of which had made a favorable impression in Italy, as well as a corps command, the XVIII. *Korpskommando* under FML Ludwig Goiginger.¹⁵³ The two infantry divisions and the XVIII. Korps staff entrained for France in mid-July and arrived there between July 19th and July 21st, just as the Allied counteroffensive at the Soissons definitively turned the tide of the fighting in the West.¹⁵⁴

The *k.u.k.* 35th Infantry Division¹⁵⁵

The 35th Infantry Division (*k.u.k. 35. Infanteriedivision*) was a battle-tested formation that had experienced extensive combat in the year and a half prior to its arrival in France. After transferring to the Isonzo from the Eastern Front in May 1917, the division had participated in the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo (May-June 1917), during which three of the division's infantry regiments had distinguished themselves and suffered significant losses in heavy fighting on Mount Hermada. The division had also fought during the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo (July-August 1917) and took part in the breakthrough near Tolmein during the Battle of Caporetto. More recently, the division had served as army reserve for the *k.u.k. 6. Armee* during the Piave

¹⁵² Ibid., 76.

¹⁵³ Etschmann, "Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung," 101.

¹⁵⁴ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 77-78.

¹⁵⁵ Unfortunately, the AOK weekly reports and Schilaneck's memoir are the only surviving sources for this division.

Offensive, although only the divisional artillery, technical troops, and infantry pioneers took part in the fighting at Montello. Thus, by the time the division departed for France, the infantry strength of the division was fairly low, with many of the infantry companies mustering approximately one hundred men.¹⁵⁶ Likewise, the heavy fighting of the previous year had cost the division some of its best and most experienced officers and NCO's, a loss that could not be compensated for at this point in the war.¹⁵⁷

Nevertheless, according to the postwar account of Alfred Schilaneck, a former chief of staff of the division, the formation remained a cohesive and competent fighting force. The two infantry brigades and most of the infantry regiments remained under the command of long-serving officers and the divisional command considered the infantry capable of handling the most difficult tasks. Likewise, the division had hitherto demonstrated no signs of serious war weariness; according to Schilaneck's account, desertion was unheard-of and military censors had not detected any significant indications of discontent in the period immediately preceding the deployment to France.¹⁵⁸ As of its arrival in the West, the 35th Infantry Division, under the command of FML Eugen von Podhoránsky, possessed approximately 10,500 men organized into two infantry brigades (69. and 70. *Infanteriebrigaden*), each of which consisted of two infantry regiments (*Infanterieregimenter* 62, 64, 51, and 63); in total, the division possessed twelve line battalions. Likewise, the division also possessed a field artillery brigade (35.

Feldartilleriebrigade), an observation balloon company (*Ballonkompanie* 27), a divisional

¹⁵⁶ In 1918, an Austro-Hungarian infantry regiment comprised three battalions of four companies each.

¹⁵⁷ Alfred Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 370-11.4 Folder I: 35th A-H [Austro-Hungarian] Division [k.u.k. 35. Infanterie-Division] Notes by Chief of Staff (History) September 1 - November 11, 1918, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, Record Group 165: Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860 – 1952, National Archives at College Park, MD, 1-2.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

cavalry squadron (6th Squadron, *Husarenregiment 4*), and a divisional assault battalion (*Sturmataillon 35*).¹⁵⁹ In terms of ethnicity, the personnel of the 35th Infantry Division consisted of Romanians, Siebenbürger Saxons (German-speakers), and Hungarians. While most of the officers and NCO's were Germans and Hungarians, the majority of the rank-and-file were Romanians save IR 62, which was predominately Hungarian. The regimental mustering areas (*Ergänzungsbezirke*) were located in Hungarian Transylvania, specifically in Klaussenburg (IR 51), Marosvásárhely (IR 62), Besztercze (IR 63), and Szaszváros (IR 64). According to Schilaneck, the “willingness and frugality” of the Romanian troops made them particularly good soldier material.¹⁶⁰

Interestingly, the AOK had ordered the strictest secrecy for the deployment of *k.u.k.* troops to France. Correspondingly, as the division assembled around Cordignano in the first week of July for transportation to the Western Front, no one in the division – even the divisional commander and his chief of staff – knew the exact details of the deployment.¹⁶¹ By July 26th, the majority of the division had arrived in the area around Conflans in Lorraine, although the divisional artillery remained in Italy until August.¹⁶² Upon arrival in France, the division was designated as army reserve and subordinated to Gruppe Combres (the German V. *Armeekorps*) of *Armee-Abteilung C*, under the overall authority of Heeresgruppe Gallwitz.¹⁶³ Commanded by the experienced *General der Artillerie* Max von Gallwitz, this army group incorporated the 5.

¹⁵⁹ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 94-95.

¹⁶⁰ Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 35th A-H Division Notes by Chief of Staff, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, 2.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁶² Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 95.

¹⁶³ Op. Nr. 24.704, 23.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, 303-33.1 Austrian GHQ [k.u.k. Armeeeoberkommando] Daily Reports (Meuse-Argonne) September 1 - October 31, 1918, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, Record Group 165: Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860 – 1952, National Archives at College Park, MD.

Armee and *Armee-Abteilung C* and covered the German front from the Argonne Forest to Metz, including the area around Verdun. This portion of the German front was relatively quiet until the beginning of September and witnessed a constant shifting of the formations that were temporarily stationed there. Thus, Heeresgruppe Gallwitz organized the area into provisional groups (*Gruppen*) in which local corps commands oversaw two to three divisions that were regularly rotated between the various *Gruppen*.¹⁶⁴ Starting in the northwest, the six *Gruppen* were designated “Maas-West,” “Maas-Ost,” “Ornes,” “Combres,” “Mihiel,” and “Gorz,” the last three of which belonged to *Armee-Abteilung C*.¹⁶⁵

The front of *Armee-Abteilung C* from the area east of Verdun to the Mosel encompassed the St. Mihiel salient, a conspicuous, 520 square-kilometer protrusion in the German lines that was a remnant of the German offensive at Verdun. From late 1916 to September 1918, the salient was one of the quietest, least active areas on the Western Front as the Allies had neglected to undertake any major operations there. Troops stationed on the frontline of the salient often did not hear enemy gunfire for days on end. Hence, the area was known as the “sanatorium of the West” as the Germans normally stationed depleted and exhausted divisions there for recuperation.¹⁶⁶ At the same time, the tactical situation of the St. Mihiel salient was extremely unfavorable for the German forces stationed in it. In addition to the risk of encirclement in the case of an enemy thrust on the flanks of the salient, Allied artillery could easily bombard any point in the interior of the salient from three directions.¹⁶⁷ Likewise, as most of the divisions of *Armee-Abteilung C* were already worn out from intensive fighting elsewhere, the manpower of

¹⁶⁴ While the geographically-designated *Gruppen* were semi-permanent, the specific corps command in charge of a *Gruppe* changed as individual formations were rotated in and out of the area.

¹⁶⁵ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 92.

¹⁶⁶ Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 35th A-H Division Notes by Chief of Staff, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, 2.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

the formations in the salient was extremely low; many infantry companies possessed less than fifty men and artillery regiments often only had two guns per battery. Thus, the German formations in the salient were obliged to station the vast majority of their forces on the frontline, leaving no considerable reserves for *Armee-Abteilung C*. At the same time, as the infantry units were understrength, the frontline itself was sparsely occupied. Indeed, the sectors of the frontline divisions were seriously overextended; most of the depleted front battalions occupied sectors two to three kilometers long and one kilometer deep.¹⁶⁸ For example, the northern area of *Gruppe Combres* in the Fresnes plain, a line of twenty-five kilometers adjacent to the eventual posting of the 35th Infantry Division, possessed a garrison of only small, weak observation detachments.¹⁶⁹

The local terrain in the St. Mihiel salient, including both the natural topography and the manmade fortifications, also entailed difficulties for the defenders. The prominent Côtes Lorraines ridgeline, running parallel to the Maas in a northwest-southeast direction in the middle of the salient, formed a notable natural obstacle with numerous ridges and dense forests. The area east of the Côtes Lorraines similarly possessed rough terrain with many topographical undulations and copious patches of thick forest and shrubbery.¹⁷⁰ Likewise, given the long period of time in which the Germans had occupied the area, the local fortifications exhibited a curious mix of older and newer defensive implements. The result was a cluttered mess of trenches, dugouts, wire obstacles, and blockhouses that generated much confusion and greatly hindered communication and coordination among the defending formations.¹⁷¹ Still, since the enemy had previously made no attempts to take the salient, the Germans had not withdrawn to a more

¹⁶⁸ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 98-99.

¹⁶⁹ Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 35th A-H Division Notes by Chief of Staff, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, 3-4.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷¹ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 98.

secure, cohesive position.¹⁷² Nevertheless, *Armee-Abteilung C* did draw up plans for a voluntary evacuation of the salient to the *Michelstellung*, a well-designed line of reinforced fortifications in the Woëvre. The plans called for six days of evacuation, in which the frontline divisions would remain in position while equipment was removed to the *Michelstellung*, and three days of retreat, during which the divisions would gradually withdraw by sector and thoroughly destroy settlements and infrastructure in the salient.¹⁷³

After a cursory training period of only two to three weeks, *Armee-Abteilung C* transferred the 35th Infantry Division to the direct command of Gruppe Combres in early August, which promptly inserted the division into the frontline in an area of the Côtes Lorraines near the village of Vigneulles.¹⁷⁴ The nine-kilometer long frontline was divided into three uniform regimental sectors – IR 62 remained for a time at Woël as army reserve – and consisted of a main line of resistance (*Hauptwiderstandslinie*) that was coherent but often hastily constructed; in many areas, the HWL comprised no more than weak wire obstacles and concrete dugouts. In each regimental sector, one battalion (two in the southernmost sector) held the foremost position, one battalion held the artillery positions, and the remaining battalion was stationed six to ten kilometers behind the front as a rest battalion.¹⁷⁵ Dominated by thick forests with small camps, depots, and field railways scattered everywhere, the terrain of the divisional area – ninety square kilometers between the frontlines and the divisional headquarters outside of Vigneulles – was extremely confusing and frustrated proper positioning and orientation.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, the difficult

¹⁷² Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 35th A-H Division Notes by Chief of Staff, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, 3.

¹⁷³ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 99.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

¹⁷⁶ Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 35th A-H Division Notes by Chief of Staff, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, 6.

landscape of the area exerted a major effect on the activities of the division even before the commencement of large-scale combat. Patrol activity by the front battalions of the 35th and the adjacent German 13. Landwehr-Division yielded very limited contact with the French 2nd Cuirassier Division opposite them, as the forward positions of both sides were quite fragmented and porous. Similarly, on August 24th, several men of the frontline battalion of IR 63 disappeared without a trace, likely after becoming lost in the forest.¹⁷⁷ Correspondingly, the Austro-Hungarian troops were not enthusiastic about their unfavorable positions and the regular patrol activities mandated by the German authorities, exhibiting notable signs of anxiety and paranoia. One platoon leader informed the divisional chief of staff that the men of the forward battalions believed that the enemy opposite them possessed a mirror with which they could perfectly detect all movements on the Austro-Hungarian side. Likewise, departing German soldiers had informed their Austro-Hungarian comrades that African colonial soldiers were cannibals, a rumor that the Transylvanians of the 35th Infantry Division, the majority of whom likely hailed from rustic backgrounds, seemed to take seriously.¹⁷⁸

At the end of August, after intense negotiations between the Supreme Allied Commander Ferdinand Foch and the commander of the AEF, John J. Pershing, the Allies decided that the AEF would undertake a major two-stage offensive in northeastern France. The first part of this American contribution to the Allied Hundred Days Offensives was the elimination of the St. Mihiel salient, a preliminary step to a major American thrust in the Meuse-Argonne region.¹⁷⁹ By the beginning of September, the Germans had noticed the marked increase in enemy movement around the salient and shifted the reserves of *Armee-Abteilung C* forward in anticipation of an

¹⁷⁷ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 100.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Edward G. Lengel, *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008), 50-51.

enemy assault. At the same time, Ludendorff was concerned above all with protecting the valuable industrial areas behind the salient, particularly the iron mines of Briey-Longwy. Thus, on September 8th, the OHL ordered the evacuation of the St. Mihiel salient.¹⁸⁰ The evacuation was still underway when the Allied offensive began four days later on September 12th. Over 500,000 American and 110,000 French troops, extensively supported by artillery, aircraft, and armor, attacked disorganized, withdrawing German forces that possessed less than a tenth of their strength. Although the largely inexperienced US First Army encountered difficulties in logistics, communication, and coordination, the Battle of Saint Mihiel was a great success for the Allies. The offensive lasted only four days and the Franco-American forces captured 13,000 German prisoners and hundreds of artillery pieces and machine guns, while the Allies themselves suffered less than 9000 casualties.¹⁸¹ The two primary thrusts of the offensive struck both sides of the salient, aiming to cut off the German forces in the southeast; one thrust pushed northward between the Côtes Lorraines and the Mosel, while another advanced southwards in the area around Combres.¹⁸² Thus, on September 12th, the *k.u.k.* 35th Infantry Division found itself immediately adjacent to one of the main axes of the St. Mihiel Offensive.

When the Allied attack began on the morning of September 12th, four battalions held the forward positions of the 35th Infantry Division (I and II/IR 62, II/IR 51, and II/IR 63), two were stationed in the artillery positions (I/IR 51 and III/IR 62), and the remaining six battalions, some of which were positioned far behind the HWL, were utilized as army reserve under the direct control of *Armee-Abteilung C*.¹⁸³ Interestingly, the division was under the temporary command of *Generalmajor* Gustav Funk, the commander of the 70th Infantry Brigade, as FML von

¹⁸⁰ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 101.

¹⁸¹ Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, 52-53.

¹⁸² Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 101.

¹⁸³ Glaise-Horstenau (ed.), *ÖULK*, vol. 7, 483-484.

Podhoránsky was on vacation at the time of the battle.¹⁸⁴ Beginning at 2 AM, vigorous artillery fire pummeled the entire divisional front, with the heaviest fire concentrated on the forward positions; alarmingly, the divisional flash-ranging section reported that at least fifteen enemy batteries were positioned opposite the divisional sector alone. By 3 AM, it was clear that the enemy artillery fire was primarily focused on the right flank of the divisional sector where the 35th bordered the 13. Landwehr-Division, whose sector was the primary target of the Allied attack in the north. Although the divisional command was convinced that the enemy activity was indicative of a large-scale offensive, it neglected to order increased combat readiness until 7:50 AM, mostly on account of the intensive evacuation efforts still in progress.¹⁸⁵

Between 7:40 and 11 AM, systematic enemy artillery fire began to target the rear areas of the division, crippling the Austro-Hungarian efforts to evacuate equipment and supplies. Simultaneously, the troops of the US V Corps struck the southernmost regimental sector (DIII), where the frontline detachment repulsed two enemy battalions, and in the northernmost sector (DI), where the enemy assault penetrated the HWL.¹⁸⁶ By the early afternoon, the divisional command had received alarming reports from the neighboring German divisions. The 13. Landwehr-Division reported significant enemy breakthroughs in its sector, which seriously threatened the right flank of the 35th Infantry-Division. Correspondingly, the divisional command ordered the 69th Infantry Brigade, which was commanding the infantry forces assembled around sector DI, to form a refused flank facing north from the artillery positions. Likewise, the 192. *Infanterie-Division*, positioned to the south of the 35th Infantry Division, communicated its

¹⁸⁴ Etschmann, "Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung," 101.

¹⁸⁵ Op. Nr. 24.221, 19.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

¹⁸⁶ The above source, a divisional after-action report sent to Gruppe Combres, was submitted before the divisional command could obtain complete reports from the combat units and is thus not fully complete or accurate.

intention to withdraw around 1:30 PM, which in turn exposed the southern flank of the division. Notably, around 2:15 PM, as the 35th divisional command attempted to relay its situation to the 192nd, the German radio operator abruptly ended the conversation with the jarring remark, “pardon me, I must interrupt; there are tanks here.” In the meantime, French troops had reportedly advanced further in the sector DI, threatening the artillery positions there. Thus, the divisional command ordered the reserves in sector DI to conduct a fighting withdrawal with the aim of covering the retreating remnants of the frontline battalions.¹⁸⁷

As exemplified by the patchy, incomplete nature of the division’s after-action report, the fighting in the sector of the 35th Infantry Division was incredibly chaotic. The difficult terrain, the intensity of the Allied assault, the shortcomings of field communications, and the inherent confusion of the interrupted evacuation wrought havoc on Austro-Hungarian command and control. The divisional command received inconsistent, incomplete reports from its subordinate units and thus obtained an accurate view of the tactical situation very slowly.¹⁸⁸ Notably, for some time during the afternoon of the 12th, communications between sectors DII and DIII had broken down completely, leaving both the divisional and brigade commands in the dark regarding developments in those sectors.¹⁸⁹ On a lower level, local Austro-Hungarian counterattacks to regain lost ground in sector DI became dispersed in the thick woods of the Côtes Lorraines and subsequently fell victim to Allied ambushes. Likewise, the thick vegetation and deficient communications seriously impeded close coordination between Austro-Hungarian

¹⁸⁷ Op. Nr. 24.221, 19.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

¹⁸⁸ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 101-102.

¹⁸⁹ Op. Nr. 24.221, 19.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

infantry and artillery; the *k.u.k.* artillery could only offer unobserved scatter fire rather than accurate, directed bombardment.¹⁹⁰

By the late afternoon, the Austro-Hungarian center in sector DII had suffered breakthroughs in both of its flanks, forcing the troops there to slowly withdraw. The 69th Infantry Brigade command had assembled two reserve battalions to conduct a counterattack on the embattled right flank, but the divisional command was more concerned with reconstituting a defensive position behind the original frontline. As the division did not possess sufficient reserves to undertake both of these tasks, *Generalmajor* Funk cancelled the prospective counterattack and ordered the remaining battalions to conduct a fighting withdrawal to the new, temporary positions of the *Schröterstellung*.¹⁹¹ The Austro-Hungarian infantry were thus able to maintain sufficient cohesion and control over the deteriorating situation to permit the withdrawal of the detachments engaged in combat.¹⁹² Beginning around 5 PM, the Austro-Hungarian units in the southern part of the divisional sector began to withdraw and at 6:30, the divisional command finally received the order from Gruppe Combres to retreat to the *Michelstellung*.¹⁹³

After 6:50 PM, the divisional and brigade headquarters withdrew to Jonville on the *Michelstellung* in coordination with the 13. Landwehr-Division. Funk ordered IR 64, which had mostly remained in reserve during the fighting, to occupy the positions in front of and on the new HWL and subordinated the artillery that had arrived there to the regimental command. The divisional command also designated areas behind the HWL to serve as regimental assembly

¹⁹⁰ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 101-102.

¹⁹¹ Op. Nr. 24.221, 19.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

¹⁹² Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 102.

¹⁹³ Op. Nr. 24.221, 19.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

zones for the retreating detachments. On September 13th, the divisional command transferred its headquarters to Conflans and worked tirelessly throughout the day to reform the shattered division and reestablish connections with the neighboring German divisions. Fortunately for the Austro-Hungarians, the enemy did not interfere in the disengagement and reassembly of the *k.u.k.* troops, save for constant, vigorous enemy air attacks.¹⁹⁴ To be sure, the reformation of the division was a herculean task, given the heavy casualties suffered by the *k.u.k.* units and the sheer number of stragglers scattered in the dense forests during the hectic, though controlled withdrawal. Correspondingly, the division had to temporarily reconstitute IR 51 and IR 62 as single-battalion regiments until September 18th.¹⁹⁵ The new position of the division extended for four and a half kilometers from Jonville northwards to Harville; initially, the outpost zone¹⁹⁶ of the division was quite large, encompassing the area Woël – Doncourt – St. Hilaire.¹⁹⁷

From September 14-16, the 35th Infantry Division conducted numerous small-scale offensive and defensive operations around the HWL and in the outpost zone of the divisional sector. Although the steady Allied advance had at one point driven the Austro-Hungarian outpost detachments back to the HWL, subsequent counterattacks with artillery support and in close cooperation with the 13. Landwehr-Division eventually reestablished an outpost zone of two kilometers beyond the HWL.¹⁹⁸ After this period, as they had accomplished their objective of eliminating the St. Mihiel Salient, the Allies halted their advance. Thus, the first and final major battle of the 35th Infantry Division on the Western Front was over. Subsequent fighting in the

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Op. Nr. 24.704, 23.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

¹⁹⁶ The “outpost zone” (*Vorfeld*) was the area of no-man’s land occupied by patrols for the purposes of reconnaissance, interdiction of enemy attacks and patrols, and facilitation of one’s own attacks.

¹⁹⁷ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 102.

¹⁹⁸ Op. Nr. 24.221, 19.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

area of *Armee-Abteilung C* was limited to patrol skirmishes and reciprocal artillery bombardment; the position of the frontlines there remained unchanged until the armistice in November.¹⁹⁹ Although the 35th Infantry Division, like its German counterparts, had avoided total annihilation during the Battle of Saint Mihiel, the division had suffered heavy losses in both men and materiel during its fighting withdrawal. As of September 19th, the division had lost 99 officers and 3268 other ranks killed, wounded, missing, and captured, thus losing almost one third of the division's strength over the course of a single week.²⁰⁰ Likewise, the division also lost 102 machine guns (including 22 Lewis guns), five infantry cannons, sixteen mortars (*Minenwerfer*), seventeen grenade launchers (*Granatenwerfer*)²⁰¹, six German-made howitzers, two German-made field cannons, three Austrian-made field cannons, and thirteen Austrian-made howitzers. Tellingly, most of the machine guns and artillery had been blown up in the bitter, chaotic hand-to-hand combat that characterized the fighting in the divisional sector.²⁰² Similarly, the fact that the majority of the division's casualties fell into the category of "missing" exemplified the prevailing confusion and disorder of the battle.

