



MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Sibling Rivalry in the Brotherhood of Arms: The Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo as the Culmination of the Habsburg-German Military Alliance

verfasst von | submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2025

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 066 803

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Masterstudium Geschichte

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Mag. Dr. Tamara Scheer Privatdoz.

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1. Introduction

The centenary of the outbreak of the First World War in 2014 and the subsequent half-decade witnessed a major revival of interest in the “seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century”¹ both in Europe and in North America. This wave of enthusiasm for the Great War, long overshadowed in popular awareness and interest by the bigger, bloodier, and more dramatic events of 1939-1945, manifested itself in a multitude of ways. Alongside the more conventional centennial phenomena of official commemorative ceremonies, special museum exhibitions, television documentaries, feature films, and public reenactments appeared expressions of popular interest more unique to the cultural and technological zeitgeist of the 2010s – numerous video games,² manifold memes, and even an entire YouTube channel³ dedicated to chronicling and analyzing the conflict week by week. While the passing of the anniversaries of the peace settlements of 1918-1920, not to mention the turbulent global events of recent years, may have heralded the conclusion of a discernable, prominent societal interest in the Great War, this period of c. 2014 – 2019 certainly represented a major turning point in the popular memory of a conflict whose immense historical significance long belied its relative insignificance in public consciousness. The fact that contemporary issues – international alliance politics and the developments in modern warfare, above all – are not infrequently compared to the events of 1914-1918 in media discourse can be seen as one manifestation of an enduring, enhanced cognizance of the conflict and its legacy.

Naturally, the 2014-2019 centennial period also represented a veritable renaissance of academic historical scholarship on the First World War. Parallel to and often connected with the broader public engagement with the period were numerous conferences, symposiums, special university courses, and archival exhibitions. All of this was accompanied by a flood of historical publications, from symposium omnibuses and widely published monographs to journal and periodical articles, as well as editorials and interviews in newspapers and magazines. To be sure, scholarly interest in the Great War was by no means uncommon, much less novel, prior to the 2010s. Indeed, the first historical scholarship on the conflict already appeared during the war itself. Nevertheless, the years surrounding and following the

¹ A quote from the American diplomat George F. Kennan. Cited in Manfred Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2014), 13.

² World War I video games released during the centenary years include: M2H and Blackmill Games, *Verdun* (M2H and Blackmill Games, PC/Xbox/PlayStation, 2015); Ubisoft Montpellier, *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft, PC/Xbox/PlayStation/Switch, 2014); Ageod, *To End All Wars* (Slitherine, PC, 2014); DICE, *Battlefield 1* (Electronic Arts, PC/Xbox/PlayStation, 2016).

³ Real Time History, The Great War, <https://www.youtube.com/@TheGreatWar>.

centenary are notable not merely on account of the sheer quantity of scholarship published then, but also for its variety and quality. Indeed, the centennial commemorations have stimulated – or at least, were concomitant with – a broad and multifaceted scholarly engagement with and discourse surrounding the Great War and all of its aspects. New methodological approaches and analytical perspectives have greatly enriched First World War scholarship, both by re-evaluating well-discussed themes and older claims as well as by illuminating previously neglected topics and new areas of research.

In the spirit of recent historiography, this thesis likewise aims to analyze an aspect of the First World War that, despite its central significance to the course of the conflict, has been comparatively neglected in the scholarship: the relationship between the armed forces of the key actors of the Central Powers, the Habsburg Monarchy and the German Empire.

1.1. Research Question

In both geographical-spatial and military-political terms, the Dual Alliance of Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany formed the core of the Central Powers coalition and both states therefore constituted each other's most important ally during the Great War. To be sure, an immense quantity of scholarship has been devoted in the last century to both states and their fateful, deeply ambivalent relationship, especially regarding the July Crisis and the outbreak of war in 1914.⁴ And yet, with respect to the military alliance of the Habsburg and Hohenzollern monarchies, the scholarship – especially the Anglophone historiography – still exhibits a number of desiderata.