By September 23rd, the division had largely reconstituted itself in its new position. The arrival of fourteen officers and 620 other ranks as reinforcements from the XXXIX. and XL. *Marschbataillone*²⁰³, combined with the return of numerous stragglers, significantly improved the manpower situation of the division, permitting the reestablishment of four three-battalion

¹⁹⁹ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 102-103.

²⁰⁰ These figures denote personnel as killed, wounded, or captured only if the regiments could confirm their fate via eyewitnesses or concrete evidence; thus, the category "missing" (79 officers and 2841 other ranks) includes those killed, wounded, or captured whose persons/bodies were in enemy possession.

²⁰¹ In the German and Austro-Hungarian armies, mortars were classified as "Granatenwerfer" (grenade launchers or smaller-caliber infantry mortars) or "Minenwerfer" (larger-caliber infantry mortars and heavy trench mortars).

²⁰² Op. Nr. 24.221, 19.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

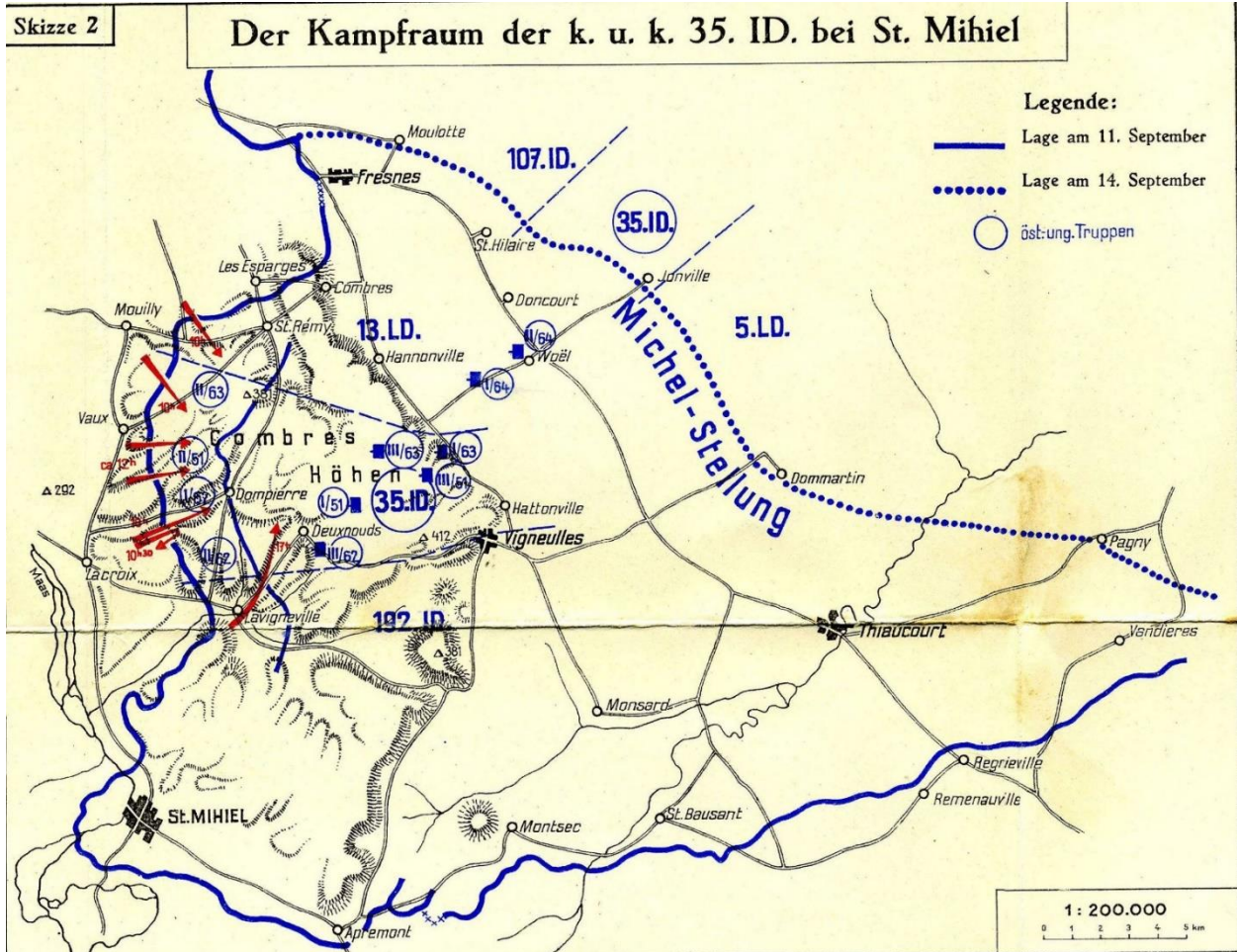
²⁰³ Instead of distributing reinforcements piecemeal, the *k.u.k.* Armee formed "march battalions" of replacements that were sent to front as entire formations and were occasionally thrown into combat as ad hoc units.

infantry regiments. Nevertheless, the actions of the previous week had noticeably reduced the combat strength of the division, which at this point possessed a combat strength of 293 officers and 6688 other ranks (including personnel on leave). Likewise, the division had at its disposal 144 machine guns, three infantry cannons, thirty mortars, four usable mountain cannons, nineteen usable field cannons, twenty-seven usable howitzers, fifteen usable heavy howitzers, and eight German light howitzers.²⁰⁴ During this period of relative calm, several notable figures visited the area of *Armee-Abteilung C*. On September 21st, Kaiser Wilhelm himself visited the *Armee-Abteilung* headquarters, accompanied by FML Klepsch-Kloth. The Kaiser greeted Habsburg officers at the HQ and some Austro-Hungarian casualties at local hospitals and expressed appreciation for the contributions of *k.u.k.* units.²⁰⁵ Otherwise, although the 35th Infantry Division continued to suffer from perennial shortages of men and materiel, combat losses from the stalemate were low and the chronicle of the division up to its withdrawal from the frontline at the beginning of November was uneventful.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Op. Nr. 24.704, 23.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

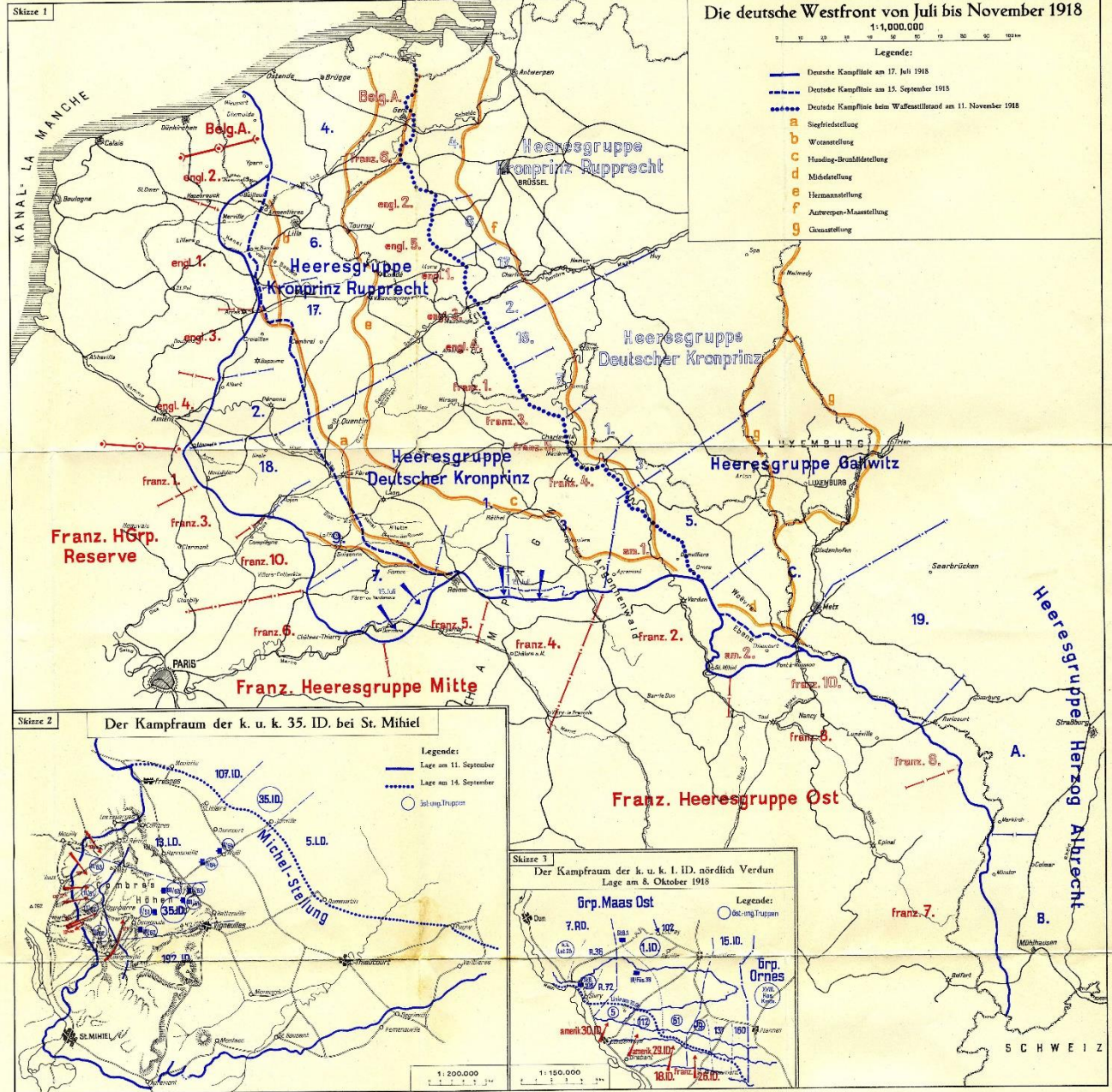
²⁰⁵ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 103.

²⁰⁶ Op. Nr. 265.02, 271.10, 278.11, 285.08, 11 – 31.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.



The 35th Infantry Division and the St. Mihiel Salient, September 1918.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Glaise-Horstenaus (ed.), *ÖULK*, vol. 7.



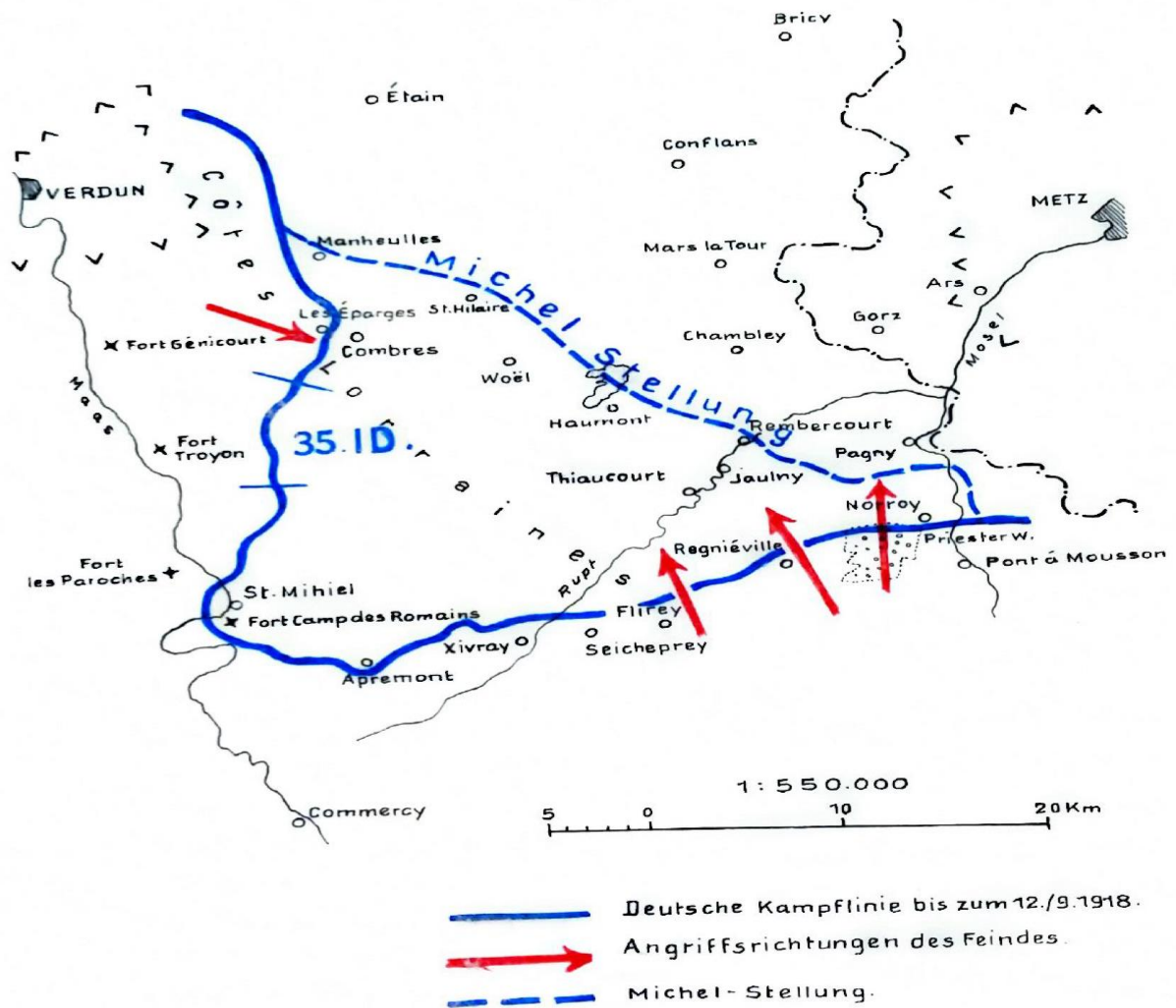
The German Western Front, July – November 1918.²⁰⁸

208 Ibid.

K.u.k. 35. ITD.

Kämpfe im Mihielbogen 1918.

(Aus Ludendorff, „Kriegserinnerungen, Seite 572“).



A wider view of the St. Mihiel Salient, September 1918.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 35th A-H Division Notes by Chief of Staff, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

The k.u.k. 1st Infantry Division

Like the 35th Infantry Division, the 1st Infantry Division (*k.u.k. 1. Infanteriedivision*) had participated in many battles on the Italian Front prior to its transfer to the West. Since 1915, the division had proven its worth in practically every area of the Italian Front, from Tirol and Carinthia to the upper Isonzo; during the recent June Offensive, the division had fought in the Tonale Pass. Notably, the commander of the division, FML Josef Metzger, was a former head of the Operations Department of the AOK. Unusually for a Habsburg officer, the Germans held him in fairly high esteem, both because of his military abilities and because of his frequent conciliation of disputes between the OHL and the AOK during the era of Conrad.²¹⁰ Even after his tenure at the AOK, Metzger proved himself to be a capable troop commander, earning the Knight's Cross of the Military Order of Maria Theresia for his leadership of the 1st Infantry Division during the Battle of Caporetto.²¹¹

At the time of its arrival in France between July 21st and August 1st, the 1st Infantry Division numbered approximately 8,400 men in two infantry brigades (1. and 2. *Infanteriebrigaden*), which comprised three infantry regiments (IR 5, IR 61, and IR 112) and three light infantry (*Feldjäger*) battalions (FJB 17, FJB 25, and FJB 31); in total, the division commanded twelve line battalions, including the *Feldjäger*. Likewise, the division also included a cavalry squadron (2nd Squadron, *Honvédhusarenregiment* 10), a field artillery brigade (1. *Feldartilleriebrigade*), a division assault battalion (*Sturmbataillon* 1), a sapper battalion (*Sappeurbataillon* 1), and an observation balloon company (*Ballonkompanie* 13).²¹² The ethnic composition of the 1st Infantry Division was quite diverse as the constituent units hailed from a

²¹⁰ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 106.

²¹¹ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 793.

²¹² Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 105.

variety of locales in Bohemia and Hungary. IR 5, with the mustering area of Szatmárnémeti in Transylvania, consisted of Hungarians and Romanians. The troops of IR 61, drawn from Temesvár (contemporary Timișoara) in the Banat, were predominately Germans and Romanians, though the regiment also had Hungarian and Serb members. IR 112 recruited from the Trentschin and Preßburg (modern-day Bratislava) areas, incorporating Germans, Hungarians, and Slovaks. The personnel of FJB 17 and 25, both of which recruited from the area around Brünn (Brno) in Moravia, were mostly Czech with some German elements; in contrast, FJB 31 recruited from the Agram district (modern-day Zagreb) and thus comprised Croats and Serbs. As was customary in the Austro-Hungarian Army, the divisional *Sturmbataillon* did not recruit from a specific area and was composed of select troops from all of the division's constituent units.²¹³

After arriving in France, the 1st Infantry Division initially assembled in the area around Montmedy to undergo training for the combat conditions on the Western Front and to receive additional equipment. Around the middle of August, the OHL ordered the division to replace the worn-out 232. *Infanterie-Division* on the frontlines adjacent to the Maas.²¹⁴ Thus, the OHL assigned the division to the Gruppe Maas-Ost (V. Reserve-Korps) of the 5. *Armee* under *General der Kavallerie* Georg von der Marwitz, which was also subordinated to Heeresgruppe Gallwitz. The division promptly occupied a seven-kilometer section of the front on the eastern bank of the Maas denoted as the subsector "Brabant," which ran from positions on the river near Sivry to the area west of Beaumont.²¹⁵ Fortunately for the Austro-Hungarians and Germans positioned there, the Meuse-Argonne region offered excellent defensive terrain. The river Maas itself was unfordable, thereby providing a key natural obstacle for an Allied offensive. Likewise, the

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 106.

²¹⁵ Op. Nr. 2516/2, 23.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, 303-33.1 Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

topography of the region was very uneven, characterized by numerous hills, ravines, and small streams; notably, the areas behind the frontline, largely untouched by the fighting, were dominated by thick forest and foliage. East of the river and behind the 1st Infantry Division's sector stood the Heights of the Maas, a major north-south ridgeline on which the Germans had concentrated artillery to command almost the entire battlefield.²¹⁶

The German defenses in the region were well-established, as the Germans had occupied most of the area since 1914. The Germans had constructed an extensive network of interlocking trenches, wire obstacles, pillboxes, redoubts, and other defensive implements, all of which formed a coherent system of killing zones. Three main defensive lines ran through the multiple sectors of the region, namely the *Eztel-Stellung*, the *Kriemhild-Stellung*, and finally, the *Freyastellung*. Although the German fortifications were mostly quite strong and well-supported by significant artillery forces and ubiquitous machine-gun nests, certain segments of the German defensive lines were poorly constructed or even virtually nonexistent when the Allies attacked in late September during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.²¹⁷ This primarily American operation, the largest battle in the history of the US Army, aimed to break through the German defenses in northeastern France and sever the German Army's north-south axis of communications on the Western Front, thereby compelling the *Westheer* to withdraw into Germany.²¹⁸

The natural and artificial defensive advantages of the region formed a key aspect of the German strategy, as otherwise the forces of Heeresgruppe Gallwitz were badly outmatched. 5. *Armee* had at its disposal approximately forty-four divisions at one time or another during the battle, but the majority of the German formations were operating at one-third or less of their

²¹⁶ Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, 57.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 420-421.

proscribed strength.²¹⁹ In contrast, a total of twenty-two American divisions²²⁰ – over 1.2 million men – participated in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, supported by 2775 artillery pieces, 821 aircraft, and almost 400 tanks. In addition to providing crews for many of the Allied artillery pieces and aircraft, the French army also offered significant infantry support for the assault. In the initial attack, American infantry forces outnumbered the German frontline divisions by more than three to one.²²¹ The subsequent actions of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive from September 26th to the end of the war on November 11th witnessed extensive and bloody fighting. Overall, the operations were a clear Allied victory. In forty-seven days, the Franco-American forces had achieved all of their objectives, advancing to Mézières, Sedan, and the upper Maas as well as capturing 26,000 prisoners, 874 artillery pieces, and 3000 machine guns. Likewise, the offensive had decimated the forces of Heeresgruppe Gallwitz, which suffered 100,000 dead and wounded in addition to the prisoners. At the same time, the Allied advance had been neither easy nor straight-forward. The German forces, despite the desperate circumstances, conducted a skilled and tenacious defense, with well-placed and coordinated artillery and machine guns inflicting heavy casualties on the Allies. Simultaneously, the inexperience and outdated frontal-assault tactics of the American troops magnified US losses during the offensive; the Meuse-Argonne Offensive was the deadliest battle in American military history, with US forces suffering 122,000 casualties, including 26,277 killed.²²²

²¹⁹ Ibid., 59.

²²⁰ In contrast to its European allies and enemies, the US Army still utilized “square” divisions in 1918; each division comprised four infantry regiments instead of three. Thus, even accounting for the disparate manpower situations of the two armies, a standard US division was inherently larger than its German or Austro-Hungarian counterpart.

²²¹ Lengel., *To Conquer Hell*, 62-64.

²²² Ibid., 419-420.

Prior to the beginning of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the 1st Infantry Division had over a month to acquaint itself to its sector of the front and prepare for the inevitable enemy assault. The terrain from the eastern bank of the Maas to the divisional HWL was thousands of meters of open fields and slopes, while the area behind the frontlines was characterized by densely wooded ravines and hills; a single road running from the town of Consenvoye northeast to Etraye and Damvillers bisected the woods there.²²³ By September 23rd, the division had received nine march companies from the XLI – XLIII. *Marschbataillone*²²⁴ and correspondingly possessed a strength of 335 officers and 8644 other ranks on October 1st. At the same time, the division had suffered only thirty-four combat casualties from September 10-20, as the combat activity in the sector Brabant consisted only of reciprocal exploratory patrols and intermittent artillery disruptive fire.²²⁵

After the Franco-American offensive began three days later, fighting in the divisional sector intensified, but the main impetus of the Allied assault was initially concentrated elsewhere. The powerful artillery bombardment preceding the Allied assault began in the early morning on September 26th and pulverized the German and Austro-Hungarian positions along the entire front of 5. *Armee*. At 7 AM, a major American attack on the German positions west of the Maas commenced while French battalions, including Senegalese troops of the 2nd Colonial Corps, undertook forceful but localized pushes against the center (sector B of IR 112) and left flank (sector C of IR 61) of the divisional sector. These attacks, as well as a later assault against the right flank of the division (sector A of IR 5) managed to overrun the forward posts, but the

²²³ Ibid., 275.

²²⁴ By late September, the 1st ID had received reinforcements from the forty-third march battalion (numbered serially from the beginning of the war) while the 35th ID had only received up to the fortieth, which exemplifies the strained and confused reinforcement situation of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918.

²²⁵ Op. Nr. 2516/2, 23.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

Austro-Hungarian defenders halted the French at the HWL and subsequently pushed the enemy back into no man's land.²²⁶

Although the 1st Infantry Division had managed to hold its positions, the primary American assault west of the river had forced the German 7. *Reserve-Division* to retreat. Consequently, on the night of September 26-27, the division withdrew its right flank to the northwest, establishing a new defensive line from Sivry to the area east of Vilosnes with *Sturmabteilung* 1. Sustained American attacks on the positions of Gruppe Maas-West up to September 30th continued to threaten the right flank of the division; while the Allied infantry attacks temporarily neglected the divisional sector itself, varying degrees of artillery bombardment, including the extensive use of poison gas, saturated the rear areas of the division. In order to lessen the risk of another frontal assault on the divisional sector, Gruppe Maas-Ost had ordered the destruction of the bridges across the Maas at Consenvoye, Sivry, and Vilosnes, but deficient ammunition prevented the divisional artillery from accomplishing this mission. Instead, the divisional sapper battalion assumed the hazardous task of infiltrating no man's land to destroy the bridges with explosive charges, a mission which they accomplished over the course of three nights. Though the first week of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive had largely spared the 1st Infantry Division from major combat action, the intensified fighting had exacted a not insignificant toll on the division's manpower; by October 3rd, the division had suffered 503 casualties, more than half of which were injuries from gas.²²⁷

The division was in a state of constant combat readiness from October 1st to October 7th, although no notable infantry combat occurred in the divisional sector during this period.

²²⁶ Op. Nr. 2802, 3.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

However, the Allies persisted in their constant, vigorous bombardment of the depots and billets in the rear areas of the divisional sector with both high explosive and gas shells. Notably, on the night of October 3rd, an assault patrol of FJB 25²²⁸ in the outpost zone of the neighboring 15. *Infanterie-Division* resulted in the capture of several soldiers of the French 18th Division. Upon interrogation, the prisoners indicated the presence of two American divisions opposite the divisional sector. Although neither subsequent observation nor further reconnaissance reports gave a clear indication of an imminent major attack, the divisional command certainly had cause for alarm. The defenses in sector A, the area of the divisional area closest to the heavy fighting west of the Maas, were extremely overextended as twelve understrength companies of IR 5 had to occupy almost five kilometers of the frontline. The total length of the divisional frontline, defended by a mere ten battalions, was 10.2 kilometers. Moreover, the withdrawal of the forces of Gruppe Maas-West to the heights north of Briulles exposed the right wing of the division to strong flanking fire from Allied artillery west of the river.²²⁹

On October 8th, the relative peace that had prevailed in the sector of the 1st Infantry Division since September 27th came to an abrupt and violent end with the beginning of the Franco-American assault east of the Maas. The French XVII Corps, composed of the US 29th and 33rd Divisions, the French 18th and 26th Divisions, and several Senegalese battalions aimed to complement the initial Allied thrust in the lower Argonne and increase the pressure on 5. *Armee*. The French forces would advance towards the town of Flabas in the east while the US divisions further to the west formed the main thrust; the 29th Division would attack northwards from

²²⁸ By this point, the Germans had consolidated the *Feldjägerbataillone* of the 1. ID to form the ad hoc “*Jägerregiment Marschan*,” which was removed from the tactical control of the division and subordinated to the German 15. ID. See Page 119 for further information.

²²⁹ Op. Nr. 2966, 15.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

Samogneux through the Consenvoye Woods to Molleville Farm, while the 33rd Division was tasked with crossing the Maas near Brabant, seizing the village of Consenvoye, and advancing through the forest onto the main ridge of the Maas Heights.²³⁰

At 6 AM, intensive Allied artillery fire opened up all along the front of Gruppen Maas-Ost and Ornes, with French large-caliber artillery pulverizing the command posts and rear positions of the sectors. The enemy infantry attack began at 7:30 under the cover of artificial fog, quickly pushing the Austro-Hungarian forward posts back to the HWL; by 10 AM, US infantry and armor had penetrated the defensive positions of sector B in front of Brabant. Although IR 5 in sector A and IR 61 in sector C repulsed several enemy assaults from the HWL, the Americans pressed their attack east of the Malbrouck Hill in sector B and achieved a mass breakthrough there in the early afternoon after heavy fighting and considerable losses. By this point, the 1st Infantry Division had committed all of its regimental reserves in counterattacks to recapture the HWL at the Malbrouck and Haumont Hills. Likewise, *Sturmabteilung* 1 had also counterattacked to reconstitute the Austro-Hungarian position in sector C. Like their comrades at St. Mihiel, the troops of the 1st Infantry Division experienced bitter, often close-quarters combat in difficult, confusing terrain. The division lost many of its anti-tank guns and close support artillery in hand-to-hand combat with attacking American troops, while the regimental command of IR 61 had to free itself from encirclement in an intense grenade duel with a French colonial battalion.²³¹

Shortly after noon, elements of the 33rd Division crossed the Maas near Consenvoye and after three failed assaults, finally succeeded in penetrating the HWL of IR 5 in sector A.

²³⁰ Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, 275-276.

²³¹ Op. Nr. 2966, 15.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

Subsequently, the simultaneous Allied thrusts north and south of Malbrouck Hill enveloped elements of IR 112 holding out on the hill. Conversely, IR 61 and the divisional *Sturmabteilung* continued to repulse enemy attacks in sector C into the late afternoon. *Generalmajor* von Hellebronth, the commander of 2. *Infanteriebrigade*, played a critical role in salvaging the Austro-German position in the Brabant sector. Displaying notable equanimity under pressure, he maintained the brigade headquarters a mere 200 paces from the advancing enemy and continued to issue orders to the beleaguered Austro-Hungarian regiments. Hellebronth combined the division's final reserves with German reinforcements and established a secondary defensive line along the *Eztel-Stellung*, which finally managed to halt the enemy advance and prevent a deeper penetration of divisional sector. Gruppe Maas-Ost subsequently ordered that the German and *k.u.k.* units subordinated to the 1st Infantry Division execute a counterattack to recapture the former divisional HWL in sectors B and C. Beginning at 5:30 AM on October 9th, the Austro-German drive was confused, disjointed, and severely disrupted by enemy artillery fire; correspondingly, the counterattack yielded no permanent gains. Again at the insistence of Maas-Ost, the 1st Infantry Division commenced another counterattack that afternoon north of the Consenvoye-Etraye road, aiming to throw the Americans back across the Maas. This effort similarly produced negligible results. Even with German reinforcements, the division simply did not possess the strength for such an offensive effort, and Maas-Ost would not provide any further reinforcements.²³² Although Franco-American forces attacking on October 8-9 had suffered significant losses and had not achieved their intended goals, the assault had managed to exhaust the last real reserves of 5. *Armee*.²³³

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, 285.

In addition to the failed Austro-German counterattacks, perhaps the most prominent combat action of Austro-Hungarian infantry on the Western Front also occurred on October 9th. In the early morning, a renewed American attack in sector A broke through the HWL of IR 5 southeast of Sivry. The remnants of IR 5, along with elements of IR 112 and a few companies of the German *Füsilier-Regiment 35* and *Infanterie-Regiment 103* retreated to Hill 371, which the Americans promptly enveloped. This ad hoc group of Austro-Hungarian and German soldiers, under the leadership of *Oberstleutnant* Rudolf Popelka, the commander of IR 5, held off repeated American attacks on their position from three sides for over a day before withdrawing to a more secure position.²³⁴ Indeed, a German Army report of October 11th, in addition to hailing the valiant defense of Brandenburger, Saxon, Rhenish, and Austro-Hungarian troops east of the Maas, singled out IR 5 and its commander for special praise. Kaiser Wilhelm himself subsequently decorated *Oberstleutnant* Popelka with the *Pour le Mérite*, the highest military order of merit in Prussia; notably, Popelka was the only Austro-Hungarian troop officer in history to receive this award.²³⁵ Still, despite the best efforts of Popelka, Hellebronth, Metzger, and other Austro-Hungarian officers, two days of bitter fighting had gravely weakened the 1st Infantry Division and the American assault had not abated. On October 9th, at around 5 PM, 125 Allied bombers pounded the depots, approaches, and supply lines in the rear areas of the division; vigorous enemy artillery fire likewise bombarded the same targets that night.²³⁶

By that point, the combat strength of the division had been almost completely exhausted. The divisional command transferred control of the sector Brabant to the German 228. *Infanterie-*

²³⁴ Op. Nr. 2966, 15.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

²³⁵ Etschmann, "Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung," 97.

²³⁶ Op. Nr. 2966, 15.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

Division at 1 PM on October 10th and withdrew to the area Remoiville-Jametz for rehabilitation.²³⁷ Although Maas-Ost had removed the 1st Infantry Division from the frontline on October 10th, the desperate situation at the front precluded a straightforward disengagement of the Austro-Hungarian units still in combat. Military necessity demanded that elements of all three regiments, particularly those of “Gruppe Popelka,” as well as the *Jägerregiment* remain under the tactical control of the German 228, 32, and 15. *Infanterie-Divisionen*. Correspondingly, the last detachments of the *k.u.k.* infantry regiments did not regroup with the rest of the division until the evening of October 12th, while the *Jägerregiment* remained under German command until October 14th. Similarly, the majority of the artillery remained in service at the front past October 10th, leaving only a few batteries at the immediate disposal of the division for several days.²³⁸

Though the division had largely accorded itself well in the fighting east of the Maas, the Austro-Hungarians had suffered heavy casualties in combat with the Franco-American forces. On October 13th, after its removal from the frontlines, the 1st Infantry Division numbered 138 officers and 3592 other ranks (not including the *Feldjägerbataillone*), a mere forty percent of its strength on October 1st.²³⁹ The combat actions of October 8-10 were similarly costly in terms of materiel. The division had lost twenty-eight of its thirty-two light (7.58cm) *Minenwerfer*, most of which were either destroyed by direct hits from enemy artillery or left behind when the Americans overran the HWL.²⁴⁰ Likewise, on October 18th, even after some reinforcement, the 1.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Op. Nr. 3061, 21.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

²³⁹ Op. Nr. 2966, 15.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

²⁴⁰ Op. Nr. 2561, 21.10.1918, 351-32.9 1st A-H [Austro-Hungarian] Infantry Division [k.u.k. 1. Infanterie-Division] Operations Documents August 26 - November 3, 1918. Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to

Feldartilleriebrigade possessed a total of sixty-four artillery pieces of all types, twenty-two less than it had on September 13th.²⁴¹

In the forest encampments of Remoiville-Jametz, the divisional command frantically attempted to return the division to some semblance of combat capability, provisionally reconstituting each regiment with two half-battalions. However, the critical state of the German forces in the Meuse-Argonne did not allow any extended period of rest; already on October 14th. Maas-Ost ordered the division to replace the 117. *Infanterie-Division* on the frontline in the sector “Vilosnes.” Maas-Ost also removed IR 112 and FJB 17 from divisional control and subordinated this “Gruppe Sivry” to the 228. *Infanterie-Division*, whereupon these *k.u.k.* units returned the front in the old divisional sector. On October 18th, the 1st Infantry Division, now also incorporating *Landsturm-Infanterie-Regiment 25* and *Sturmbataillon 106* of the *k.u.k.* 106th Infantry Division, took over the sector northwest of Vilosnes, a 1.6 kilometer section of the frontline directly on the Maas. The defensive situation in the new divisional sector was quite precarious. For one, the fortifications in the area were extremely underdeveloped, as that section of the *Kriemhild-Stellung* really only existed on paper. Consequently, the division placed the HWL directly on the Maas to utilize the natural obstacle and ordered the frontline battalions to hurriedly construct additional wire obstacles and makeshift machine-gun nests. On October 22nd, the embattled 7. *Reserve-Division* on the right wing of the division withdrew in the face of the American onslaught, which compelled the division to further extend its already overstretched lines to Liny in the northwest.²⁴²

World War I. Record Group 165: Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860 – 1952, National Archives at College Park, MD.

²⁴¹ Op. Nr. 3043, 18.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

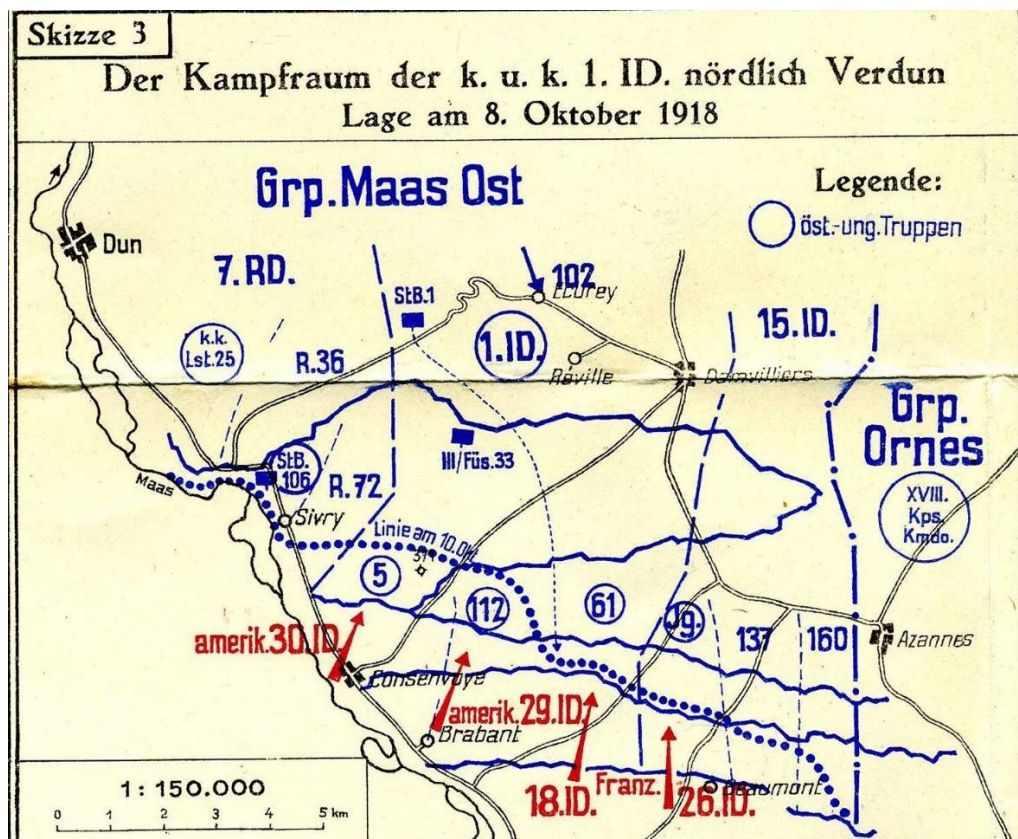
The 1st Infantry Division remained in a constant state of combat readiness on the frontlines in the Vilosnes sector until its withdrawal at the beginning of November. Fortunately for the exhausted, poorly-supplied, and understrength Austro-Hungarians, only localized infantry combat developed in the sector in the final weeks of the war, as the majority of the heavy fighting occurred west of the division and in the former divisional sector of Samogneux-Brabant.²⁴³ Yet, despite being spared from large-scale enemy attacks, the everyday difficulties of life on the Western Front still took a heavy toll on the manpower and materiel of the division. Constant artillery fire directed on frontline and rear areas of the division, especially bombardment with mustard gas, resulted in near-catastrophic losses, despite the best efforts of the divisional leadership to ensure proper gas protection measures. Over the course of three days from October 21st to October 23rd, the division suffered approximately 382 casualties from gassing alone; at this time, the division possessed a total combat strength of only 2700 men. The single worst incident occurred on October 23rd when gas bombardment inflicted 109 casualties, including the entire headquarters staff of both Lst.IR 25 and *Sturmbataillon* 106.²⁴⁴

Indeed, much to the chagrin of FML Metzger, the incessant artillery bombardment and small-scale infantry combat consistently eroded the combat capability of the division during the last few weeks of the war. Yet, aside from sending sharp protests to the German authorities and the AOK, Metzger could do little to avert the gradual annihilation of his division through attrition. The 1st and the 35th Infantry Divisions thus comprised the first and most significant stage of the Austro-Hungarian deployment of infantry to the Western Front. They participated in the fighting as coherent formations and suffered high casualties in the face of major Allied

²⁴³ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 110-111.

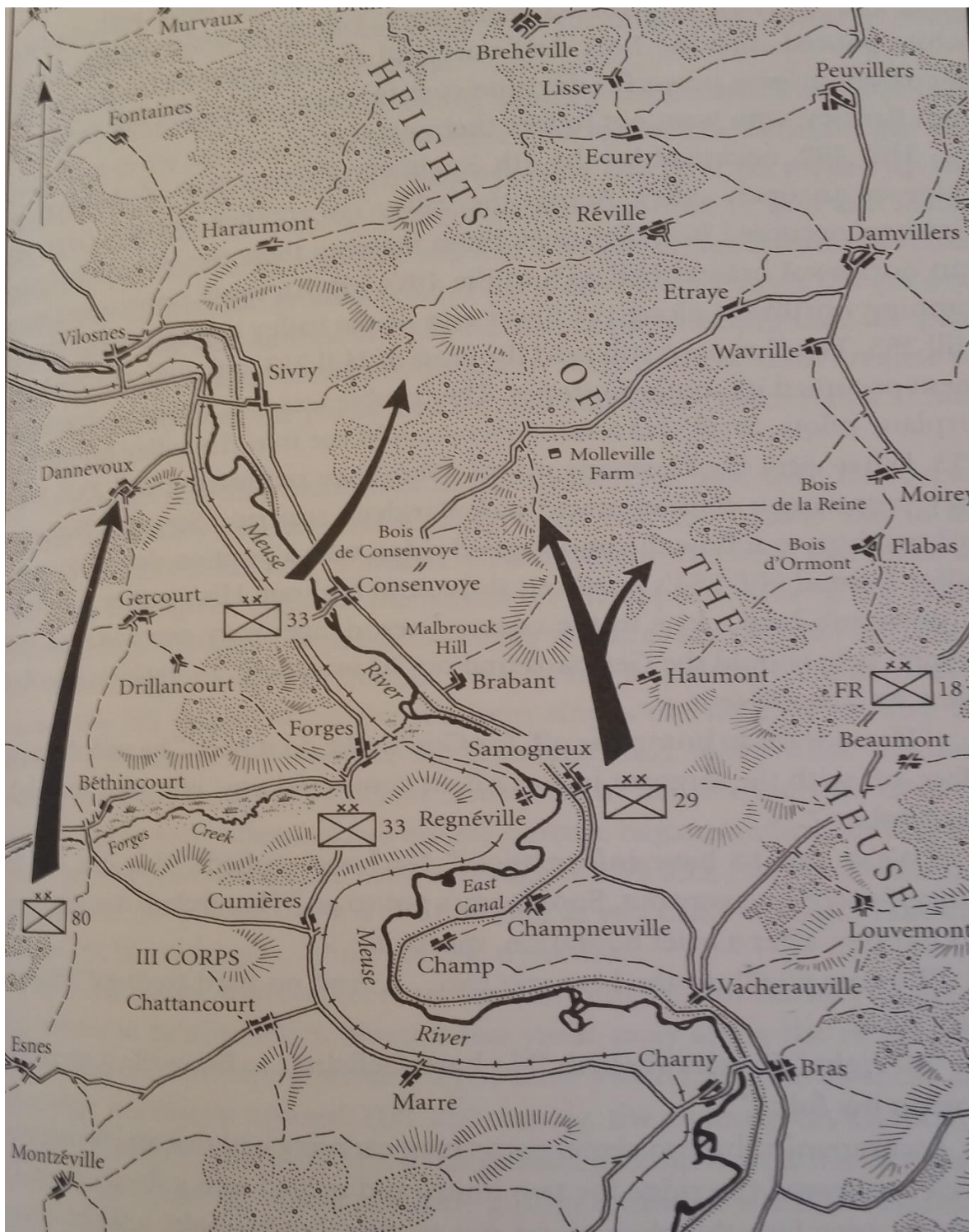
²⁴⁴ Op. Nr. 1023/8, 23.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

offensives. Yet, the fact that these divisions, neither of which participated in large-scale combat for more than a few days, constitute the most significant contribution of the *k.u.k.* infantry in the West demonstrates the overwhelming futility of Austria-Hungary's participation on the Western Front. Successful defensive or counteroffensive actions by Austro-Hungarian troops were temporary at best and were in any case unsustainable given the overwhelming superiority of the enemy. Thus, the total impact of these Austro-Hungarian divisions was measured at the tactical or sub-tactical level in military terms, in meters or a few kilometers in spatial terms, and in hours in temporal terms. The second stage of the Austro-Hungarian intervention in the West, beginning in September, was even less significant in the course of the final battles in northeastern France.