For one, though recent historiography has somewhat ameliorated the disparity, historical scholarship in Western Europe as well as in the wider Anglosphere has focused primarily on the Western Front as the decisive theater of the conflict. Consequently, the other theaters in Eastern Europe, Italy, the Balkans, and the Middle East – i.e. the theaters in which the Central

⁴ The most recent general histories analyzing both Austria-Hungary and Germany are Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914 - 1918*. 2. ed. (London [u.a.]: Bloomsbury, 2014). See also the various contributions in Ortner, M. Christian, Hans-Hubertus Mack, Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Verlag Militaria Edition Stefan Rest, Verlag, Militärgeschichtliches Museum, und Kaiserliches und Königlich Heeresmuseum (ed.), *Die Mittelmächte und der Erste Weltkrieg: Symposium 16. bis 18. Juni 2014: Acta* (Wien: Verlag Militaria GmbH, 2016).

For recent general histories of wartime Austria-Hungary, see Manfred Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy* as well as Helmut Rumpler, Adam Wandruszka, and the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848 - 1918. Band 11, Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2016).

For Germany, see Afflerbach, Holger. *On a Knife Edge: How Germany Lost the First World War*. of *Cambridge Military Histories*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022; Daniel J. Hughes and Richard L. DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War, 1871-1918* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018).

Powers fought as a coalition – have been comparatively neglected by scholars outside of the countries involved in the hostilities on these fronts.⁵ There thus exists a preponderance of scholarship on the conflict between the Entente/Allied coalition and the German Empire compared to works devoted to the other members of the Central Powers, both as individual states and as a coalition. Secondly, despite the centrality of coalition warfare to the First World War – an international conflict waged by two large and diverse alliance blocs – the subject of coalition warfare itself has received little attention,⁶ even if alliance politics and its military dimensions – not least of all thanks to the abundance of source material – have conversely been the subject of much study.⁷ Thirdly, despite the extent of historical scholarship on both Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany, surprisingly little has been written about the ambiguous relationship between Vienna and Berlin relative to other topics⁸, and both Anglophone and German-speaking research on the subject has focused primarily on diplomacy and high politics between the respective governments and general staffs.⁹ The alliance between Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany is thus mostly represented in

⁵ On the comparative neglect of the Eastern and Italian Fronts – especially in Anglophone scholarship – see: Nick Lloyd, *The Eastern Front: A History of the Great War* (London: Penguin Books, 2024), ix-xiii; Nicola Labanca, “The Italian Front,” in: *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 266–296, here 266-267.

⁶ Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 286-287.

⁷ Lothar Höbelt, “‘Frock Coats and Brass Hats‘ Das Verhältnis von Politik und Militär im Ersten Weltkrieg,” in: *Frontwechsel: Österreich-Ungarns “Großer Krieg” im Vergleich*, ed. Wolfram Dornik and Markus Wurzer (Wien [u.a.]: Böhlau, 2014), 357-376, here 369-370.

⁸ Helmut Rumpler, “Einleitung: Die Krise der Moderne in Mitteleuropa,” in: *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848 - 1918. Band 11, Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg, 1. Teilband, Der Kampf um die Neuordnung Mitteleuropas, Teil 1, Vom Balkankonflikt zum Weltkrieg*, ed. Helmut Rumpler, Adam Wandruszka, and the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2016), 1-37, here 1-2.

⁹ For the general history of the Dual Alliance, see Francis Roy Bridge, “III. Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten,” in: *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848 - 1918. 6: Die Habsburgermonarchie im System der internationalen Beziehungen, 1*, ed. Adam Wandruszka, Helmut Rumpler, and the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1989), 196-373; Jiří Kořalka, “Deutschland und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918,” in: *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848 - 1918. 6: Die Habsburgermonarchie im System der internationalen Beziehungen, 2*, ed. Adam Wandruszka, Helmut Rumpler, and the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1993); Helmut Rumpler (ed.), *Der „Zweibund“ 1879: das deutsch-österreichisch-ungarische Bündnis und die europäische Diplomatie; Historikergespräch Österreich - Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1994* (Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996).