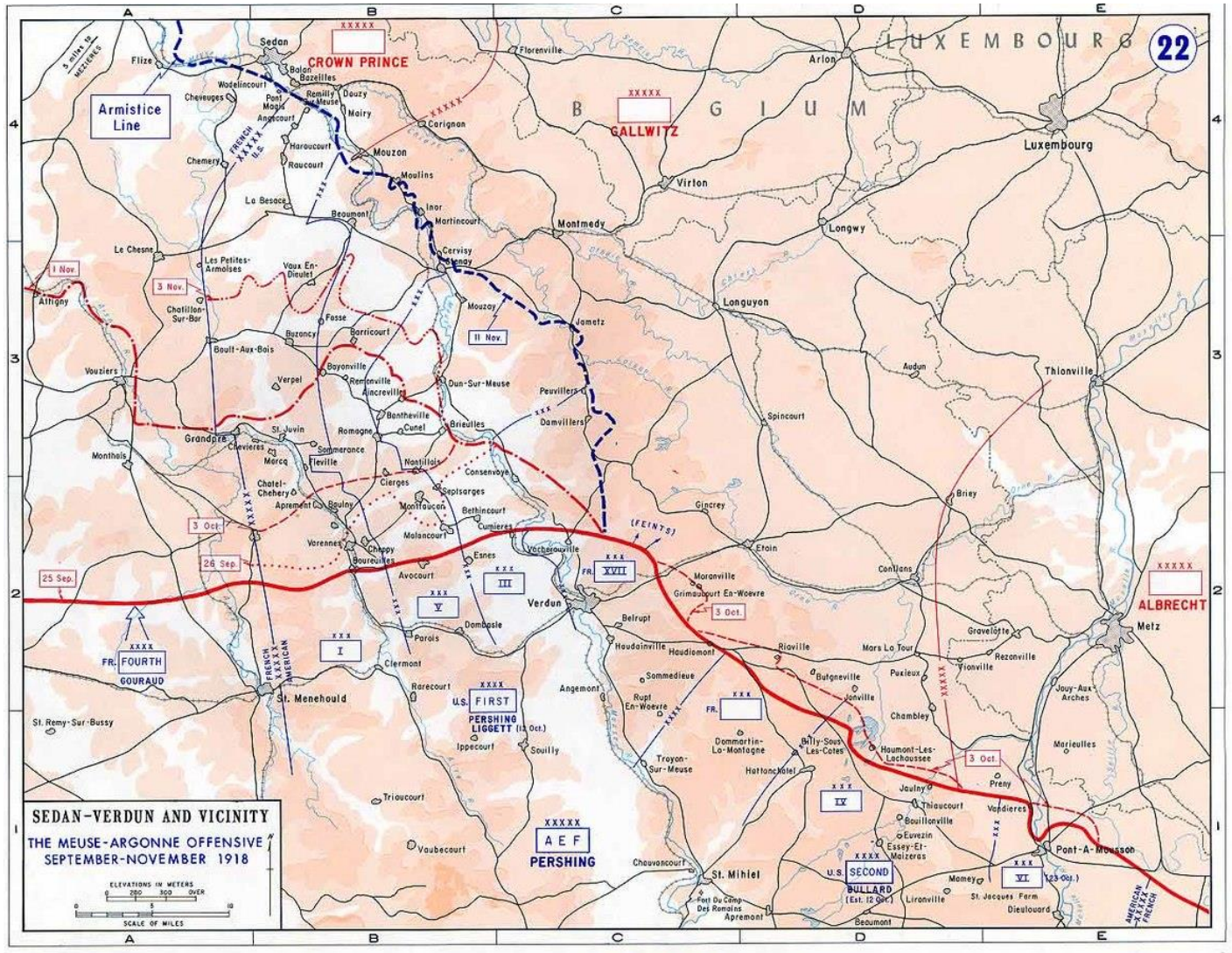
The 1st Infantry Division on the Maas Front, October 1918.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Glaise-Horstenau (ed.), *ÖULK*, vol. 7.



The eastern Meuse-Argonne, October 1918.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, 257.



The Meuse-Argonne Offensive, September – November 1918.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Department of History, USMA at West Point, “Meuse-Argonne Offensive Map” *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed March 15th, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Western front 1918_german.jpg.

The k.u.k. 106th Infantry Division

Unsurprisingly, even after the initial deployment of *k.u.k.* divisions to France in July, the OHL was still unsatisfied with the Austro-Hungarian contribution on the Western Front. As Germany's strategic position deteriorated further, particularly after the "Black Day of the German Army" at St. Quentin on August 8th, the German requests for further *k.u.k.* divisions intensified. In an August 14th meeting at Spa between Emperor Karl, Erz, and the OHL, the allies initially agreed that the timing of a further Austro-Hungarian deployment to the West would be determined by the AOK, as the Habsburg Monarchy faced its own crises on the home front and in Italy.²⁴⁸

However, just as in June, the increasingly desperate manpower shortages of the *Westheer*, coupled with the escalation of the Allied offensives in France, compelled the Germans to renege on this consensus. On August 29th, the same day that the OHL withdrew German forces back to the Siegfried Line, Hindenburg sent a dispatch to Baden²⁴⁹ in which he highlighted the heavy losses of the German Army on the Western Front. Correspondingly, Hindenburg asserted that, "in the interest of the common cause," Austria-Hungary should adopt a completely defensive posture in Italy and deploy all forces not needed there to the West.²⁵⁰ Interestingly, the highest-ranking Habsburg officers on the Western Front, FML Klepsch-Kloth and FML Goiginger, vocally supported the deployment of further divisions in France. Somewhat surprisingly, the AOK relented and after consultation with Feldmarschall Boroević, decided to send the 106th and 37th Honvéd Infantry Divisions along with the IX. Korpskommando to France.²⁵¹ Although the

²⁴⁸ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 80-81.

²⁴⁹ The headquarters of the AOK were located just outside of Vienna in Baden bei Wien from 1916 to 1918.

²⁵⁰ Glaise-Horstenau (ed.), *ÖULK*, vol. 7, 484.

²⁵¹ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 83-84.

AOK informed Ludendorff on September 1st that no further divisions could be diverted to the West, the OHL continued to press in for additional Austro-Hungarian divisions until October 16th, by which point the political and military collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy had rendered such requests completely delusional.²⁵²

The 106th Infantry Division (*k.u.k. 106. Infanteriedivision*), under the command of FML Karl Kratky, arrived in Montmedy in mid-September.²⁵³ The division was composed entirely of members of the Landsturm, the third-line reserve/militia of the Austro-Hungarian military. Older territorials between the ages of thirty-four and fifty-five (terms of service were naturally extended during the war²⁵⁴) comprised the Landsturm, which was originally intended to provide replacements for first and second-line units and perform home defense duties. However, in reality, the Landsturm also formed field units and fought at the frontlines during the war.²⁵⁵ Indeed, the 106th Infantry Division had previously participated in combat on the Eastern Front and in Italy. According to an October 12th, 1918 AEF intelligence report concerning the division, the division had suffered extremely heavy casualties fighting between Asiago and the Brenta in December 1917 and January 1918, during which the divisional *Sturmbataillon* had been practically annihilated.²⁵⁶ After being reconstituted at Bozen in April, the division had not seen further action at the front and was instead deployed to Lublin in Austrian-occupied Poland, where it assisted with the harvest during the summer of 1918. The division comprised

²⁵² Ibid., 85-88.

²⁵³ Glaise-Horstenau (ed.), *ÖULK*, vol. 7, 485.

²⁵⁴ Some members of the 106th Infantry Division were as old as seventy-four.

²⁵⁵ Peter Jung, *The Austro-Hungarian Forces in World War I (1): 1914-16* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 4.

²⁵⁶ *106th Landsturm Division (Austro-Hungarian)*, F.P. No. 296, 382-22 106th A-H [Austro-Hungarian] Landsturm Division [k.u.k. 106. Landsturm-Infanterie-Division] Information, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, Record Group 165: Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860 – 1952, National Archives at College Park, MD.

approximately 10,200 troops in twelve line battalions, which in turn formed four regiments in two brigades; the 210. *Landsturm-Infanteriebrigade* included *Landsturm-Infanterieregimenter* 31 and 32 while the 211. *Landsturm-Infanteriebrigade* contained Lst.IR 6 and 25. The division also included R Squadron, *Ulanenregiment* 1 as divisional cavalry, a field artillery brigade (106. *Feldartilleriebrigade*), a divisional assault battalion (*Sturmataillon* 106), and sapper company (2nd Company, *Sappeurbataillon* 16). The mustering districts of the regiments were located in Bohemia and Galicia, namely in Teschen in Austrian Silesia (Lst.IR 31), Neusandec and Tarnów in Galicia (Lst. IR 32), Eger in Bohemia (Lst.IR 6), and Brünn (Lst.IR 25). Consequently, the troops of the division were predominately Polish and Czech with some German elements; Lst.IR 6 was composed entirely of German-speakers, apparently the only such unit of the *k.u.k. Armee* on the Western Front.²⁵⁷

The division's nature as a Landsturm unit, the duration of its posting in the interior, and haste with which the AOK deployed it to France all significantly hampered the division's combat capability. Indeed, in its assessment of the division, the XVIII. *Korpskommando* highlighted the inexperience of its personnel, noting that the division "cannot under any circumstances be employed as a counterattack division."²⁵⁸ The materiel complement of the division was especially poor. Unlike the *k.u.k.* divisions that had preceded it, the 106th Infantry Division did not possess a full complement of artillery; the divisional field artillery brigade comprised only two batteries upon its arrival in France. On September 14th, the OHL allocated the division to Maas-Ost to serve as group reserve in the area of Damvillers – Delut – Brandeville. Maas-Ost

²⁵⁷ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 113.

²⁵⁸ Anlage 113, 16.9.1918,329-33.5 Folder II: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary [Kriegstagebuch des k.u.k. XVIII Korpskommandos (Gruppe Ornes)] August 24 - October 10, 1918, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, Record Group 165: Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860 – 1952, National Archives at College Park, MD.

divided up the division and deployed the individual regiments to various German formations, where they provided labor and security services in rear areas.²⁵⁹ However, on September 19th, 5. *Armee* reformed the division and transferred it southwards to the command of Gruppe Ornes (the *k.u.k. XVIII. Korpskommando*), where the Group promptly re-divided the formation. Gruppe Ornes deployed three of the regiments (Lst.IR 6, 31, and 32) to the sectors Azannes, Damloup, and Maucourt to act as security detachments in the rear positions of the *Volker-* and *Kriemhild-Stellungen*, thereby freeing up elements of the Group's German units for frontline service. The fourth regiment (Lst.IR 25), the *Sturmbataillon*, and the field cannon batteries remained under the 211. *Lst.Infanteriebrigade* as group reserve in forest encampments south of Loison.²⁶⁰

In the meantime, the divisional command attempted to train the novice Landsturm regiments in the combat methods of the Western Front, but constant combat readiness and fortification construction seriously impeded the progress of the three deployed regiments. Lst.IR 25 and the *Sturmbataillon* had better opportunities to train as group reserve, but the Meuse-Argonne Offensive rudely interrupted their instruction on September 29th, when 5. *Armee* reassigned both of these units to the 7. *Reserve-Division* of Gruppe Maas-West. The units promptly redeployed to the area around Sivry to fill in the gaps of the frontline there.²⁶¹ These two units were thus the only units of the division to witness heavy combat when they participated in the defense of the sector Vilosnes-Liny on October 8-9.²⁶² As previously mentioned, these units came under the command of the *k.u.k. 1st Infantry Division* after it took over the Vilosnes

²⁵⁹ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 113-114.

²⁶⁰ Anlage 111, 16.9.1918, Folder II: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

²⁶¹ Op. Nr. 1003/6, 3.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

²⁶² Op. Nr. 1010/8, 10.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

sector on October 16th and participated with their countrymen in the skirmishes there until the beginning of November. The three other regiments of the division remained as labor and security detachments for Gruppe Ornes and witnessed no combat.²⁶³ On October 28th, upon German insistence, Gruppe Ornes positioned Lst.IR 6 and 32 on the frontlines of the German 32. and 37. *Infanterie-Divisionen*; initially, the Group planned to deploy the 106th Infantry Division on November 1st as “Division Maucourt” with control over the aforementioned regiments.²⁶⁴ However, the imminent Austro-Hungarian armistice eventually nullified these plans and the division withdrew without ever deploying to the front as a whole.²⁶⁵



Austro-Hungarian troops on the Western Front: march through a French village.²⁶⁶

²⁶³ Op. Nr. 1031/4, 31.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

²⁶⁴ Anlage 525, 28.10.1918, 329-33.5 Folder III: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary [Kriegstagebuch des k.u.k. XVIII Korpskommandos (Gruppe Ornes)] October 11 - November 3, 1918, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, Record Group 165: Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860 – 1952, National Archives at College Park, MD.

²⁶⁵ Op. Nr. 1314, 31.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

²⁶⁶ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront.”



Austro-Hungarian troops on the Western Front: speech of a commander upon arrival in France.²⁶⁷

The *k.u.* 37th Honvéd Infantry Division²⁶⁸

The 37th Honvéd Infantry Division (*k.u. 37. Honvédinfanteriedivision*) was unique among the Austro-Hungarian formations deployed to France in several respects.²⁶⁹ In contrast to the other three divisions, which were either formations of the Common Army or the Landsturm, this division was a formation of the Hungarian Honvéd. After the Compromise of 1867 (*Ausgleich*)

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Any extant records for this division would belong to the Hungarian archives in Budapest, which the author did not consult for this project; however, given the brief tenure of this division in the West and its prevailing inactivity, the author feels the study of the other three divisions to be more pertinent.

²⁶⁹ The Honvéd appellation “k.u.” stands for “*königlich ungarisch*” or “Royal Hungarian.” The equivalent title for the Austrian Landwehr was “k.k.” for “*kaiserlich-königlich*” or “Imperial (Austrian) – Royal (Bohemian).”

that created the Dual Monarchy, the Austro-Hungarian Armed Forces (*k.u.k. Wehrmacht*) consisted of three organizations. The largest and primary element was the Common Army (*k.u.k. Armee*), which conscripted from both halves of the monarchy and was one of the few common institutions in Austria-Hungary.²⁷⁰ The Austrian and Hungarian halves of the monarchy both possessed their own defense ministries and semi-autonomous armies that are variously described as national guards or territorial armies.²⁷¹ While the Austrian *k.k. Landwehr* and the Hungarian *Honvédség* were originally conceived as reserve and territorial defense units, they were integral parts of the Austro-Hungarian field army by 1914.²⁷² Indeed, the 37th Honvéd Division was a fully-fledged infantry division completely on par with the formations of the *k.u.k. Armee*. As of its arrival in France, the division, under the command of FML Háber, comprised approximately 488 officers and 15,000 men with a combat strength of around 11,000. The division possessed twelve line battalions in four infantry regiments, specifically *Honvédinfanterieregimenter* 13 and 18 in the 73. *Honvédinfanteriebrigade* and HIR 14 and 15 in the 74. *Honvédinfanteriebrigade*. The 37th Honvéd Division also incorporated the 37. *Honvédfeldartilleriebrigade*, the 5th Squadron, *Husarenregiment* 4 as divisional cavalry, the *Sturmbataillon* 37, and 1st Company, *Sappeurbataillon* 37. The division's personnel, drawn from the Preßburg Honvéd district, were primarily a mix of Hungarians and Slovaks with some German-speaking elements.²⁷³

The 37th Honvéd Infantry Division had previously fought on the Eastern Front in Poland, Galicia, and in the Carpathians. From mid-August to early September 1918, the division was

²⁷⁰ The other common institutions of the Dual Monarchy were the Common Finance Ministry and the Foreign Ministry. A Joint Ministerial Council comprised of representatives from both the Austrian and Hungarian governments was responsible for matters concerning the Habsburg Monarchy as a whole.

²⁷¹ István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps 1848-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 16-19.

²⁷² Jung, *The Austro-Hungarian Forces in World War I (1): 1914-16*, 3-4.

²⁷³ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 115-116.

stationed on the Italian Front, though as it had served as a reserve for the *k.u.k. 6. Armee*, the division had not suffered major losses. The division arrived on the Western Front between September 22nd and 25th and unlike the other Austro-Hungarian divisions in the West, was not assigned to Heeresgruppe Gallwitz. Instead, the division was subordinated to *Armee-Abteilung A* of the Heeresgruppe Herzog Albrecht von Württemberg and positioned southwest of Straßburg. Under the nominal command of the *k.u.k. IX. Korpskommando*, the division underwent training and received German officers and NCO's as instructors; at the same time, the divisional artillery completely rearmed with German equipment. Later in October, the division moved closer to the frontline in the area around Saarburg. Notably, unlike the other *k.u.k.* divisions in the West, none of the Honvéd infantrymen saw combat in France, as the Germans primarily utilized the regiments of the 37th Honvéd Division for the construction of field fortifications. Only some of the reconnaissance and artillery liaison personnel entered the frontline. The division remained under German control in France for a few days longer than the other Austro-Hungarian formations, only ceasing its construction work on November 6th.²⁷⁴

Other Austro-Hungarian Formations and Organizations on the Western Front

In July 1918, concomitant with the deployment of the *k.u.k. 1st* and *35th* Infantry Divisions, the AOK sent heavy artillery units to the Western Front for the fourth time. Similar to the situation in March, the OHL prioritized haste over preparation and insisted on the earliest possible arrival of the artillery support. Hence, once again, the *k.u.k.* artillery destined for France did not receive a full period of replenishment. In the last week of July, four heavy field artillery regiments departed for France (*schwere Feldartillerieregimenter* 11, 54, 59, and 72), each

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 116.

consisting of three heavy howitzer batteries and a heavy cannon battery. Four additional batteries of heavy howitzers and two observation balloon companies also accompanied these regiments. In September, as the 37th Honvéd and 106th Infantry Divisions deployed to the West, the AOK also dispatched additional artillery units, specifically one mountain artillery regiment (*Gebirgs-Artillerieregiment* 8) and five heavy artillery batteries.²⁷⁵ In total, the AOK deployed forty-eight artillery pieces²⁷⁶ to the Western Front in the latter half of 1918, all of which entered the service of the 17. *Armee* of Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht. However, this final chapter of the *k.u.k.* heavy artillery in the West was a far cry from the heady days of 1914. Ammunition and equipment shortages, incessant breakdowns and lack of repair materials, and insufficient, poorly-trained crews significantly reduced the combat effectiveness of the Austro-Hungarian artillery units. The *k.u.k.* artillery deployed in July entered combat on August 15th and by August 26th, lack of ammunition had compelled all of the batteries to withdraw from the front. Indeed, in the remaining months, the Germans could only utilize the *k.u.k.* artillery for increasingly short periods of time before lack of ammunition or the breakdown of the guns mandated their replacement. Thus, rather than provide auxiliary firepower for the Germans, the once-vaunted Austro-Hungarian artillery could only operate by consuming additional German material. Indeed, according to the Austro-Hungarian liaison officer with the 17. *Armee*, the German authorities considered the *k.u.k.* artillery to be “no reinforcement to the defense, but only a further burden for the army.”²⁷⁷

As mentioned previously, the AOK dispatched the XVIII. *Korpskommando* under FML Goiginger along with the 1st and 35th Infantry Divisions in July. Goiginger was perhaps one of

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁷⁶ This figure includes only the separate heavy artillery regiments and batteries supplied to German formations, not the artillery brigades of the *k.u.k.* infantry divisions.

²⁷⁷ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 117-119.

the ablest Austro-Hungarian field commanders of the entire war and had experienced notable success in Italy during the previous year. In June 1917, Goiginger had led the successful counterattack that captured Mount Ortigara, during which Austro-Hungarian storm troops seized the summit of the mountain from numerically-superior Italian forces.²⁷⁸ Likewise, one year later, he had also overseen the Austro-Hungarian capture of the Montello during the Piave Offensive.²⁷⁹ Goiginger and his staff arrived in France on July 21st, concurrent with the arrival of the 1st and 35th Infantry Divisions. While the AOK may have sent Goiginger and his corps to command the *k.u.k.* divisions deployed to France, the OHL evidently had no intention of conceding such a degree of control to the *k.u.k. Armee*. In fact, the XVIII. *Korpskommando* lacked any tactical or logistical control over the Austro-Hungarian divisions in the West, which were subordinate to Goiginger's corps only in matters of training. Even in this regard, the *Korpskommando*'s authority was short-lived; after August 24th, the divisional training groups (*Divisionsausbildungsgruppen* or DAG) of the 1st and 35th Divisions fell under the direct control of 5. *Armee* and redeployed to the frontline divisions.²⁸⁰

Instead, on August 24th, the XVIII. Korps took over command of the Gruppe Ornes, moving its headquarters to Sorbey and receiving control over three German divisions, namely the Prussian 33. *Infanterie-Division*, the Saxon 32. *Infanterie-Division*, and the Badener 28. *Reserve-Division*. Thus, for the most part, the Austro-Hungarian corps in the west commanded German rather than Austro-Hungarian troops; only the 106th Infantry Division was subordinate to the XVIII. Korps and this control was intermittent in duration and limited in scope. The IX. *Korpskommando* under FML Edler von Manns-Au, dispatched with the 37th Honvéd and 106th

²⁷⁸ Paolo Morisi, *Hell in the Trenches: Austro-Hungarian Stormtroopers and Italian Arditi in the Great War* (Warwick: Helion & Company, 2018), 34.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 173-175.

²⁸⁰ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 93.

Infantry Divisions in September, had even less authority. Stationed in Straßburg, this corps possessed a skeleton staff and never even received an area of command. Nevertheless, this corps command did play a role in the orderly withdrawal of the nearby and similarly inactive 37th Honvéd Division from the Western Front in November.²⁸¹

In addition to sending corps commands to the Western Front, the AOK also established several organizations to oversee the logistical affairs of the Austro-Hungarian formations in France. In July, the AOK created the *k.u.k. Etappenstelle West*²⁸² (EstW) to manage the supply of the *k.u.k.* units in the West. In theory, the EstW was in charge of the transportation and provisioning of all materiel from the Habsburg Monarchy to its troops in France. This entailed the establishment of a headquarters in the West with attendant depots and a main field post office, as well as the assignment of an Austro-Hungarian staff officer as a liaison to the German quartermaster general. Likewise, the EstW also had control over the personnel matters of the Austro-Hungarian units in the West.²⁸³ Under the command of *Oberquartiermeister Oberst* Edmund Ritter von Marnegg and headquartered in Sedan, the EstW was also responsible for reporting the material condition and requirements of Austro-Hungarian troops to the AOK.²⁸⁴ Later, the EstW also established an office in Bieberich bei Mainz in Germany. Interestingly, in order to keep the presence of Austro-Hungarian units in France secret from the Allies, Austro-

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁸² In a military context, “Etappen” refers to the rear area or communications zone of an army. Thus, “Etappenstelle West” translates approximately to “Rear Area/Communications Station West.”

²⁸³ Op. Nr. 1735/26, 1.7.1918, 303-41.4 Austrian GHQ [k.u.k. Armeeoberkommando], Western Front: Transpiration July 1918, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, Record Group 165: Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860 – 1952, National Archives at College Park, MD.

²⁸⁴ Op. Nr. 1735/17, 3.7.1918, 303-41.5 Austrian GHQ [k.u.k. Armeeoberkommando], Western Front: Supply July 1918, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, Record Group 165: Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860 – 1952, National Archives at College Park, MD.

Hungarian and German logistical personnel omitted the “*k.u.k.*” prefix in all official communications regarding the EstW.²⁸⁵

In addition, the AOK established two offices to manage the allocation of personnel to the formations in the West. The Personnel Collection Station West (*Personalsammelstelle West* or PsstW) in Sedan (later Mainz) worked with personnel detachments in the *k.u.k.* divisions to assign and remove personnel; interestingly enough, the office often had to remove Austro-Hungarian personnel who, for whatever reason, arrived in the West without authorization. Similarly, in early September, the AOK erected the Personnel Control Station West (*Personaldirigierungsstelle West*) at the Salzburg railway station to prevent unauthorized personnel of the *k.u.k. Armee* from travelling to the Western Front; eventually, only individuals assigned to the units on the Western Front were permitted to travel to Germany.²⁸⁶ Finally, in late July, the AOK created an Artillery Replacement Group West (*Artillerieersatzgruppe West*) of approximately 1000 men to manage the training and allocation of replacement artillery personnel for the Austro-Hungarian units in France. Under the control of the EstW, the Group established its headquarters in Arlon near Sedan and erected training facilities there²⁸⁷

According to the last order of battle for the Austro-Hungarian formations on the Western Front, published on October 15th, 1918, the total disposition of *k.u.k.* troops in France was as follows: forty-five and $\frac{3}{4}$ battalions, four cavalry squadrons (400 cavalymen in total), ninety-six artillery batteries (around 360 guns), eight technical formations, and two observation balloon

²⁸⁵ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 121.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

companies. In total, in mid-October, the *k.u.k.* forces in the West amounted to an effective combat strength of approximately 18,000.²⁸⁸

The Withdrawal of Austro-Hungarian Forces from the Western Front

In October 1918, as the soldiers of the *k.u.k.* 1st and 106th Infantry Divisions faced the Franco-American onslaught in the Meuse-Argonne, the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy entered its terminal phase. The military debacles in France and Italy during the summer had transformed the specter of military defeat into an increasingly-apparent reality. As the position of the Austro-Hungarian Army deteriorated into utter hopelessness on all fronts, the last pillar maintaining the Habsburg Monarchy gradually collapsed. Given the powerlessness of the *k.u.k. Armee* to achieve a decisive military outcome, the defeat of Germany in the West sealed the fate of Austria-Hungary. On September 14th, the Austro-Hungarian government dispatched a peace note to the Allies, which they ignored; similarly, an October 3rd appeal for an armistice based on the Fourteen Points did not receive a favorable response.²⁸⁹

Desperate to salvage his fragmenting realm, Emperor Karl issued a “Peoples’ Manifesto” on October 16th that reorganized the monarchy into a federal state with complete self-determination for each nationality.²⁹⁰ However, this concession was years, if not decades, too late. By this point, years of war, deprivation, and a curious mix of oppression and incompetence on the part of the Habsburg government had completely alienated the peoples of the Monarchy. The Czechs and Slovaks, Poles, and South Slavs, all of whom had formed national committees or governments by early October, rejected the manifesto outright. Similarly, the Hungarian

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 119-120.

²⁸⁹ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 215-216.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

government refused to concede any autonomy to non-Magyars in Hungary and threatened to cut off food shipments to Austria unless the Emperor excluded the lands of the Crown of St. Stephen from the manifesto.²⁹¹ Rather than saving Austria-Hungary, the Peoples' Manifesto served as its death warrant. By officially sanctioning the division of Habsburg Monarchy into national groups, the manifesto shattered the already-disintegrating civil service and destroyed any remaining legitimacy of the central government. Although Karl attempted to reassert the special bond between the army and the crown, the soldiers of the *k.u.k. Armee* now legally owed their allegiance not to the central government, but to their respective nationalities; indeed, on October 31st, Karl even permitted officers of the army to swear oaths to the new national governments springing up throughout the former monarchy.²⁹² Wilson's October 20th response to the earlier peace note, in which he explicitly rejected a peace with anything short of full sovereignty for the peoples of Austria-Hungary, was the final nail in the coffin of the Habsburg Monarchy.²⁹³

Thereafter, the long-predicted dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy proceeded at a dizzying pace. On October 21st, the German Austrian political parties formed a national committee and began to seize control of the government in Austria. In Hungary, the government had already unilaterally abrogated the Compromise of 1867 on October 16th. However, on October 24th, a Hungarian national committee formed by the radical Mihály Károlyi instigated a nationalist revolution in Budapest. After several days of mass demonstrations and clashes with security forces, Károlyi seized control of the government, definitively ended the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, and declared an independent Hungarian republic. Similarly, national committees in the other regions of the monarchy, namely in Bohemia, Poland, and the South

²⁹¹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 540-541.

²⁹² Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 216.

²⁹³ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 541.

Slavic lands, also seized power in the last week of October, effecting the de facto dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy. Notably, the Emperor refused to intervene, declaring that “enough blood had been spilt.”²⁹⁴ At the same time, the Italians had launched their final offensive at Vittorio Veneto on October 24th. After two days of brave resistance, the exhausted, heavily outnumbered *k.u.k. Armee* disintegrated. Troops of every nationality refused to fight and began to desert the frontline in droves.²⁹⁵ On October 29th, Alexander von Krobotin, the commander of Heeresgruppe Tirol, informed the AOK of the urgent necessity of an unconditional surrender. Two days later, an Austro-Hungarian delegation arrived at the Italian headquarters at Villa Giusti, where they received the Allied terms of surrender on November 2nd. After much debate, confusion, and Karl’s characteristic equivocation, the Austro-Hungarian military signed the armistice on November 3rd.²⁹⁶

On October 29th, after Arz had informed Hindenburg of the collapse of the *k.u.k. Armee* in Italy, the OHL ordered the withdrawal of all Austro-Hungarian units on the Western Front from the frontlines. The local German authorities, rather than the AOK, promulgated and executed the order and correspondingly began to plan for the transport of the *k.u.k.* units back to the defunct monarchy. Compelled by growing disorder among the Austro-Hungarian personnel, the OHL instructed the German railway authorities on October 31st to quickly arrange the transport of the *k.u.k.* troops back to Austria-Hungary.²⁹⁷ However, at the beginning of November, a political dispute threatened to quite literally derail the homeward transportation of the *k.u.k.* personnel in the West. The Hungarian government, anxious of Yugoslav and Romanian invasions of their territory and resentful that the Germans were holding so many Hungarian

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 542-543.

²⁹⁵ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 217.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 217-218.

²⁹⁷ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 126-127.

soldiers far from their homeland, refused to provide rail transport for the withdrawal of the German *Alpenkorps* from the Balkans. In retaliation, the OHL postponed the evacuation of *k.u.k.* troops from France and only the personal intervention of Arz resolved this dispute on November 2nd. By November 4th, all Austro-Hungarian divisions in the West had withdrawn from the frontlines, though the Germans kept their artillery units in frontline service for slightly longer.²⁹⁸ Likewise, on that same day, the XVIII. *Korpskommando* transferred command of Gruppe Ornes to the Prussian XVII. Korps and the corps staff departed Sorbey for Arlon.²⁹⁹ Ironically, in contrast to arrangements during the actual fighting, the XVIII. Korps received effective control over the 1st, 35th, and 106th Infantry Divisions during the evacuation. As the 37th Honvéd Division was isolated from the other *k.u.k.* divisions in Alsace, this division fell under the control of the IX. *Korpskommando* during the transport back to the former Austria-Hungary.³⁰⁰

Interestingly, in stark contrast to the total disintegration of the *k.u.k. Armee* on other fronts at the end of the war, the evacuation and homeward transportation of the Austro-Hungarian formations in the West was comparatively well-organized and orderly.³⁰¹ The prevailing chaos in the German rail system in early November precluded the rail transport of the Austro-Hungarian troops west of the Rhine. Consequently, the three divisions under the XVIII. Korps marched their troops across Alsace-Lorraine, the Saarland, and the Palatinate over the course of November, crossing the Rhine itself at Mannheim and Karlsruhe between November 18th and 24th. Although the formations remained relatively cohesive during the march through

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁹⁹ Entry of 4.11.1918, 329-33.5 Folder I 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) War Diary [Kriegstagebuch des k.u.k. XVIII Korpskommandos (Gruppe Ornes)] August 24 - November 4, 1918, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I Record Group 165: Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860 – 1952, National Archives at College Park, MD.

³⁰⁰ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 128-129.

³⁰¹ Etschmann, “Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung,” 104.

Germany, the revolution on November 9th and the influence of revolutionary German soldiers exercised a notable and pernicious influence on the discipline of the troops. Likewise, after the armistice of Compiègne on November 11th, many Austro-Hungarian soldiers feared internment and consequently deserted; over the course of two weeks, over 1200 men from IR 64 absconded, nearly half of the regiment.³⁰² After the German authorities once again denied them rail transportation, the Austro-Hungarians continued their march through Hessen, Baden, and Württemberg. Morale and discipline continued to decline, partially on account of a lack of adequate footwear. As the Austro-Hungarians travelled to Heilbronn, where they finally received rail transportation, theft and looting among the troops proliferated and desertion continued to increase.³⁰³ Further south, the 37th Honvéd Division had departed the Western Front on November 19th and arrived in Ulm five days later. After extended negotiations with the German authorities, the division departed in echelons for the Hungarian border via Salzburg.³⁰⁴

Unlike the 37th Honvéd Division, which returned to Hungary as a coherent whole, the other *k.u.k.* divisions had to make practical adjustments for the new political arrangements of central and eastern Europe. On November 4th, the AOK had decreed that the personnel of the 1st, 35th, and 106th Infantry Divisions, after yielding all weapons and ammunition, would form transport groups on the basis of ethnicity and subsequently depart for their respective countries. The evacuation from Heilbronn began on November 27th and the last elements of the Austro-Hungarian divisions had left by December 4th. According to Polatschek, most of the particulars regarding the transportation back to the former Austria-Hungary and the subsequent demobilization cannot be verified by the existing documents in the Austrian State Archives.³⁰⁵

³⁰² Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 129-130.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 129-131.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 132-133.

However, in his brief 2009 chapter on the subject, Wolfgang Etschmann asserted that the return of *k.u.k.* troops from the Western Front was a political issue in the new Republic of German Austria, where the government feared a coup by returning elements of the old army. The Austrian government thus forbade the transportation of the troops through the territory of German Austria, instead diverting them to the German-speaking parts of Bohemia. Therefore, according to Etschmann, the formations were probably disarmed and disbanded by Czechoslovak troops before finally their personnel finally returned to their respective homelands.³⁰⁶



The burial of a fallen Austro-Hungarian soldier in France.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Etschmann, “Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung,” 104.

³⁰⁷ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront.”

V. Analysis of the Conditions and Performance of the *k.u.k.* Divisions in France

While utterly insignificant in a wider military sense, the Austro-Hungarian presence on the Western Front in the latter half of 1918 was noteworthy in several regards. This phenomenon constituted the largest participation of *k.u.k.* units in the West; likewise, the *k.u.k.* forces in France in November 1918 were the last formations of the Habsburg military to fight in the First World War. Concurrently, the orderly evacuation and homeward journey of the Austro-Hungarian divisions in France sharply contrasted with the final days of the *k.u.k. Armee* in Italy, where the Habsburg formations essentially “melted away.”³⁰⁸ Thus, with the possible exception of Karl von Pflanzer-Baltin’s army in Albania³⁰⁹, the Austro-Hungarian divisions in the West represented the last remnants of the Habsburg Monarchy, which had effectively dissolved even while soldiers in France continued to fight and die in its name. However, the Austro-Hungarian divisions in France were significant in other ways as well. An examination of these divisions not only illuminates the unique experiences of Habsburg troops in a theater of war largely alien to the *k.u.k. Armee*, but also serves as an excellent case study for the late-war Austro-Hungarian Army as a whole. In particular, the Austro-Hungarian position on the Western Front exemplifies the close, yet complicated Austro-German military relationship, the evolution of the *k.u.k. Armee* into a more modern fighting force, and the ultimately insurmountable difficulties that hamstrung its combat effectiveness.

The Austro-German Military Relationship on the Western Front

As previously alluded to, Austro-German military cooperation was certainly nothing new; to varying degrees, the Imperial German and *k.u.k.* Armies had worked together almost

³⁰⁸ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 217.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

since the very beginning of the conflict. As the war escalated and the military strength of the Habsburg Monarchy wavered, increasing German intervention in theaters previously dominated by Austria-Hungary generated a closer relationship between the two armies. By 1917, many of the formations of the Central Powers on the Eastern Front and in the Balkans exhibited a surprising degree of integration. Increasing numbers of German officers and NCO's served in *k.u.k.* units and the OHL often assigned German units to Habsburg formations to strengthen important sections of the front. Consequently, many Austro-Hungarian corps and armies on the Eastern Front possessed almost as many German as Habsburg troops.³¹⁰ Thus, the seemingly strange position of FML Goiginger and the XVIII. Korps in France was not extremely unusual. Likewise, the Austro-Hungarian experience on the Western Front in 1918 typified the relationship between the Austro-Hungarian and German militaries in several regards. Indeed, the presence of *k.u.k.* formations under direct German command on a German front is an excellent lens for examining an extreme and fairly unique instance of Austro-German military cooperation. Specifically, the *k.u.k.* forces in France in 1918 demonstrated an overwhelming, multifaceted dependence on German support and a complicated, ambivalent relationship with their German allies.

Considering the sorry state of the Austro-Hungarian military, the larger political and economic reliance of the Habsburg Monarchy on Germany, and the nature of the Western Front as a primarily German affair, it is hardly surprising that the German Army bore much of the material cost of maintaining Austro-Hungarian formations in France in 1918. Yet, when examining the weekly reports and operations documents of the *k.u.k.* divisions in the West, the

³¹⁰ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War, 1871-1918*, 317.

level of dependence on German supplies and equipment is nevertheless striking. To be sure, the AOK and OHL planned on extensive German material support for the *k.u.k.* divisions from the beginning. On July 1st, the two high commands established the basic outlines for the material provision of Austro-Hungarian troops in France. As noted previously, these agreements established the *Etappenstelle West* as the Austro-Hungarian logistical apparatus in the West. In theory, this organization and the Austro-Hungarian plenipotentiary at the OHL would oversee material and personnel matters for the *k.u.k.* formations in France in cooperation with the German authorities. According to the Austro-German arrangements, the EstW was to supply the Austro-Hungarian divisions with clothing, footwear, personal equipment for men and horses (belts, ammunition pouches, saddles, harnesses, etc.), and specific medical supplies; likewise, the EstW was also responsible for the provisioning of special sapper equipment, namely bridging material and explosives.³¹¹ Moreover, the *k.u.k.* military postal service (*Feldpost*) would oversee all Austro-Hungarian mail on the Western Front.³¹²

Yet, tellingly, the provisions for the supply of the *k.u.k.* divisions in France stated first and foremost that the EstW, and by extension the AOK, would supply items “if possible when German stores cannot.” Indeed, even a cursory glance at the document reveals that the Germans bore the lion’s share of logistical responsibility. Firstly, while the issue of repayment was still unresolved, the July 1st agreements stipulated that Austro-Hungarian troops in the West would receive food from German stores at German prices until further notice. Likewise, the Germans also were responsible for providing gas masks, firewood, replacement horses, tires and other

³¹¹ Although not explicitly stated in the July 1st arrangements, one can infer from operations documents that the EstW was probably also responsible for supplying ammunition for Austrian-made weapons.

³¹² Op. Nr. 1735/26, 1.7.1918, Austrian GHQ Western Front: Transpiration July 1918, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

operating equipment for automobiles, and certain other medical supplies, specifically needles, disinfectant, and bandages. In most of these cases, the Austro-Hungarians were not even required to reimburse the Germans for the cost of the supplies; moreover the Germans also shouldered the cost for the transport and supply of *k.u.k* units through Germany and German-occupied territory. Similarly, the Germans provided workshops for the repair of Austro-Hungarian equipment and treated wounded *k.u.k.* personnel in their hospitals at no cost. However, the burden of logistical responsibility also entailed a large degree of German control. According to the aforementioned arrangements, much of the materiel supplied remained German property and upon their departure from the West, Austro-Hungarian troops would have to surrender that materiel to the German authorities. Furthermore, as the *k.u.k. Feldpost* could not really function on the Western Front without the cooperation of German postal and rail authorities, the private correspondence and packages of *k.u.k* personnel were subject to German restrictions; only the so-called “*Bingesundkarten*”³¹³ and hospital cards were exempt from German moratoria.³¹⁴ More fundamentally, the EstW answered to the German quartermaster general in all matters not pertaining exclusively to Austria-Hungary, which of course meant that the EstW was subordinate to the *Generalquartiermeister* in most matters on the German-dominated Western Front.³¹⁵

Although the level of Austro-Hungarian logistical dependence is conspicuous enough in these official agreements, the operational histories of the *k.u.k.* infantry divisions in France reveal the true extent of German material support. During the battles of September and October 1918, all three Austro-Hungarian infantry divisions deployed to the front grew increasingly

³¹³ These preprinted greeting cards simply contained one’s name, address, and the eponymous phrase “I am well” printed in all eleven official languages of the Monarchy.

³¹⁴ Op. Nr. 1735/26, 1.7.1918, Austrian GHQ Western Front: Transpiration July 1918, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³¹⁵ Op. Nr. 1735/17, 3.7.1918, Austrian GHQ, Western Front: Supply July 1918, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

reliant on German equipment to maintain their combat effectiveness; more specifically, the capability of the *k.u.k.* divisions in modern combat was to a great extent the product of German material support. Significantly, each division in the West replaced much of its artillery complement with German-made guns. In his September 23rd report to the AOK, FML Metzger noted that a total rearmament of the 1. *Feldartilleriebrigade* with German equipment was necessary as the 1st Infantry Division received insufficient ammunition from the EstW. At that time, the division had already equipped two batteries with German light howitzers.³¹⁶ Two days later, the field artillery brigade command provisionally assigned three more batteries to retrain on German guns.³¹⁷ Likewise, after the fighting at St. Mihiel had destroyed or disabled thirty-four of its artillery pieces, the 35th Infantry Division reported on September 23rd that efforts were already underway to reequip the divisional field artillery regiments with German materiel.³¹⁸ On October 3rd, the 106th Infantry Division likewise reported a planned rearmament with German equipment, although subsequent events call the success of this rearmament into question.³¹⁹ The extensive rearmament of Austro-Hungarian formations with German artillery was crucial for their continued efficacy. By adopting German equipment, the *k.u.k.* divisions integrated themselves further into the German supply chain and ensured that they would receive adequate ammunition for their most important weapons.

In addition to replacing Austro-Hungarian artillery pieces and thereby partially circumventing the inadequate supply system of the *k.u.k. Armee*, German material support also

³¹⁶ Op. Nr. 2516/2, 23.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³¹⁷ Op. Nr. 2652, 25.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents August 26 - November 3, 1918. Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³¹⁸ Op. Nr. 24.704, 23.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³¹⁹ Op. Nr. 1003/6, 3.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

served to magnify the firepower of the *k.u.k.* divisions in France. On September 24th, 5. *Armee* ordered the uniform equipment of the *k.u.k.* division(s) with German *Minenwerfer*. According to this order, each *k.u.k.* regiment would receive six light *Minenwerfer* for infantry use and each mortar battery would receive eight medium and twelve light *Minenwerfer*; consequently, each Austro-Hungarian regiment would possess as many mortars as its German counterpart. Subsequently, by the time it faced the American onslaught on October 8th, the 1st Infantry Division possessed no less than thirty-two German light *Minenwerfer*.³²⁰ Similarly, 5. *Armee* had also supplied the 1st Infantry Division with twenty-seven antitank rifles (*T-Gewehre*) by October 4th, a measure that was urgently necessary given the great number of tanks utilized by the Allies during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.³²¹ Notably, when they first arrived in France, the OHL allocated to each division approximately 200 captured British Lewis guns to augment their machine-gun complement.³²² Considering the fairly low manpower of each division, the supply of additional machine guns must have effected quite a significant multiplication of the *k.u.k.* infantry's firepower. Indeed, after receiving 248 Lewis guns from the German authorities, the perennially-understrength 106th Infantry Division reported quixotically that, if the division could train enough personnel, it could achieve an establishment of six light MG's per company, an armament level equivalent to a German division.³²³

The frequent commandeering of the heavy weapons of departing German formations is also indicative of the *k.u.k.* divisions' great dependence on German materiel. On several

³²⁰ Op. Nr. 2561, 24.9, 21.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents August 26 - November 3, 1918. Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³²¹ Op. Nr. 2834, 4.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents August 26 - November 3, 1918. Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³²² Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 91.