For the history of the Dual Alliance during the First World War, see Gerard E. Silberstein, *The Troubled Alliance: German-Austrian Relations 1914 to 1917* (Lexington, Ky.: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1970); Gary W. Shanafelt, *The Secret Enemy: Austria-Hungary and the German Alliance: 1914 – 1918* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press [u.a.], 1985); Lothar Höbelt, „Diplomatie zwischen Bündnissicherung und Friedenshoffnung. Die Außenpolitik Österreich-Ungarns 1914-1918,“ In *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848 - 1918. Band 11, Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg, 1. Teilband, Der Kampf um die Neuordnung Mitteleuropas, Teil 2, Vom Vielvölkerstaat Österreich-Ungarn zum neuen Europa der Nationalstaaten*, ed. Helmut Rumpler, Adam Wandruszka, and the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2016), 1017-1094.

historiography by the views and actions of high-ranking politicians, diplomats, bureaucrats, and general headquarters officers.

To be sure, the study of the alliance-political and grand-strategic dimensions of the Dual Alliance is of immense significance, especially given the lack of attention paid to these issues in traditional, operational military historiography.¹⁰ Nevertheless, this focus on the highest-level workings of coalition warfare neglects the question of how the Austro-Hungarian and Imperial German armies actually cooperated as military institutions in the conduct of joint operations. Although millions of Austro-Hungarian and German officers and soldiers fought together on multiple fronts from almost the very beginning of the war until the very end, the concrete, practical realities of coalition warfare for the Habsburg-German alliance “in the field” – that is, between formations and units deployed in and behind the frontlines – are a topic that has received surprisingly little direct attention from historians as a subject in its own right. Indeed, this large-scale, long-term military collaboration serves as the essential backdrop in most works about Austria-Hungary and/or Imperial Germany, and while individual aspects – especially the negative ones – are often highlighted, few works actually treat it as an object of extensive, systematic analysis.

This thesis therefore poses the question of how Austro-Hungarian and German personnel, the actual protagonists of the Habsburg-German military alliance – the eponymous “brothers” of the “brotherhood of arms” (*Waffenbrüderschaft*), to use the contemporary propaganda slogan – experienced and practiced coalition warfare during one of the Dual Alliance’s most large-scale and most successful joint offensive operations, namely the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo¹¹ on the Italian Front in the autumn of 1917. How well – or how poorly – did the Habsburg and German militaries collaborate in the field during this major campaign, and to what extent did the “working relationship” between the two armies during their joint offensive in Italy reflect the fundamental ambivalence and contradiction inherent in the broader political and diplomatic framework of the Dual Alliance?

¹⁰ Holger H Herwig and Gary Sheffield, “Disjointed Allies: Coalition Warfare in Berlin and Vienna, 1914,” in: *War Studies Reader*, ed. Gary Sheffield (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010), 84–102, here 86.

¹¹ Commonly referred to in English as the “Battle of Caporetto,” derived from the Italian name for the village of Kobarid (German: Karfreit) in contemporary Slovenia, in the proximity of which one of the most decisive actions of the Habsburg-German offensive transpired. This thesis utilizes the term “Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo” both as a direct translation of the most common German name (*die Zwölfte Isonzoschlacht*) and as the most neutral term for the campaign. On the alternative names for the campaign (e.g. the Battle of Karfreit/Flitsch/Tolmein/Flitsch-Tolmein) and their potential underlying implications, see below.

1.2. Relevance of the Topic

An analysis of the “working relationship” between the Austro-Hungarian and German militaries during the Isonzo Offensive that transcends the confines of chancellery buildings and high command billets, branching out into field army headquarters and forward command posts, and thus extending the perspectives incorporated beyond ministers and chiefs of the general staff to commanders and staff officers of field formations, is relevant in several respects.