³²³ Op. Nr. 1003/6, 3.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

occasions, German units departing Austro-Hungarian divisional sectors left their heavy machine guns, mortars, and antitank guns in the frontlines for hours, sometimes even days after the Austro-Hungarians took over as to not weaken the local defenses.³²⁴ Indeed, on October 8th, one of the major problems facing the 1st Infantry Division was an insufficient number of machine guns and mortars on parts of the frontlines; contrary to the normal procedure, the departing German *Füsilier-Regiment* 35 had removed its heavy weapons from the positions near Brabant.³²⁵ Similarly, the prospective use of the 106th Infantry Division on the frontlines near Maucourt at the end of October was entirely contingent on use of German materiel left behind in the sector.³²⁶ In the final weeks of the *k.u.k.* infantry's deployment to the West, their reliance on German supplies peaked as the Austro-Hungarian logistical apparatus seemingly fell apart. In an October 21st report to the AOK concerning the material situation of his division, Metzger noted that the 1st Infantry Division was receiving replenishment in uniforms, weapons, and equipment mostly from German stocks as "our supply system has broken down."³²⁷

However, the reliance of the Austro-Hungarian divisions in the West on their German allies was not limited to logistical matters. Training was another area in which the *k.u.k.* units in France largely depended on German personnel; this is unsurprising, given that Austro-Hungarian infantrymen had no prior experience of fighting on the Western Front. To be sure, German influence over training in the *k.u.k. Armee* long predated the arrival of Austro-Hungarian divisions in the West. By 1916, the AOK had recognized the valuable advances made by the

³²⁴ Op. Nr. 2864, 8.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents August 26 - November 3, 1918. Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³²⁵ Op. Nr. 2966, 14.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³²⁶ Anlage 471, 23.10.1918, Folder III: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³²⁷ Op. Nr. 3061, 21.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

Germans in developing new infantry and artillery tactics. Correspondingly, the two armies created exchange programs for officers down to company level and erected joint training courses; notably, several Habsburg officers attended training programs on the Western Front, where they received instruction in German storm-troop tactics.³²⁸ Indeed, even as late October 29th, 1918, the Austro-Hungarian military was still sending officers to the West to familiarize themselves with German observation, mapping, and surveying techniques.³²⁹ Similarly, the revised infantry, artillery, and gas manuals promulgated by the AOK after 1916 were heavily reliant on German source material.³³⁰

Still, when the 1st and 35th Infantry Divisions arrived in France in July 1918, the Germans considered the *k.u.k.* units unfit for combat on the Western Front. Therefore, the first two *k.u.k.* divisions received three to four weeks of intensive training at the hands of German instructors in German training facilities behind the frontlines. During this period, the exercises focused especially on the conditions and tactics particular to the Western Front.³³¹ Likewise, from July to September 1918, the *k.u.k.* divisions in France dispatched around twenty-four artillery officers to the German artillery school in Maubeuge to learn the latest German artillery methods.³³² Furthermore, as the field artillery brigades of the Habsburg infantry divisions progressively rearmed with German materiel, the *k.u.k.* artillerymen naturally required German instructors to train them in operating the new weapons. Consequently, the *Artillerieersatzgruppe West* in Arlon received one German artillery officer and four to six NCO's for each of its training batteries.³³³

³²⁸ Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918* (London: Arnold, 1997), 236.

³²⁹ Anlage 526, 29.10.1918, Folder III: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³³⁰ Herwig, *The First World War*, 236.

³³¹ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 125.

³³² *Ibid.*, 78.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 125.

Notably, even after the initial month-long training period, much of the training of the *k.u.k.* personnel took place in German divisional areas or under German instruction. On August 28th, Heeresgruppe Gallwitz ordered that the DAG for the 1st and 35th Divisions relocate to the area of Gruppe Ornes, where the Austro-Hungarian troops would receive technical training from the Group's German divisions while simultaneously performing construction work.³³⁴ Likewise, the *k.u.k.* divisional commands continued to receive tactical guidance from their German comrades, which was crucial for combat preparations. For example, the 1st Infantry Division's initial defensive guidelines from September 13th explicitly reference the combat experience of neighboring German divisions.³³⁵ Similarly, the division's specific plans for the defense of the sector Brabant³³⁶, which entailed a vigorous elastic defense concentrated on the HWL, are nearly identical to the defensive guidelines of the neighboring 15. *Infanterie-Division*.³³⁷ The 106th Infantry Division predictably demonstrated particular reliance on German personnel to instruct its largely untrained and inexperienced Landsturm troops. On September 22nd, shortly after the division's arrival in France, 5. *Armee* ordered the transfer of officers and NCO's from the division to German frontline formations for instruction; simultaneously, the army command also established a training course in Florenville for using the Lewis gun.³³⁸ In his weekly report of September 26th, FML Kratky noted the large number of divisional personnel attending a variety

³³⁴ Entry of 28.8.1918, Folder I 18th Austrian Corps War Diary, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³³⁵ Op. Nr. 2265/1, 13.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents August 26 - November 3, 1918. Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³³⁶ Op. Nr. 2160, 351-32.12 1st A-H [Austro-Hungarian] Infantry Division [k.u.k. 1. Infanterie-Division] Operations Orders and Maps September 7 - November 21, 1918, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, Record Group 165: Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, 1860 – 1952, National Archives at College Park, MD.

³³⁷ Op. Nr. 2588, 22.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents August 26 - November 3, 1918. Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³³⁸ Entry of 22.9.1918, Folder I 18th Austrian Corps War Diary, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

of German training programs. As of that date, seventy-five commissioned and noncommissioned officers and 475 other ranks were in German courses covering machine gun and mortar use, infantry infiltration tactics, and the use of carrier pigeons and message dogs. Two weeks later, on October 10th, around 800 men from the division were attending training of one sort or another, including the divisional MG course, the German courses at Sedan, and training assignments with German frontline divisions.³³⁹

Perhaps even more fundamentally, the Austro-Hungarian divisions in France relied heavily on German formations for tactical support. Just like at the army and corps level on the Eastern Front, German units often served as vital auxiliaries to shore up the strength of the *k.u.k.* formations in the West. Thus, in addition to fighting alongside formations of the German Army, all of the Austro-Hungarian divisions possessed subordinate German units at one time or another. After the heavy losses of St. Mihiel, the 35th Infantry Division received seven German machine-gun companies as reinforcements in late September.³⁴⁰ Furthermore, during the first week of October, the 35th Infantry Division received tactical control over IR 365 of the German 94. *Infanterie-Division* and utilized this German unit to replace its own IR 64 on the frontline. At the time, this supplement to divisional strength was likely quite necessary. The division had temporarily yielded IR 51, which had left the divisional sector for the neighboring 107. *Infanterie-Division*; likewise, as it was the only regiment largely spared during the St. Mihiel Offensive, IR 64 had experienced extensive use in both offensive and defensive actions since September 13th and was probably exhausted.³⁴¹ The 1st Infantry Division also received extensive

³³⁹ Op. Nr. 926/5, 1010/8, 26.9-10.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, 303-33.1 Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁴⁰ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 103.

³⁴¹ Op. Nr. 24.221, 265.02, 19.9-11.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, 303-33.1 Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

support from German units during its frontline use. On September 14th, Maas-Ost dispatched a German *Minenwerfer* company to Etraye to reinforce the division. The 1. *Infanteriebrigade* received the medium and heavy mortar batteries to strengthen its artillery allocation and for the training of Austro-Hungarian mortar personnel, while the light mortars went to the divisional command as a mobile anti-tank reserve.³⁴² Similarly, two weeks later, after the divisional command had expressed some doubts regarding the artillery strength of the division, Maas-Ost subordinated two battalions of the Bavarian *Reserve-Feldartillerieregiment* 10 as well as three 15cm howitzer batteries of *Fußartillerie-Abteilung* 55 to the divisional artillery brigade.³⁴³

Indeed, during the combat actions of October 8-9, a sizeable and tactically-significant proportion of the 1st Infantry Division's forces consisted of German units. Between 7 and 8:30 AM on October 8th, just as the Allies attacked the divisional sector, Maas-Ost placed III/*Füsilier-Regiment* 35 and IR 102 at the disposal of the divisional command. These units formed a major element of the divisional reserve during the early part of the battle and were crucial in GM von Hellebronth's efforts to reestablish a viable defensive line. Likewise, during the counterattacks on October 9th, the division command received tactical control over the Saxon 32. *Infanterie-Division* and its two regiments. Many of the troops under the command of *Oberstleutnant* Popelka during his heroic stand on Hill 371 were Germans, as were most of the forces involved in the counterattack that stabilized the division's right flank.³⁴⁴ When the battered, depleted 1st Infantry Division returned to the frontlines on October 18th, it now incorporated several

³⁴² Op. Nr. 2397, 14.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents August 26 - November 3, 1918. Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁴³ Op. Nr. 2750/21, 1001/3, 30.9.-1.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents August 26 - November 3, 1918. Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁴⁴ Op. Nr. 2966, 14.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

companies of the German *Maschinengewehr-Scharfschützen-Abteilung* 69³⁴⁵ (Machine gun marksman detachment), a significant addition to the firepower of the division.³⁴⁶ Given its great deficiencies in equipment, the 106th Infantry Division would have also required significant reinforcement with German units if it had deployed to the frontlines. In light of its imminent deployment, the division asked Gruppe Ornes on October 22nd for the assignment of additional artillery units and repeated this request with even greater urgency two days later. Subsequently, Gruppe Ornes allocated five batteries to the division, four of which were German. Nevertheless, as the division's intended deployment to the front approached, the artillery strength of the division was still so weak that Gruppe Ornes ordered the artillery of its adjacent German divisions to cover large parts of the Maucourt sector.³⁴⁷

Hence, given the constant interaction of German and Austro-Hungarian personnel in the West on so many levels, the phenomenon of the *k.u.k.* divisions in France serves as good window for viewing the professional relationship between the two armies. FML von Podhoránsky of the 35th Infantry Division probably provided the best summary of the situation, noting that “the relationship with the German troops and commands is not an easy one, although tact is exercised on both sides.”³⁴⁸ Much like the wider chronicle of the Dual Alliance in the First World War, Austro-German relations on the Western Front were close yet profoundly ambivalent. In analyzing the relationship between the Austro-Hungarian and German armies in France, one must firstly distinguish between lower and higher-level relations. In general, relations between

³⁴⁵ An elite unit of several machine gun companies that often served as a special corps or army-level reserve.

³⁴⁶ Op. Nr. 3043, 21.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁴⁷ Anlagen 486, 487, 499, 535, 22-29.10.1918, Folder III: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁴⁸ Op. Nr. 258.08, 31.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

the Habsburg and German soldiery deteriorated from initial amicability to palpable resentment, with interactions noticeably worsening in the last few weeks of the war.³⁴⁹ To be sure, both armies made efforts to achieve harmonious and efficient cooperation between the troops. Schilaneck noted that the authorities of *Armee-Abteilung C* circulated makeshift pamphlets explaining Austro-Hungarian and German rank insignia to facilitate communication between the personnel of the two armies. Likewise, both Habsburg and German authorities strictly enforced the reciprocal obligation to salute properly.³⁵⁰ Yet, the futility of Austro-German resistance against the Allies by the autumn of 1918 was well-known among German troops; many German soldiers, exhausted by months of heavy fighting and desperate for peace, unsurprisingly did not view the Austro-Hungarian intervention in the West positively. In an October 23rd statement to the 1. *Infanteriebrigade*, the commander of FJB 25 reported the outright hostility of some German troops towards the *Feldjäger*. These German soldiers expressed frustration and bewilderment at the presence of Austro-Hungarian troops in the West, asking the Czech infantrymen “why are you here?” and “why are you prolonging the war?”³⁵¹ For their part, many Austro-Hungarian soldiers, particularly Hungarians, seem to have shared this exact sentiment, resenting their exile “in servitude to a foreign power.”³⁵²

Relations between Austro-Hungarian and German command authorities, while better-documented, are similarly complicated. On one hand, many of the interactions between Habsburg and German officers exhibited a significant degree of cordiality, mutual respect, and

³⁴⁹ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 92.

³⁵⁰ Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 35th A-H Division Notes by Chief of Staff, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, 4.

³⁵¹ Op. Nr. 1023/8, 23.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁵² Op. Nr. 3046, 21.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

productivity. Given the direct subordination of *k.u.k.* units to the German Army in the West, harmonious relations between the two officer corps were of practical necessity, particularly since both the command staffs and the troop bodies of the *k.u.k.* formations contained a large number of German personnel. For example, the XVIII. *Korpskommando* under Goiginger not only commanded mostly German units, but also possessed a fair number of German staff officers; eight of the officers on Goiginger's corps staff were Germans.³⁵³

One of these German officers, the Prussian *Oberleutnant* von Proeck, made such a positive impression on the *Korpskommando* that upon his departure, Goiginger issued a formal farewell on behalf of the entire Austro-Hungarian corps staff. Hailing the departing ordnance officer as a "dutiful coworker, tactful liaison, and a beloved comrade," Goiginger asserted that the Habsburg officers "would maintain a lasting, hearty, and comradely sentiment...for this young and promising officer."³⁵⁴ Schilaneck also described positive relations between the staff of the 35th Infantry Division and its German counterparts. Upon the arrival of the 35th Infantry Division in France, the chief of staff of *Armee-Abteilung C* took great interest in the organization, armament, and material condition of the *k.u.k.* troops, asserting the vital necessity of a good understanding between German and Austro-Hungarian troops. Similarly, Schilaneck described the German liaison officer for the division, the Bavarian general staff officer Major Graf Berchem, as a "loyal and valued advisor" who advocated for the division's interests to the German authorities.

³⁵³ Anlage 432, Folder III: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁵⁴ Anlage 560, 1.11.1918, Folder III: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

Moreover, Berchem went far beyond his responsibilities as a liaison when he personally performed staff work for the division at the front.³⁵⁵

Certain Austro-Hungarian officers likewise endeared themselves to the Germans while on the Western Front. Goiginger in particular seems to have earned the esteem of the German authorities in the West. On November 5th, after the XVIII. *Korpskommando* transferred command over Gruppe Ornes, Goiginger met with Gallwitz at his headquarters before departing France. According to Gallwitz's memoirs, the Austrian expressed deep regret and distress over Austria-Hungary's "abandonment" of its ally. In turn, Gallwitz wrote in his diary that "one must have a special sympathy for this brave old Austrian officer."³⁵⁶ The Germans did occasionally praise the bravery and martial spirit of the Austro-Hungarian troops in the West and commend their combat actions in France, as shown by the German reports of September 13th and October 10-11.³⁵⁷ Hindenburg, after the arrival of the 1st and 35th Infantry Divisions in July, noted the unsuitability of the *k.u.k.* formations for frontline service and felt that the poor quality of these divisions reflected the sorry state of the *k.u.k. Armee* as a whole; nevertheless, Hindenburg asserted that the Habsburg officers and soldiers were as a whole willing, hardworking, and fairly capable.³⁵⁸ Eduard von Below, the commander of V. Korps (Gruppe Combres), described the troops of the 35th Infantry Division to be "sturdy" upon his inspection of the formation.³⁵⁹ Similarly, Gallwitz was impressed by the infantrymen and staff officers of the 1st Infantry

³⁵⁵ Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 35th A-H Division Notes by Chief of Staff, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, 4-5.

³⁵⁶ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 128.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 102; 109.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

Division after visiting the Austro-Hungarian units at the front; furthermore, German reports after the combat actions of October 8-10 praised the leadership of Metzger and Hellebronth.³⁶⁰

Yet, a fair degree of antipathy and condescension remained in the attitude of the German officer corps towards its Austro-Hungarian counterparts on the Western Front. The German reports on the actions of the 1st Infantry Division strongly criticized the Austro-Hungarian artillery as “too slow and clumsy” while simultaneously maintaining that the junior officers and NCO’s of the division had “utterly failed.”³⁶¹ Understandably, the German authorities in the West universally denigrated the quality of the 106th Infantry Division, which Gallwitz characterized as “quite untrained” and “virtually sans-culottes in their clothing.” For his part, Hindenburg seriously doubted that the Landsturm infantry would fight at all.³⁶² Unsurprisingly, perhaps the harshest criticism of the Austro-Hungarian troops on the Western Front came from Ludendorff. In his memoir, he described the 35th Infantry Division as “a *k.u.k.* division on the Combres Heights that should have performed better,” a remark that reportedly infuriated FML von Podhoránsky.³⁶³ The Austro-Hungarian leadership in France also expressed a degree of resentment towards their German allies. German disdain for the combat capabilities of the Habsburg military did not go unnoticed. In late October, Podhoránsky reported that some of the 35th Infantry Division’s officers were unhappy about the Germans’ use of the division as rear-line labor, which was likely interpreted as a slight by the honor-conscious Habsburg officer corps.³⁶⁴ Indeed, when the German authorities removed the *k.u.k.* divisions to rear areas at the beginning of November and proposed their use in constructing field fortifications, the officers of

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 106; 109.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 109.

³⁶² Ibid., 114.

³⁶³ Ibid., 104.

³⁶⁴ Op. Nr. 258.08, 31.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

IR 63 submitted a written petition to the XVIII. *Korpskommando*, decrying such a utilization as “prisoner work” (*Gefangenenarbeiten*).³⁶⁵

Nevertheless, it was the seemingly cavalier manner in which the German command authorities utilized the *k.u.k.* units that created the greatest tension between Austro-Hungarian and German leadership on the Western Front. The constant state of emergency in the German Army during the desperate fighting of the final weeks of the First World War resulted in many units, both German and Austro-Hungarian, remaining in near-continuous use on the frontlines. Likewise, German commanders often had to shuffle individual units around the front to plug gaps in the lines or reinforce especially tenuous sectors. Thus, on several occasions, *k.u.k.* units found themselves separated from their parent formations and dispatched to a neighboring German division, where they would fight continuously until they became too depleted to offer effective resistance.

Examples of this phenomenon litter the chronicles of the *k.u.k.* divisions in France. One notable instance occurred with the *Feldjägerbataillone* of the 1st Infantry Division. The *Feldjäger* constituted some of the division’s best infantry and had made a favorable impression on Gallwitz during his inspection; consequently, the Germans combined the *Feldjägerbataillone* into an ad-hoc regiment under *Oberstleutnant* Marschan and removed them from the control of the division. Maas-Ost subordinated the “*Jägerregiment* Marschan” to the badly-depleted German 15. *Infanterie-Division* in a neighboring sector, where the *Feldjäger* remained until several days after the 1st Infantry Division had withdrawn from the frontlines. The removal such a significant part of the division’s infantry forces and its subsequent mauling while under

³⁶⁵ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 129.

German command enraged Metzger, who complained bitterly to Gallwitz.³⁶⁶ Later, the circumstances surrounding the withdrawal of Gruppe Maas-West on the division's right flank also seemingly indicated German highhandedness in their dealings with their Habsburg allies. On October 18th, the German liaison officer to the divisional command informed Metzger that Maas-West intended to withdraw north of Brioules without fighting in the case of a renewed American attack. As shown in the divisional report of October 21st, Metzger was dumbfounded that the German authorities had hitherto failed to inform him of this plan, given that this withdrawal would affect the position of the 1st Infantry Division considerably.³⁶⁷ If the divisions of Maas-West withdrew, the frontline of the already-overstretched division would double to nearly eleven kilometers and both flanks of the divisional sector would be exposed to enemy attack. As he had just submitted reports to Maas-Ost detailing the weak combat strength of the division, Metzger was particularly vexed by the German failure to communicate.³⁶⁸

The case of *Sturmbataillon* 106 is another prime example of the tensions regarding the German treatment of *k.u.k.* units. As previously mentioned, StBaon 106 and Lst.IR 25 were transferred to the 7. *Reserve-Division* of Gruppe Maas-Ost on September 29th and inserted onto the frontlines between Sivry and Brioules. Initially, the continued command of these units by the 211. *Landsturm-Infanteriebrigade* made this transfer slightly more palatable for the command of the 106th Infantry Division. However, on September 30th, Maas-West removed the Landsturm brigade command and subordinated the *k.u.k.* regiments to a newly-arrived German brigade; in its report of October 3rd, the divisional command noted resentfully that this “unoriented” German

³⁶⁶ Polatschek, “Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront,” 106-107.

³⁶⁷ Op. Nr. 3043, 21.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁶⁸ Op. Nr. 3014, 21.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

brigade now had command over four Austro-Hungarian battalions.³⁶⁹ Apparently, the precedents of the 1st Infantry Division's *Feldjägerbataillone* and the 106th Infantry Division's Lst.IR 25 and StBaon 106 were not lost on the Austro-Hungarian authorities in the West. In a memorandum of October 10th, FML Goiginger elected to keep the other three Landsturm regiments as rear-line security and labor detachments, fearing that the total withdrawal of the regiments would induce the Germans to shunt them off to a different sector of the front.³⁷⁰

On October 19th, 5. *Armee* ordered Gruppe Ornes to deploy the 106th Infantry Division to the frontlines. The division was still extremely understrength at the time. Only two of the division's three regiments were considered combat ready (only after a further eight to twelve days and even then, only on a quiet sector of the front); moreover, the division lacked adequate artillery and had not yet received German *Minenwerfer*. Thus, on October 20th, the XVIII. *Korpskommando* indicated to 5. *Armee* that a return of StBaon 106 and Lst.IR 25 would be desirable for the prospective deployment. 5. *Armee*'s response, transmitted that same day, was ambiguous. While the army seemingly approved Gruppe Ornes' request, the Germans asserted that the immediate redeployment of StBaon 106 was impossible, as it was an indispensable element supporting the "hardly battleworthy" troops of the 1st Infantry Division. 5. *Armee* would thus do nothing other than order the 1st Infantry Division to only employ StBaon 106 as a reserve.³⁷¹ Five days later, Gruppe Ornes relayed the renewed request of the 106th Infantry Division for the return of StBaon 106. The divisional command reported the heavy losses suffered by the *Sturmataillon* during its near-continuous combat use, noting the incapacitation

³⁶⁹ Op. Nr. 1003/6, 3.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁷⁰ Op. Nr. 861, 10.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁷¹ Anlagen 424, 426, 20.10.1918, Folder III: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

of the entire battalion staff by gas on October 23rd and that the *Sturmbataillon* had already lost half of its strength by October 10th; correspondingly, the division feared the complete destruction of its best combat troops. Notably, the division informed the German authorities that “the permanent retention of the battalion at the front is not permissible under *k.u.k.* regulations” and thereby requested the removal of the battalion as soon as possible. Gruppe Ornes naturally concurred with the division and recommended the soonest possible reunion of StBaon 106 with its parent division. Interestingly, 5. *Armee* had already ordered Maas-Ost to return the *Sturmbataillon*, but the Group ignored the order.³⁷² In the end, Maas-Ost did not order the replacement of StBaon 106 until November 1st and even then, the Group planned to withhold the battalion as a reserve for the 1st Infantry Division until November 4th.³⁷³

The Combat Effectiveness of the Austro-Hungarian Divisions in France

Like the armies of the other belligerents, the Austro-Hungarian Army evolved considerably over the course of the First World War. The experience of modern warfare on multiple fronts wrought sweeping changes in the organization, equipment, and tactics of the *k.u.k. Armee*; likewise, the massive demands of total war on the manpower and resources of Austria-Hungary profoundly altered the size, composition, and effectiveness of the Habsburg military. The Austro-Hungarian divisions on the Western Front exemplified the wartime transformation of the *k.u.k. Armee* from a small, poorly-equipped, tactically-backward army of professional soldiers into a large conscript force with vastly-increased firepower and modern infantry and artillery tactics. However, the experience of the *k.u.k.* troops in France also revealed

³⁷² Anlage 495, 25.10.1918, Folder III: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁷³ Anlage 559, 1.11.1918, Folder III: 18th Austrian Corps (Ornes) Annexes to War Diary, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

the major weaknesses of the late-war Habsburg military, particularly the pervasive shortages of men and materiel. Hence, combat against vastly-superior French and American forces on the Western Front, a theater of war for which the *k.u.k.* infantry were fundamentally unprepared, mercilessly exposed the shortcomings of the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1918.