As previously stated, a focused, comprehensive investigation of the relationship between the two armed forces as a topic in itself fills a major gap in existing Great War scholarship, both that specific to the Dual Alliance as well as with respect to coalition warfare in general. Both older, traditional military history, with its narrow, often one-sided operational and tactical focus, as well as the newer historiography too often relegate the subject of inter-military relations to secondary, tangential importance. In addition, Austrian and German scholarship of the last several decades, despite a shift in focus in the vein of the “New Military History” towards political, social, and cultural themes outside of purely operational military history, has largely ignored the wartime experiences of officers in favor of a concentration on the perspective of common soldiers.¹² Given the essential role of officers in field formations in combined operations A new approach that synthesizes the immense if fragmentary research dispersed throughout decades of scholarship while simultaneously analyzing the original interwar sources that constitute the basis of this scholarship through the prism of inter-military relations can provide a clearer, more detailed, and perhaps more nuanced perspective on the Habsburg-German alliance and its concrete military manifestation in the field. In a similar vein, an analysis of coalition warfare – that is, the collaborative military efforts between multiple states and the resultant challenges, complications, and tensions – via the example of Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany serves to expand the perspective of military-historical analysis beyond the restrictive paradigm of the individual state in line with a more international point of view for understanding the conflict. Likewise, a greater understanding of the Habsburg-German military alliance can facilitate the comparative analysis of other

¹² Martin Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge: Kriegserfahrungen österreichisch-Ungarischer Offiziere 1914-18* (Boston: BRILL, 2016), 15-16. In this work, Schmitz aims to counteract exactly this issue within Austrian military historiography. According to Schmitz, the prevailing lack of interest in the wartime experiences of Austro-Hungarian officers stands in stark contrast to the extensive source material on the subject.

military coalitions, the most natural and obvious comparison being with the opposing forces of the Entente/Allies during the First World War.¹³

The specific choice of the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo as the focus of this thesis is by no means arbitrary. This particular campaign is a relevant, even ideal case study of the Habsburg-German military relationship for three primary reasons. The first factor is the scale and nature of the operations: the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo was both a large-scale joint offensive as well as the only large-scale joint offensive conducted by the Central Powers on the Italian Front, the significance of which will be expounded below. The second aspect is the chronology of the offensive: the Habsburg-German Isonzo campaign occurred in late 1917, after three years of military cooperation on the Eastern and Balkan fronts, and indeed constituted the last major joint operation of the war for the Austro-Hungarian and German armies. Thirdly, on account of its relatively late occurrence, a year before the end of the war, as well as its spectacular result for the Central Powers – their final victory of the Great War, both as a coalition and as individual belligerents – the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo was a prominent topic of postwar Austrian and German writing, both in military historiography and memoir literature.

To be sure, historians of the First World War have already utilized most of these sources in the past century. Indeed, as mentioned above – and will be detailed below – several of these sources, written by some of the most prominent Austro-Hungarian and German officers involved in the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, form the essential foundation of all subsequent writing on the subject. However, they have thus far remained underutilized in a more systematic and focused study of Habsburg-German inter-military relations.

1.3. Methodology and Sources

In light of these deficits in previous historiography, the goal of this thesis is to analyze how Austro-Hungarian and German officers characterized the wartime relationship between the two militaries in their subsequent written works. In this sense, these works, largely – but not entirely – composed and published during the interwar period, serve as the primary source basis for this analysis. Besides military-historical monographs intended for public consumption, including both the Austrian and German official histories of the war, the source basis also comprises periodical and newspaper articles as well as a number of memoir works.

¹³ See above all: Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* for a detailed analysis of the major opposing two-state military alliance.

While both Austrian and German sources – and therefore perspectives – are considered in the analysis, this work concentrates more on the Austro-Hungarian perspective as simultaneously both the primary belligerent on the Italian Front and the decidedly junior partner in the Dual Alliance. Although the focus lies on the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo as a case study of Habsburg-German military cooperation, the incorporation of extensive secondary literature serves to position the experiences of this campaign within the broader context of the entire war. Such a synthesis of previous scholarship within the framework of a more specific case study serves both to underline the major lines of continuity and evolution in Habsburg-German military relations as well as to highlight the particular circumstances and qualities that defined this instance of coalition warfare.

1.3.1. The Analysis of Officer Autobiographical Literature

The analysis of sources written by higher-ranking officers in the armies of the Dual Alliance provides a number of opportunities for gaining valuable insights while also posing several clear methodological problems, especially with respect to the autobiographical works.¹⁴ One of the major advantages of officer autobiographical sources is their relative quantity and comparative level of detail. By virtue of their higher average educational level, their position as the leaders of the military, and a consequently greater sense of superiority and significance to the course of the war, officers were far more likely to generate both more extensive and detailed correspondence during the war as well as later systematically compose their wartime experiences into more organized, coherent memoir works.¹⁵ Of course, while both the relative quantity of officer memoir works as well as the manifold insights they can provide as to the inner workings of the Austro-Hungarian army during the war are indeed of great value, the nature of these sources does contain certain inherent distortions. For one, given their elevated

¹⁴ On officer memoirs/autobiographical literature from the First World War, specifically for Habsburg officers, and their inherent complexities as historical sources for the war, see: István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps 1848-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 217-221; Bernhard Mertelseder and Sigrid Wisthaler, “Soldat und Offizier in ihren Erinnerungen. Methodische Überlegungen zu österreichischen Kriegstagebüchern,” in: *Ein Krieg - zwei Schützengräben: Österreich - Italien und der Erste Weltkrieg in den Dolomiten 1915 - 1918; [bilaterale Tagung in Cortina d'Ampezzo, 2001]*, ed. Brigitte Mazohl (Bozen: Athesia, 2005), 63-86, here 63-73; Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 19-24; Oswald Überegger, “Vom militärischen Paradigma zur ‚Kulturgeschichte des Krieges‘? Entwicklungslinien der österreichischen Weltkriegsgeschichtsschreibung im Spannungsfeld militärisch-politischer Instrumentalisierung und universitärer Verwissenschaftlichung,” in: *Zwischen Nation und Region: Weltkriegsforschung im interregionalen Vergleich; Ergebnisse und Perspektiven*, ed. Oswald Überegger (Innsbruck: Wagner, 2004), 63-122, here 83-92.

On Austro-Hungarian and German officer autobiographical works specifically related to the Italian Front, see: Alexander Jordan, *Krieg um die Alpen: der Erste Weltkrieg im Alpenraum und der bayerische Grenzschutz in Tirol* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2008), 37-41.

¹⁵ Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 16.

position, officer works tend to neglect, if not outright ignore, certain dimensions of the wartime *k.u.k. Armee*. For example, deficiencies in leadership as well as social tensions within the army – especially between the officer corps itself and the ranks – are two topics that seldom appear in officer accounts but are thematized more frequently in the memoir works of ordinary soldiers.¹⁶ Likewise, the retrospective character of autobiographical works in general and the associated complexities are naturally of great significance in evaluating officer memoir literature as well. In most cases, officers composed their memoirs after the war on the basis of their wartime journals, thereby altering both their evaluation of their experiences as well as the fundamental construction of the autobiographical narrative via the imposition of hindsight. In fact, the “wartime” journals were often enough themselves only written down at the very end of the conflict, if not afterwards. It is therefore extremely difficult, if not impossible, to filter out the distortive lens of subsequent events in assessing these sources.¹⁷

Indeed, the immense political, social, economic, and cultural turmoil in the postwar Austrian Republic ensured that retrospective accounts of the Great War would be heavily burdened by contemporary concerns. The fact that many Austro-Hungarian career officers found themselves unemployed and in financial straits after the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy provided a concrete, material incentive to publish their memoirs. However, pecuniary incentives were far from the only motivation for former Habsburg officers to compose and publish autobiographical accounts. In the context of the total defeat of Austria-Hungary and the complete collapse of its institutions, the question of defending one’s own wartime record, as well as the reputation and prestige of the old *k.u.k. Armee* as a whole, was perhaps just as significant as any financial imperatives.¹⁸