One obvious way in which the *k.u.k.* divisions in the West demonstrated the modernization of the Austro-Hungarian military was in their organization and equipment. In terms of structure, all of the divisions in the West reflected the final organizational reforms of the *k.u.k. Armee*, which had begun in October 1917. The new regulations stipulated infantry divisions of four infantry regiments; a regiment now consisted of three battalions (I-III), each of which contained four companies³⁷⁴. The reduction of infantry regiments from four battalions to three served to facilitate easier command and control and permit the formation of new units with the extraneous battalions; IR 112 of the 1st Infantry Division was one of these “new” regiments, comprising former battalions of IR 71 and IR 72.³⁷⁵ Each infantry company numbered around 250 men, and thus each infantry regiment totaled about 3000 men of all ranks. A *Feldjägerbataillon* consisted of 1100 men of all ranks in four companies.³⁷⁶ In addition to the reorganization of the line infantry, the reforms also stipulated the expansion of specialist infantry units within *k.u.k.* infantry divisions, which reflected the army’s growing emphasis on modern, small-unit infiltration tactics. As of 1918, each division was to possess a dedicated sapper battalion and a *Sturmataillon* originally comprised of the handpicked assault companies of each infantry regiment. An Austro-Hungarian *Sturmataillon* consisted of four infantry companies, one machine-gun company, a close-support artillery company, a mortar company, and a

³⁷⁴ Landsturm and Honvéd regiments had always comprised only three battalions.

³⁷⁵ Jung, *The Austro-Hungarian Forces in World War I* (2), 10-12.

³⁷⁶ John Dixon-Nuttall, “The Austro-Hungarian Army 1914-18,” Austrian Philatelic Society, accessed June 18th, 2018, <http://www.austrianphilately.com/dixnut/index.htm>.

flamethrower company; totaling 800-1000 men, the *Sturmabteilung* not only formed the elite assault infantry of a division, but also served to train the rest of the infantry in modern infiltration and close-combat tactics.³⁷⁷ In total, an Austro-Hungarian infantry division in 1918 had an authorized rifle strength³⁷⁸ of 11,567.³⁷⁹

The organization of the *k.u.k.* divisions in the West corresponded to the realities of the Austro-Hungarian military in late 1918. On one hand, they largely reflected the results of the modernizing reforms of 1917-1918. As previously seen, each division possessed four infantry regiments of three battalions each (the 1st Infantry Division had three *Feldjägerbataillone* in place of a fourth infantry regiment). All of the divisions likewise had a divisional *Sturmabteilung* and included a number of special technical formations, from sapper and flamethrower units to communications (mostly field telephone and telegraph) and searchlight sections. However, at the same time, the composition of the Austro-Hungarian formations in France also demonstrated the immense manpower shortages facing the Monarchy by late 1918. Despite the influx of millions of former POW's after the Peace of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 and the reduction of exemptions from conscription, the replacement apparatus of the *k.u.k. Armee* was already in critical condition at the beginning of the year. By January 1918, seventy percent of all men eligible for the draft in Austria-Hungary had already been drafted.³⁸⁰ The political and economic situation of the Monarchy also sapped the strength of the field army. The AOK had to keep well over a million troops in the interior of the Monarchy both to man vital war industries and to maintain security in the face of growing anarchy; by October 1918, an estimated 1.7 million

³⁷⁷ Morisi, *Hell in the Trenches*, 62-63.

³⁷⁸ "Rifle strength" (Feuergewehrstand) was the number of riflemen in a division, while the "ration strength" (Verpflegungsstand) was the total personnel of the division, including staff officers, weapons crewmen, support personnel, etc.

³⁷⁹ Glaise-Horstenau (ed.), *ÖULK*, vol. 7, 47.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 35-38.

soldiers (out of a total of 4,269,000) were stationed in the interior. Likewise, shortages of horses constrained the size of artillery and logistical units.³⁸¹ Correspondingly, the actual strength of *k.u.k.* formations declined and deviated significantly from the authorized number. In 1918, the proscribed ration and rifle strengths of an infantry battalion were 1275 and 832 respectively; when fully equipped with light machine guns, these numbers decreased to 1207 and 628. Despite the proscribed divisional rifle strength of 11,600, most divisions possessed only 8000, 6000, or even 5000 riflemen.³⁸² For example, on September 10th, even before the division experienced combat, the 1st Infantry Division was well below the official establishment.³⁸³ The average overall strength of the infantry regiments was only 2088 men and 101 officers; the largest individual battalion (III/IR 61) possessed only 541 men and 22 officers. The average strength of the three *Feldjägerbataillone* was 640 men and 83 officers, while StBaon 1 had only 500 men and 19 officers.³⁸⁴

Consequently, the Austro-Hungarian divisions in the West demonstrated the attempt by the Habsburg military to compensate for reduced manpower with increased firepower. This trend was common to all of the armies of the Great War but was particularly significant for the *k.u.k. Armee*. One of the most striking features of this magnification of divisional firepower was the tremendous increase in the quantity of artillery allocated to each division. In 1914, the *k.u.k. Armee* possessed an average of only forty-two artillery pieces per infantry division, one of the lowest among the armies of the major powers. In contrast, the average artillery strength of an

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁸³ Unfortunately, the statistics for divisional strengths in the weekly reports and operations documents are often unclear and overall, incomplete. Rifle versus ration strength is only sometimes specified and the statistics often only include the infantry regiments, thus omitting the artillery units, machine-gun units, technical troops, etc. The strengths of any attached German units are likewise absent.

³⁸⁴ Op. Nr. 2516/2, 10.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

Austro-Hungarian division in 1918 was seventy-six.³⁸⁵ Not only had the proscribed artillery strength of a division risen substantially, but the composition of the divisional artillery brigade had changed, now comprising a larger variety of more modern artillery pieces. In 1918, an Austro-Hungarian artillery brigade consisted of three artillery regiments: two field artillery regiments, both of which now included howitzers, cannons, antiaircraft guns, and mortars, and one heavy field artillery regiment. In total, the field artillery brigade comprised on paper around 100 guns, including field cannons, howitzers, heavy howitzers, heavy cannons, mountain guns, antiaircraft guns, and mortars.³⁸⁶

Indeed, while understrength according to the official proscription, the 1. *Feldartillerbrigade* of the 1st Infantry Division possessed a formidable array of artillery pieces upon its arrival in the West. On September 13th, the division had an overall artillery strength of eighty-eight guns, specifically sixteen field cannons, twenty-eight field howitzers, eight mountain cannons, four mountain howitzers, twenty heavy howitzers, and twelve additional heavy guns³⁸⁷ of the German *Landwehr-Artillerie Regiment* 68.³⁸⁸ Though possessing few dedicated antitank implements, the *k.u.k.* divisions in France increasingly utilized Austro-Hungarian artillery pieces as close-support and antitank weapons after rearming with German materiel.³⁸⁹ Similarly, late-war *k.u.k.* divisions also incorporated a far greater number and variety of infantry weapons. In addition to increased numbers of mortars and infantry support guns, Habsburg divisions possessed four times as many machine guns in 1918 as they had in 1914,

³⁸⁵ Glaise-Horstenau (ed.), *ÖULK*, vol. 7, 51.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 79-85.

³⁸⁷ Exact type not specified in the report.

³⁸⁸ Op. Nr. 2265/1, 13.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁸⁹ Op. Nr. 2207/2, 11.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

including both heavy³⁹⁰ and light machine guns.³⁹¹ The *k.u.k.* divisions in France had fairly large numbers of machine guns at their disposal, particularly considering their low manpower; on October 23rd, even after the heavy losses of the previous weeks, the 1st Infantry Division still possessed ninety-three machine guns of all types for approximately 2300 combat troops.³⁹²

Although the Austro-Hungarian Army of 1918 had adapted significantly to the demands of modern warfare in terms of organization, equipment, and tactics, several weaknesses critically undermined the performance of the *k.u.k.* divisions in France. First and foremost, the Austro-Hungarian forces simply did not possess sufficient men and materiel to face the Allied juggernaut in the West. In its defensive preparations for sector Brabant, the command of the 1st Infantry Division noted that the division did not possess enough artillery to provide adequate support for the eight-kilometer HWL. Unlike in Italy, where the terrain often significantly restricted the avenues of attack, the Allied forces in the Meuse-Argonne could and did attack along the entire divisional frontline. With only eighty-eight guns available, of which four batteries had to remain in reserve, the division could not achieve the minimum desired concentration of one gun per 100 meters; one gun for every 125 meters of front was the absolute best case scenario. Even in this best case scenario, a mere eight guns would remain for tank defense and the mobile support of counterattacks, which were vital tasks for Western Front combat in 1918.³⁹³ The division similarly possessed insufficient manpower for a proper defense-in-depth of their sector. While Metzger and his staff planned for defensive operations by the

³⁹⁰ A “heavy” MG is a crew-served weapon mounted on a tripod or similar implement, while a “light” MG (often the same model of weapon) is more portable and usually can be operated by an individual soldier.

³⁹¹ Glaise-Horstenau (ed.), *ÖULK*, vol. 7, 51.

³⁹² Op. Nr. 3078, 23.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents. Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁹³ Op. Nr. 2265/1, 13.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

forward companies in the outpost zone, they acknowledged that the low levels of manpower and training among the division's units precluded an active, elastic defense. Consequently, the divisional command forbade a prolonged forward defense, instead emphasizing that all units should prioritize holding the HWL at all costs. Thus, rather than creating a system of multiple echelons and defeating an enemy attack in front of the key defensive position, the 1st Infantry Division ordered its forward units to hold the machine gun nests immediately in front of the frontline and delay the enemy advance long enough for the division to place all of its reserves in the HWL.³⁹⁴ While this plan may have made the most of adverse circumstances, it was nevertheless wholly inadequate to stave off the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. The Americans possessed a three to one advantage in infantry and had concentrated 156 artillery pieces for every mile of the front (around ninety-seven per kilometer); the sheer weight of men and firepower was enough to overwhelm the Austro-German forces.³⁹⁵

The reliance of the Austro-Hungarian formations in France on German logistical and tactical support stemmed from the inability of the AOK to provide its divisions with sufficient supplies or reinforcements. Consequently, despite German assistance, the 1st and 35th Infantry Divisions could not fully restore their combat strength after the initial battles; likewise, the 106th Infantry Division could not constitute battleworthy units from the majority of its personnel. On October 12th, after the heavy losses of the preceding days, the 1st Infantry Division requested the allocation of additional reinforcements. However, the DAG 1 could only provide 200 replacements (to replace total losses of approximately 5779 dead, wounded, and missing³⁹⁶ for 1-

³⁹⁴ Op. Nr. 2160, 2160/1. 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Orders and Maps, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁹⁵ Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, 62.

³⁹⁶ 4997 of this number were classified as missing, though this figure includes stragglers who were subsequently reunited with the division.

10 October)³⁹⁷ and informed Metzger that no further trained replacements would be available until mid-November. Moreover, the AOK indicated to Metzger on that same day that there were no reinforcements available for the division at all.³⁹⁸ Significantly, losses among specialist personnel were almost irreplaceable. When the field telephone platoon attached to the *Jägerregiment Marschan* requested replacements for the thirty-nine telephonists and signals troops lost during the actions of October 8-13, the divisional command replied that such a replacement was impossible.

The *k.u.k.* divisions in the West also suffered from a chronic lack of Austro-Hungarian weapons and equipment, which German assistance could not entirely ameliorate. On October 14th, the 1st Infantry Division reported severe shortages in ammunition and equipment for Austrian-made small arms and machine guns; two days later, the division informed Maas-Ost that a total lack of belted ammunition had rendered all of their Schwarzlose heavy machine guns inoperable. Although the division faced less serious shortages in Lewis ammunition, a deficiency in magazines for this weapon similarly exercised a baneful effect.³⁹⁹ Moreover, even though the hundreds of Lewis guns supplied to the *k.u.k.* units by the OHL formed a significant proportion of the divisions' machine gun complement, the utility of these weapons for the Austro-Hungarian troops was limited. The soldiers of the 1st Infantry division complained of reliability issues, the limited capacity of the magazines, and deficient training in the use of the Lewis gun and consequently had little confidence in the weapons.⁴⁰⁰ Humorously, the Americans of the 33rd

³⁹⁷ Op. Nr. 1014/3, 14.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁹⁸ Op. Nr. 3061, 3087, 21-25.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

³⁹⁹ Op. Nr. 2973, 2984, 2985, 14-16.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴⁰⁰ Op. Nr. 3016, 20.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

Division, themselves lacking confidence in the French-supplied Chauchat, happily relieved captured *k.u.k.* troops of their Lewis guns upon the seizure of Consenvoye on October 8th.⁴⁰¹

The particular conditions in the West also constrained the combat effectiveness of the Austro-Hungarian formations there. For one, the necessity of performing non-combat duties exacerbated the already-strained manpower situation of the *k.u.k.* divisions. The low strength of the Austro-Hungarian units made adequate fortifications all the more important, but construction work simultaneously further compromised the frontline strength of the combat units. On October 3rd, as the division hurriedly prepared to meet the imminent Franco-American assault, the 2. *Infanteriebrigade* reported not only that the units assigned to fortification work were insufficient, but also that the German removal of *k.u.k.* units for construction behind the HWL critically undermined the brigade's defensive preparations at the frontline. The brigade command noted that not a single man could be spared for construction work behind the lines, as all forces were needed to both improve and defend the frontline.⁴⁰²

Removal of troops for training also reduced the effective frontline strength of the divisions. After highlighting the great number of men from the division attending German training courses, FML Kratky asserted that such departures caused the combat strength of the 106th Infantry Division to sink substantially below authorized levels.⁴⁰³ Yet, at the same time, the *k.u.k.* troops in France did not receive adequate training in the combat methods of the Western Front. According to Schilaneck, the majority of the troops of the 35th Infantry Division did not master the latest German small-unit tactics; the brevity of the initial training period and the

⁴⁰¹ Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, 278.

⁴⁰² Op. Nr. 1003/10, 3.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴⁰³ Op. Nr. 926/5, 26.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

contrast with the methods usually employed by the *k.u.k. Armee* in Italy resulted in a superficial grasp of the German tactics. Accustomed to holding defensive lines in dense concentrations under the close supervision of officers, most of the Austro-Hungarian rank-and-file were not well-suited to mobile, decentralized infiltration tactics.⁴⁰⁴ Likewise, IR 5 of the 1st Infantry Division reported that the majority of its replacements had received only eight to twelve weeks of training and consequently had very limited knowledge of infantry combat techniques; one third of the replacements had never even thrown a hand grenade.⁴⁰⁵ Moreover, the constant state of emergency on the frontlines impeded the adequate training of Austro-Hungarian personnel. The rearmament of the *k.u.k.* artillery formations with German equipment was difficult to execute, as the divisions often could spare neither the personnel nor the guns from frontline duty; the 1. *Feldartillerbrigade* experienced this at the beginning of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, when the division had to remove its batteries from training and reposition them at the front.⁴⁰⁶ Similarly, the Lst.IR 6, 31, and 32 of the 106th Infantry Division experienced repeated interruptions of their training exercises when they were stationed as rear-line security and labor units. Up to October 10th, multiple march alerts, the detachment of large elements for labor duties, and inspections resulted in the average completion of only one day of training (out of twelve possible days) by each battalion.⁴⁰⁷

Thus, the majority of the Austro-Hungarian troops on the Western Front, especially the replacements that arrived at the divisional training centers, were not particularly adept in

⁴⁰⁴ Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 35th A-H Division Notes by Chief of Staff, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, 4-5.

⁴⁰⁵ Op. Nr. 2957, 7.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴⁰⁶ Op. Nr. 2699, 26.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴⁰⁷ Op. Nr. 1010/8, 10.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

advanced infantry tactics. Most of the line infantry were sufficient for manning static defense lines and performing security and labor duties but were unable to succeed in complicated small-unit actions such as patrols in the outpost zone or counterattacks. Indeed, the Austro-Hungarian experience in France exemplifies the prevailing differentiation among the *k.u.k.* infantry in the final years of the Great War. By 1917, Austro-Hungarian formations consisted of two main groups: younger, physically-fit, and better-trained shock troops and generally older, less fit soldiers in defensive and support roles.⁴⁰⁸ Hence, the *k.u.k.* units in the West that experienced the most intense combat and had the most success were the *Sturmabteilungen*, inherently the best-trained and equipped troops of the divisions, the similarly well-equipped and specially-trained sappers, and the younger, more experienced soldiers of the infantry regiments. For example, the troops of *Oberstleutnant* Popelka's IR 5, notable for their adept defense of Hill 371, were overwhelmingly young; eighty percent of the regiment's troops were younger than twenty, while the remaining twenty percent were mostly under thirty. After the heavy fighting of early October, eighty-five percent of the regiment were undernourished, poorly-trained new recruits; however, Popelka described the veteran fifteen percent as experienced, well-trained, physically-strong, and highly-motivated.⁴⁰⁹

As previously recounted, these small, elite elements of the *k.u.k.* infantry performed the most dangerous and demanding tasks of the battles of September and October. Nevertheless, although the "shock" detachments were successful in many small-unit actions, a few successful patrols, a temporarily successful counterattack, or the infliction of heavy losses on the enemy could not achieve any significant, long-term success. Correspondingly, the patrol operations of

⁴⁰⁸ Morisi, *Hell in the Trenches*, 67.

⁴⁰⁹ Op. Nr. 2957, 7.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

the 1st Infantry Division in late September highlight not only the most modern aspects of the *k.u.k. Armee*, but also its major shortcomings in the West. On September 17th, Maas-Ost ordered the division to undertake major patrol operations in front of sector Brabant for the purpose of acquiring enemy prisoners; anticipating a major enemy attack, the German authorities wanted to ascertain the Allied position and intentions in the sector.⁴¹⁰ Consequently, all of the frontline battalions executed assault patrols of varying scope from September 22nd until the beginning of the major Allied attack on the divisional sector. The stormtroop operation of September 22nd was one of the more successful operations, even though it did not actually yield any prisoners. Beginning at 4:30 AM, a small group of handpicked volunteers from IR 5 conducted a reconnaissance-in-force in the outpost zone of the regimental subsector. Fifty-five infantrymen advanced on an enemy-occupied trench, supported by eight pioneers, three batteries of artillery, and auxiliary labor and medical troops. The artillery provided a creeping barrage (*Feuerwalze*) to cover the advance of the assault patrols, subsequently switching to a box barrage to isolate the enemy position during the attack of the regimental *Sturmtruppen*. The Austro-Hungarian assault troops infiltrated the position, destroyed the enemy shelters with grenades, and retreated under the cover of smoke.⁴¹¹

On one hand, this operation demonstrated the proficiency of certain *k.u.k.* units in modern artillery and small-unit tactics. The action of September 22nd involved close combined-arms coordination, complex artillery and infiltration techniques, and the use of specialized equipment, namely different types of grenades, obstacle-clearing implements, searchlights, field telephones, and light signals. Likewise, the operation showed that a portion of the Austro-Hungarian infantry

⁴¹⁰ Op. Nr. 917/1, 18.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴¹¹ Op. Nr. 2597/1, 22.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

in the West were skilled and motivated enough to undertake some degree of offensive action; *Oberstleutnant* Popelka remarked that these line infantrymen had shown themselves to be the equivalent of the *Sturmataillon*. A subsequent assault patrol by two storm platoons of *Feldjägerbataillone* 17 and 25 on the evening of October 2nd was even more successful. The *Feldjäger* enveloped a French position and stormed the trench with grenades, killing fifteen French soldiers and capturing three Frenchmen and a cache of French wine.⁴¹²

However, at the same time, the September 22nd operation and subsequent stormtroop actions also showed that the division did not really possess the capability for large-scale, sustained operations. The artillery allocated for the operation was insufficient in quantity and failed to achieve a sufficient degree of coordination with the infantry assault; most importantly, the cordoning barrage was too late to prevent the withdrawal of enemy troops from the targeted position. Moreover, enemy troops reoccupied the position immediately after the Austro-Hungarians returned to their lines.⁴¹³ The next day, after the regimental commanders had proposed a major stormtroop operation, the artillery brigade commander pointed out that the artillery lacked the guns and the ammunition for any large-scale penetration of the enemy frontline.⁴¹⁴ Subsequent operations were limited in scale and mixed in results. Two patrol operations of IR 61 on October 4th were spectacular and costly failures; even if their tactics were relatively advanced, the Austro-Hungarian assault troops lacked the numbers and firepower to overcome significant enemy resistance.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹² Abt.Ic.Nr. 29/10, 3.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴¹³ Op. Nr. 2597/1, 22.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴¹⁴ Op. Nr. 2585/1, 23.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴¹⁵ Op. Nr. 1004/2, 4.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

The Material Conditions and Discipline of the k.u.k. Troops in the West

Just like all of the other belligerents, the Austro-Hungarian formations in France experienced fairly heavy losses during the last two months of the First World War. According to the official statistics, the 1st, 35th, and 106th Infantry Divisions suffered a total of 19,295 casualties on the Western Front, including 779 dead, 2139 wounded, 10,974 sick⁴¹⁶, and 5403 missing and captured.⁴¹⁷ According to Polatschek, the largest number of casualties stemmed from either gassing or capture.⁴¹⁸ The great number of missing/captured troops, the second largest source of losses, is particularly intriguing. Given the contemporary national tensions in Austria-Hungary and the pervasiveness of desertion in the Habsburg military in 1918, one might conclude that large numbers of Austro-Hungarian soldiers, alienated from the Habsburg cause and fighting far away from their homelands, simply deserted to the Allies. While signs of war weariness, discontent, and slackening discipline are ubiquitous in the weekly reports and operations documents of the *k.u.k.* divisions in France, there are no indications of widespread nationalist discontent among the Austro-Hungarian personnel in the West.⁴¹⁹ Instead, these documents show that the horrible material conditions on the Western Front, combined with exhaustion from incessant combat, were the primary factor behind morale issues among the Habsburg troops.