This was indeed a “double defeat” for the Habsburg officer corps; on the one hand, the military defeat represented a professional failure on the part of the army’s leadership – i.e. the officer corps – while on the other hand, the collapse of the Habsburg state left former Austro-Hungarian officers without an institutional or an ideological “home.” Consequently, the publications written by former Habsburg officers in the interwar period – memoirs, autobiographies, as well as military-historical literature – generally exhibit a strong apologetic tone, reflecting the magnitude of the trauma experienced by the professional officer corps in the defeat and dissolution of the monarchy.¹⁹ Several exculpatory topoi are therefore

¹⁶ Mertelseder and Wisthaler, “Soldat und Offizier in ihren Erinnerungen,” 63.

¹⁷ Ibid. 66-67.

¹⁸ Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 23.

¹⁹ Überegger, “Vom militärischen Paradigma zur ‚Kulturgeschichte des Krieges’?,” 83-84.

prominent in Habsburg officers' memoir literature, all of which overlap significantly with the similarly apologetic accounts of German officers in the interwar period: the assertion that the Central Powers' armies were "undefeated in the field" (*im Felde unbesiegt*); the corresponding accusation of betrayal – a "stab in the back" (*Dolchstoß*) – of the army on the part of certain disloyal elements on the home front; and finally the rejection of any responsibility on the part of Austria-Hungary and the German Empire for starting the conflict.²⁰ The plainly tendentious character of officer memoir literature, both Austrian and German, and its prevailing preoccupation with questions of responsibility and guilt in the aftermath of ignominious defeat, is of particularly great significance to the issue of Dual Alliance inter-military relations, as will be further explicated below.

Finally, a few important caveats should be underscored as to the particular perspectives offered by this specific corpus of sources. Despite the numerous differences between these officers – even besides the obvious distinction of Habsburg or German military affiliation – the group of authors whose works are incorporated in this analysis exhibit a few commonalities that significantly influenced their points of view. For one, all of these officers were native German-speakers who espoused a German ethnic/cultural identity, if not necessarily the political identification with a (pan-) German nation-state. Secondly, all of the individuals featured in this study were indeed members of their respective officer corps, and career military men at that. The perspectives offered by such long-service professional officers – who constituted an increasingly small proportion of the wartime officer corps in both armies – thus represent the institutional ethos and culture(s) of a select, distinct, self-consciously "elite" group within the Austro-Hungarian and German militaries.²¹ Similarly, all of the officers in question here were staff officers and therefore an "elite within the elite" of the professional officer corps.²² The position and typical wartime experiences of professional staff officers, usually serving behind the frontlines in the headquarters of higher echelons, must be underscored in contrast to those of junior line officers – that is, lower-ranking officers, increasingly drawn from reserve officers and individuals commissioned during the

²⁰ Ibid. 88-90.

²¹ For the wartime evolution of the Austro-Hungarian and German officer corps, especially the differences between professional and reserve officers as well as the consequences of the depletion of the prewar officer cadres, see: Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 280-287.

For Austria-Hungary: Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 192-195.

For Germany: Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 337-339.

²² On the distinct status and function of the general staffs/the staff officer corps, as well as their fraught relationship with frontline personnel, see for Austria-Hungary: Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 158-174.