In addition to fighting a hopeless battle against the full might of the Allied armies, Habsburg soldiers also had to endure severe material deprivation during their time in France. Although the material situation of the *k.u.k.* divisions in the West was initially favorable,

⁴¹⁶ This figure represents the total cases of illness (including gassing) reported, not the total number of individuals who were ill.

⁴¹⁷ Glaise-Horstenau (ed.), *ÖULK*, vol. 7, 42.

⁴¹⁸ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 121.

⁴¹⁹ Etschmann, "Österreich-Ungarn zwischen Engagement und Zurückhaltung," 101.

particularly in comparison to their recent experiences in Italy, logistical support for these formations declined swiftly and significantly over the course of September and October. One recurring and particularly serious issue was the inadequate provision of clothing. Weeks of living on or near the frontlines, exposed to the elements and enemy fire, naturally took its toll on the uniforms of the troops. On October 21st, after extended service on the frontlines (even longer than the division itself), the 1. *Feldartilleriebrigade* noted that the condition of the troops' clothing was terrible, especially the pants and field blouses; allotments from divisional stores only partly covered the needs for replacements.⁴²⁰ Likewise, in a materiel report to the AOK on that same day, Metzger emphasized the poor condition of and lack of replacements for all types of clothing as one of the chief impediments to the combat effectiveness of the division. Coupled with the concomitant shortage of tent squares, the inadequacy of the soldiers' clothing exacerbated the pernicious effects of the cold, rainy weather in northeastern France.⁴²¹

However, the EstW was almost entirely incapable of ensuring the timely and sufficient provision of clothing and other vital supplies. The logistical difficulties experienced by the *k.u.k.* divisions in the West partly stemmed from their dispersion in eastern France; according to Schilaneck, the EstW could not easily cope with dispatching supplies to so many different areas of the front, especially given the congestion in the German rail system.⁴²² However, the collapse of Austro-Hungarian industry was the fundamental impediment. By late 1918, shortages in labor and raw materials, particularly coal, had drastically reduced the industrial production and

⁴²⁰ Op. Nr. 3043, 21.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴²¹ Op. Nr. 3061, 21.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴²² Schilaneck, *Die oest. ung. 35. Infanteriedivision auf dem westlichen Kriegsschauplatz*, 35th A-H Division Notes by Chief of Staff, Box 3, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I, 6-7.

transportation capacity of the Habsburg Monarchy.⁴²³ The 106th Infantry Division experienced the greatest material hardship of the *k.u.k.* divisions in the West, as it was a low priority for both the Austro-Hungarian and German commands. On September 26th, only a couple weeks after the division arrived in France, the divisional command reported a shortage of 6000 pairs of shoes, 150 pairs of boots, 5500 pairs of pants, 5000 field blouses, 3300 coats, and 9500 pairs of underwear. Likewise, the division lacked any cold-weather gear and most train⁴²⁴ material.⁴²⁵

Indeed, the material condition of the Landsturm troops was so bad that, upon the arrival of the division in the Ornes sector, a local German commander provided hundreds of barefooted *k.u.k.* soldiers with boots from his own stores.⁴²⁶ Although possibly the most severe issue, the lack of suitable clothing was not the only element of the Austro-Hungarian divisions' logistical woes. After the beginning of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, food supplies ran perilously low for the 1st Infantry Division. The logistical chaos wrought by the Allied attack and the constant bombardment of depots and transport routes in the divisional sector precluded the regular and sufficient supply of frontline troops from the field kitchens. Consequently, soldiers at the frontline had to utilize their iron rations and subsist largely on nonperishables.⁴²⁷ In early October, as the situation became more desperate, the divisional command issued detailed instructions for the emergency slaughter and processing of horses, paying particular attention to

⁴²³ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 908-909.

⁴²⁴ Equipment for horse-drawn supply trains (harnesses, saddles, wagons, etc.)

⁴²⁵ Op. Nr. 926/5, 26.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴²⁶ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 114.

⁴²⁷ Op. Nr. 2686, 27.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

utilizing as much of the carcass as possible; notably, the divisional command even proscribed the consumption of horses killed by gunfire or shelling.⁴²⁸

Combined with the inclement weather and the great deficiency in suitable accommodations at the frontline, the dearth of clothing supplies compounded the misery of the overworked, exhausted Austro-Hungarian soldiers. For one, the lack of clothing and shelter stimulated and exacerbated the outbreak of disease. A great variety of ailments afflicted the Habsburg troops in France, from venereal disease to bowel disorders to the Spanish Flu. Although certainly not as deadly as in other areas of Europe, the Austro-Hungarian forces in the West did witness a conspicuous rise in flu cases during October, which Metzger largely attributed to the poor clothing and quartering conditions.⁴²⁹ Between October 10th and the end of the month, approximately twenty-three men from the 35th Infantry Division died from pneumonia induced by the flu, although the disease rendered many more unfit for action.⁴³⁰ However, even as the flu abated, other diseases continued to cause misery among *k.u.k.* troops. On October 4th, the 106th Infantry Division reported that although the number of sick was declining, the number of ailing troops was on rise, primarily as a result from skin ailments, lice infestations, and other conditions generated by poor living and sanitary conditions.⁴³¹ The pervasive clothing shortages similarly intensified the impact of gas bombardment on the troops of the *k.u.k.* formations. The Allies' prodigious use of mustard gas to saturate the frontlines and rear areas of the divisional sectors already created enough problems for Austro-Hungarian

⁴²⁸ Divisionskommando-Abfertigung Nr. 199, 6.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴²⁹ Op. Nr. 3043, 21.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴³⁰ Op. Nr. 271.10, 278.11, 285.08, 17-31.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴³¹ Op. Nr. 1010/8, 10.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

troops, namely by impeding the movements of supplies and reinforcements. The long duration with which mustard gas remained on surfaces, when coupled with the clothing shortages, resulted not only in more severe gas injuries from lack of protection, but also further depleted the troops' supply of suitable clothing.⁴³²

The weekly reports of the *k.u.k.* divisions in the West are conspicuously pithy and vague in matters pertaining to the morale and discipline of the troops. For the most part, the divisional commanders reported the morale and physical condition of their soldiers as “good” or “adequate,” despite all of the aforementioned problems. Thus, accounting for the biases and interests of those in command, one cannot really gain a complete, detailed picture of the psychological state of Habsburg soldiers in France from reading the weekly reports at face value. However, both reading between the lines and analysis of some of the operations documents partially illuminates the problems of morale and discipline facing these formations. Firstly, although the extant files do not provide explicit statistics concerning desertion, one can confirm its occurrence. In his weekly report of September 26th, FML Kratky of the 106th Infantry Division noted that ninety-three men from the division deserted during the train journey from Poland to France.⁴³³ Likewise, at least 189 men had deserted from IR 5 prior to October 7th, when the division reported the formation of a labor company composed of deserters from that regiment. In its desperation for more manpower, the 1st Infantry Division not only allocated this

⁴³² Op. Nr. 1023/8, 23.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴³³ Op. Nr. 926/5, 26.9.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

deserter company for construction duties at the frontline, but also authorized the brigade command to reinsert any well-behaved deserters back into the ranks of the regiment.⁴³⁴

Nevertheless, no major disciplinary breakdown equivalent to the situation in Italy occurred among the Austro-Hungarian formations on the Western Front. In fact, the most significant instance of disorder arose far from the frontlines and at the very end of the conflict. At the end of October, the men of the divisional training groups in Arlon, influenced by the revolutionary sentiments of nearby German soldiers, demanded transportation back to Austria-Hungary and threatened armed insurrection in the event of a deployment to the front. While this threat induced the German authorities to expedite the withdrawal of Austro-Hungarian troops from the West, no revolt of any sort ultimately came to pass.⁴³⁵ However, if nothing else, the operations documents of the *k.u.k.* formations in France demonstrate that the Austro-Hungarian command authorities were very concerned with preventing the disciplinary and moral collapse of their troops. After the desertions during the division's journey to France, the command of the 106th Infantry Division requested that the AOK authorize the use of physical restraint to punish deserters on the Western Front, a measure which the Emperor Karl had abolished in his disciplinary reforms of the previous year. On October 15th, the legal department of the AOK replied, refusing the permit such disciplinary measures except in the most urgent circumstances.⁴³⁶

Among the 1st Infantry Division, Metzger repeatedly stressed the responsibility of officers for upholding the morale and discipline of the division. On September 12th, after

⁴³⁴ Op. Nr. 2873, 7.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴³⁵ Polatschek, "Österreichisch-ungarische Truppen an der Westfront," 127.

⁴³⁶ Op. Nr. 926/5, 562, 26.9-15.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

noticing the chaotic distribution of rations, the slackening of march discipline, and a growing failure to salute superior officers, Metzger ordered the divisional leadership to ensure the orderly and equitable provision of food and the maintenance of disciplinary standards.⁴³⁷ Metzger's particular emphasis on stricter policing of roads and billets to "put a stop to shirking" suggests a strong concern for, if not the actual occurrence of, large numbers of *k.u.k.* soldiers absconding from frontline duty.⁴³⁸ The leadership of the 1st Infantry Division also feared the pernicious influence of domestic politics on the morale and discipline of their ethnically-diverse rank-and-file, especially after the monumental events of October 1918. On October 26th, Metzger informed the officers of the division that they had a special duty to monitor the effect of letters and newspapers from Austria-Hungary on their subordinates. Stressing the especially difficult position of the Austro-Hungarian forces isolated in the West, Metzger commanded his officers immediately inform him of any political discontent in the ranks so that he could prepare adequate countermeasures.⁴³⁹

Although the divisional reports do not mention widespread, significant insubordination and likely downplay discontent in the ranks, the documents from the *k.u.k.* divisions in France do acknowledge specific issues affecting the troops' morale. While perhaps not as prominent Metzger had feared, political concerns did materialize among Habsburg soldiers in the West. On October 21st, Metzger indicated to the AOK that many Hungarian soldiers of IR 61, hailing from Banat, were anxious of a Serbian invasion of their homeland. These soldiers expressed resentment towards fighting for the Germans in a distant country when the war directly

⁴³⁷ Op. Nr. 2360, 12.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴³⁸ Op. Nr. 2673/11, 27.9.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴³⁹ Op. Nr. 3120, 26.10.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

threatened their homes and families. Similarly, the armistice negotiations in late October/early November sowed confusion among the ranks and further reduced the willingness of the troops to continue to fight.⁴⁴⁰ Somewhat ironically, given the German perception of the unreliability of the multiethnic *k.u.k. Armee*, the Habsburg commanders in France also expressed concerns that the growing defeatism among their German comrades exercised a pernicious influence on morale. On October 23rd, Metzger directly attributed discord among “a few unruly elements” of the division to fraternization with German troops.⁴⁴¹

However, the most consistent themes in the divisional documents concerning troop morale were material deprivation and exhaustion from incessant frontline use. In its October 11th report to the AOK, the 35th Infantry Division highlighted the lack of suitable clothing as the greatest detriment to troop morale, particularly since nearby German troops were well provided for in this regard. In contrast, after the arrival of replacement uniforms, the division reported a week later that the provision of cold-weather clothing to most of the units noticeably improved the attitude of the soldiers. However, on October 23rd, the division observed that despite a month of comparative rest, the morale of the troops “who had previously never lost their courage in the heaviest fighting” had still not completely recovered. In addition to citing the influence of domestic political events and the hope for an armistice, FML von Podhoránsky asserted that the inadequacy of accommodations, the lack of a rest period, and continuing material difficulties constituted the most significant impediment to repairing the morale of the rank-and-file.⁴⁴²

⁴⁴⁰ Op. Nr. 3189, 1.11.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴⁴¹ Op. Nr. 3043, 1023/8, 21-23.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴⁴² Op. Nr. 265.02, 271.10, 278.11, 11-23.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

The “mutiny” of FJB 25, perhaps the most prominent instance of insubordination among the *k.u.k.* troops in the West, exemplifies the overwhelming influence of material deficiency and combat fatigue on Austro-Hungarian morale. On the night of October 22nd, the 1st Infantry Division ordered this *Feldjägerbataillon* to return to its positions on the frontline. The Czech troops of the battalion refused and ignored the repeated demands of their officers, stating that they were too exhausted to continue fighting. The *Feldjäger* notably did not threaten their superiors with violence or desert; in fact, the soldiers did not even refuse to continue fighting. The Czech soldiers merely requested a few days of rest and replacements for their tattered clothing. Upon hearing of this “mutiny,” the battalion commander reproached the noncompliant troops, arguing that their “shameful behavior tarnished the good reputation of the unit.” Accordingly, the commander demanded that “any decent men should follow him to the frontline.” Somewhat surprisingly, this appeal to the men’s honor was effective; all of the *Feldjäger* promptly obeyed their commander and resumed their positions at the front.⁴⁴³

The ethnicity of the troops in this particular situation is significant. Of all of the ethnicities of Austria-Hungary, the Czechs were the most suspect in the eyes of Habsburg political and military authorities during the First World War. Throughout the war, there were many instances of mutiny and defection among Czech units; both the AOK and the OHL considered the Czechs to be inherently and categorically treasonous, hence Ludendorff’s initial request to exclude Czech troops from the *k.u.k.* formations sent to the West.⁴⁴⁴ Indeed, Habsburg authorities had many reasons to suspect the political reliability of Czech troops in 1918, given the size and prominence of the anti-Habsburg Czech Legion and the strenuous activities of the

⁴⁴³ Op. Nr. 1023/8, 23.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴⁴⁴ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 945-946.

Czechoslovak national committee. Yet, one must note that many thousands of Czech soldiers continued to fight for the Habsburg Monarchy until the end of the war, far more than the number who deserted to the Czech Legion. Likewise, one cannot uncritically accept the assertions of postwar nationalists that all non-German and non-Hungarian *k.u.k.* soldiers espoused well-developed nationalist views and deserted because of these nationalist sentiments⁴⁴⁵. Indeed, even after large numbers *k.u.k.* soldiers began to desert in 1918, particularly after the failure of the June Offensive, Allied authorities in Italy reported that “hunger and hopelessness” were the primary motivations among Habsburg deserters, not nationalistic fervor.⁴⁴⁶ Similarly, as previously mentioned, Habsburg soldiers of all nationalities, including the supposedly reliable Austrian Germans and Hungarians, abandoned their posts en masse at Vittorio Veneto.

Correspondingly, the case of FJB 25, nearly concurrent with the collapse of the *k.u.k. Armee* in Italy, illustrates the greater complexity behind the loyalties and motivations of *k.u.k.* soldiers and suggests that difficult fighting conditions, not intrinsic ethnic loyalty or disloyalty, lay behind motivations for insubordination. In his report to the division, Hellebronth attested to the quality of FJB 25 and its officers, noting its excellent combat record on the Western Front. Hellebronth pointed to the horrible conditions among the unit, which was “clad in rags” and “completely exposed to the weather, gassing, and shelling.” Likewise, the battalion report emphasized the utter exhaustion of the men after almost two months of continuous use at the frontlines, during which the unit had suffered nearly eighty-percent casualties. In the end, Hellebronth concluded that that such unfavorable conditions “surpassed the limit of human capacity.” In his view, only reinforcements and an extensive period of rehabilitation could

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 952-953.

preserve the unit. The further “forced use of the remnants of the battalion” would not only completely destroy the unit, but “would hardly serve the purpose for which the Austro-Hungarian presence on the Western Front was intended.”⁴⁴⁷ Hellebronth’s observation represented the wider opinion of the Austro-Hungarian leadership on the Western Front. All of the divisional commanders repeatedly requested the removal of their units from frontline deployment for rehabilitation. Yet, the desperate position of the German Army in the West in the final weeks of the conflict did not permit such respite. Metzger underscored the reality of the situation when he observed that “the last remnants of the division will be inevitably expended;” in his view, only the complete evacuation of the division from the meatgrinder of the Western Front would save the *k.u.k.* troops from utter destruction.⁴⁴⁸

And yet, despite the overwhelmingly unfavorable conditions on the Western Front, the Austro-Hungarian divisions there did not disintegrate. To be sure, many of the casualties denoted as “missing” indubitably surrendered to Allied forces during the confusion of the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne battles. This was certainly not unique to Austro-Hungarian troops; hundreds of thousands of German soldiers surrendered to the Allies in the final months of the war, especially after the Peace Note of October 3rd.⁴⁴⁹ Likewise, given the evident concerns of the Austro-Hungarian leadership with discontent, indiscipline, and shirking, a fair number of *k.u.k.* soldiers in France likely absconded in some way or another. Nevertheless, several factors explain why the *k.u.k.* formations in the West did not share the fate of their counterparts in Italy. One of the most obvious explanations is simple geography. While Austro-Hungarian soldiers on the Italian Front

⁴⁴⁷ Op. Nr. 1023/8, 1023/6, 23.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴⁴⁸ Op. Nr. 3087, 25.10.1918, *Wochenberichte der k.u.k. Truppen im Westen*, Austrian GHQ Daily Reports, Box 1, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

⁴⁴⁹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 528.

or in the Balkans could easily return home upon desertion, the personnel of the four divisions in France were separated from their native lands by hundreds of miles. Capture by the Allies in France did not guarantee as swift of a homecoming as an official withdrawal, which was already a topic of discussion by the end of October.

Similarly, unlike the situation in Austria-Hungary, the German army and state had not yet collapsed prior to November 9th and conceivably offered a barrier to a complete disintegration. Although not in a much better situation themselves, the German formations in the West, by providing extensive material and tactical support to their Habsburg allies, likely contributed to averting a total Austro-Hungarian collapse in the West. However, the Allies themselves provided the most valuable contribution to the survival of the *k.u.k.* divisions opposing them. Although harried by constant bombardment and a deteriorating supply situation, the Habsburg troops in northeastern France managed to avoid the brunt of the enemy onslaught after October 11th, unlike their compatriots at Vittorio Veneto. Indeed, in his evaluation of the morale situation of IR 5, *Oberstleutnant* Popelka asserted that the regimental leadership could preserve the unit's discipline in the status quo. However, at the same time, Popelka noted that he could not guarantee that his soldiers would offer resistance in the face of a renewed enemy offensive in their sector.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁵⁰ Op. Nr. 3189, 1.11.1918, 1st A-H Infantry Division Operations Documents, Box 2, Austro-Hungarian Military Records Relating to World War I.

VI. Conclusion

While overwhelmingly apparent, the military insignificance of the Austro-Hungarian divisions in France obscures important aspects of the First World War that the phenomenon illustrates. First and foremost, the political and military relationship between Austria-Hungary and Germany during the war was multidimensional and complicated. As shown by both the political processes leading up to the Austro-Hungarian deployment to France and the experiences of the *k.u.k.* divisions on the Western Front, Austro-German relations not only changed significantly over the course of the war but were also deeply ambiguous. Initially, Austria-Hungary was not merely an obedient thrall of the German Reich, but an autonomous and important actor whose relations with its German ally were far from harmonious. The deployment of Habsburg infantry to France was a product of the tensions and contradictions in the Dual Alliance; therefore, this phenomenon represents the evolution of a strained wartime relationship between sovereign states into one of dependence and submission. In this way, Austria-Hungary's involvement on the Western Front encapsulates the many political, economic, and military factors behind the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy. Ironically, in the end, the interests of the two allies most closely coincided during the extended process of their final defeat.

More generally, the Austro-Hungarian Army's actions on the Western Front provide important insights into the functioning of this complicated, troubled organization. In addition to illustrating the *k.u.k. Armee's* evolution as a fighting force over the course of the Great War, the experiences of Austro-Hungarian divisions in France show the many weaknesses that bedeviled the Habsburg military throughout the conflict. Likewise, the events on the Western Front in late 1918 further illuminate the major role played by the German Army in propping up its Habsburg counterpart during the final years of the war. Moreover, the topic of Austro-Hungarian forces on

the Western Front relates directly to more fundamental questions regarding Austria-Hungary during the First World War. How did Austria-Hungary, a state whose collapse so many predicted long before 1914, endure four years of total war before finally giving in? More importantly, why did so many soldiers of so many different ethnic backgrounds continue to fight and die for the supposedly-defunct Habsburg Monarchy? Only further research that deals with Austria-Hungary, the *k.u.k. Armee*, and its soldiers on their own terms can answer these questions.

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