For Germany: Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 88-91; 299-300; 332-334.

war, who led their platoons, companies, and battalions directly into combat.²³ To be sure, in these respects, the sources analyzed in this thesis are by no means extraordinary for Austro-Hungarian officer autobiographical literature, as the vast majority of surviving war diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies were written by general staff officers with German as their mother tongue.²⁴

It must be emphasized here that the perspectives of staff officers are not inherently less authentic or less valuable than those of frontline officers or enlisted men. In fact, given the responsibilities of higher-echelon staffs – in this case, primarily at the corps, army, and theater levels – for operational planning, command and control, logistics, and personnel matters, staff officers were instrumental in coordinating and executing joint operations between the Habsburg and German armies. Thus, while senior staff officers' experiences of and perspectives towards coalition warfare are distinct from those of junior leaders and ordinary conscript soldiers, they can provide extremely valuable insights into the working relationship between the two military institutions on a more macroscopic, systemic level. More fundamentally, despite their very clear biases and limitations, one should not dismiss officers' retrospective accounts as essentially unreliable sources. When analyzed with proper caution, this category of ego-document can still provide valuable information.²⁵

1.3.2. Official Histories

Distinct from, but on account of their authorship, very closely related to the corpus of interwar officer autobiographical literature are the Austrian and German official military histories of the First World War. Both are exhaustive, multivolume accounts of the conflict that relate the course of the military campaigns between 1914 and 1918 in great detail, chronicling operations down to the divisional level. This thesis analyzes the official histories as primary sources; that is, as expressions of the perspectives of the Austro-Hungarian and German officers who wrote them. However, given that it is impossible to disentangle these foundational secondary sources for the history of the Great War from the historiography that they so fundamentally shaped, the history of their composition and publication – as well as the particular qualities of their underlying perspectives – will be dealt with below within the broader framework of the historiography of the Dual Alliance.

²³ On the manifold differences in wartime experiences among Habsburg officers and the perils of generalizing the "officer experience," see Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 16-17.

²⁴ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 218.

²⁵ Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 23-24.

*Österreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg*²⁶ (Austria-Hungary's Last War, hereafter abbreviated as ÖULK), the official Austrian military history of the First World War, was published in seven main volumes between 1930 and 1938 by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Defense (*Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung*). Including the seven supplementary volumes and the register volume, the entire series totals fifteen volumes, and possesses the distinction of being the only official history of the belligerent powers of the First World War to be completed before the outbreak of the Second World War. The series was written by a group of former general staff officers in the War History Section of the Austrian War Archive (*Kriegsarchiv*) under the direction of Edmund Glaise von Horstenau (1882-1946), the then director of the *Kriegsarchiv*, and Rudolf Kiszling (1882-1976), head of the aforementioned War History Section.²⁷ The sixth volume, which deals with the year 1917, was published in 1936 and devotes 223 of its 772 pages to the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo. According to the preface, Kiszling was primarily responsible for the composition of this chapter.²⁸ Kiszling, a career staff officer and graduate of the Austro-Hungarian staff college (*Kriegsschule*), served in divisional, corps, and army-group staffs during the war. After the war, Kiszling was the chief editor of ÖULK and after the *Anschluss* became head of the reorganized *Heeresarchiv* in Vienna in 1938. Besides his friend and colleague Glaise, who will be covered separately below, Kiszling was one of the most prodigious and influential Austrian military historians of the twentieth century.²⁹

The German counterpart to ÖULK, *Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918*,³⁰ was published in fourteen volumes between 1925 and 1942. The final two volumes of *Der Weltkrieg* – including the thirteenth volume on military operations outside the Western Front until November 1918 – were only completed during the Second World War by the War History Research Institute (*Kriegsgeschichtliches Forschungsanstalt des Heeres*), an institution directly subordinate to the general staff of the German army, and were interestingly not intended for public circulation. Both the thirteenth and the fourteenth volumes were correspondingly labelled “only for official use” within the German army high command (*Oberkommando des Heeres*).

²⁶ For this thesis, the pertinent volume is: Edmund Glaise von Horstenau (ed.), *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918. 6. Das Kriegsjahr 1917* (Wien: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1936).

²⁷ For the publication history of ÖULK, see: Überegger, “Vom militärischen Paradigma zur ‚Kulturgeschichte des Krieges’?,” 78-79; Rudolf Jeřábeck, “Die österreichische Weltkriegsforschung,” in: *Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse*, ed. Wolfgang Michalka (München [u.a.]: Piper, 1994), 953-971, here 954-957.

²⁸ Glaise von Horstenau (ed.), *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918. 6., V.*

²⁹ A brief outline of Kiszling's career can be found in: Edmund Glaise von Horstenau and Peter Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht: die Erinnerungen Edmund Glaises von Horstenau. I, K. u. k. Generalstabsoffizier und Historiker* (Wien/Graz [u.a.]: Böhlau, 1980), 168, n. 106.

³⁰ The corresponding volume relevant for this thesis is: Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918. 13, Die Kriegführung im Sommer und Herbst 1917* (Berlin: Mittler, 1942).

These volumes only became public in 1956 when the Federal Archive of the recently established Federal Republic of Germany republished *Der Weltkrieg* in its entirety.³¹ The thirteenth volume, relevant for this thesis, was completed in 1942. The chapter on the Italian Front comprises 100 of the 462 pages of text. Unlike ÖULK, which was composed and published by a relatively small, stable, and coherent group within a single institution, a far more complicated history lay behind the development and publication of *Der Weltkrieg*. The German official history was subject to both the political turmoil of the Weimar Republic as well as the sweeping institutional and ideological changes wrought by the National Socialist regime.³² Important for the context of this thesis is the circumstance that the pertinent volume for the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo was written after the “re-militarization” of official German military historiography from 1934 onwards. The authors of this volume – at this point, all general staff personnel – eschewed a broader, more wholistic analysis of the conflict in favor of a traditional, narrow operational focus.³³

1.3.3. Military-Historical Monographs and Articles

The interwar period witnessed a prodigious and lively historical discourse on the recent conflict, and as one of the most clear-cut military successes of the Central Powers, the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo was the topic of many publications. Next to the official histories produced by (in the Austrian case, former) staff officers in the direct employ of the Austrian and German governments, this thesis also analyzes some of the other, mostly non-official historical publications written by Habsburg and German officers. These works range from comprehensive, ostensibly “objective” historical monographs and periodical articles to very obvious polemical tracts aimed at promoting a particular interpretation of the war’s history. As the authors in question were directly involved to varying degrees in the events addressed in their works, many of these histories also possess a certain autobiographical character.

The fifth volume of the ten-volume series *Der große Krieg 1914-1918*,³⁴ published in 1922 and covering the history of Austria-Hungary during the war, was the product of a team of former Habsburg staff officers, including several who later contributed to ÖULK. Edited by former Prussian officer and military writer Max Schwarte (1860-1945) and published in

³¹ See the Bundesarchiv preface to the above-cited edition for an overview of the publication history.

³² For the history of *Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918* in particular and German official military historiography in general, see Markus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: der Erste Weltkrieg: die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914 – 1956* (Paderborn/Wien [u.a.]: Schöningh, 2002).

³³ Ibid. 153-157.

³⁴ Max Schwarte (ed.), *Der große Krieg 1914–1918: In zehn Bänden. Band 5, Der österreichisch-ungarische Krieg*. Reprint 2020, (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

Germany, this unofficial history of the war – in many ways the prototype for ÖULK – explicitly aimed at increasing the German public’s awareness of and appreciation for their erstwhile Habsburg ally.³⁵ The thirty-page chapter on the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo was the joint product of Glaise as well as *Feldmarschallleutnant* (FML) Theodor von Konopicky (1870-1949)³⁶, the former chief of staff for the Southwestern Front Command (*Kommando der Südwestfront*, hereafter KdSWF), the Habsburg theater-level command in Italy in 1917.

Probably the most comprehensive, detailed history of the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo from the viewpoint of the Central Powers is the two-volume *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo*³⁷ (The Breakthrough on the Isonzo) written by the Bavarian *General der Artillerie* (GdA) Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen (1862-1953)³⁸ and published in 1926 as the twelfth edition of the German *Reichsarchiv* series *Schlachten des Weltkrieges* (Battles of the World War). Krafft, one of the most prominent German staff officers of the Great War, served as the chief of the Bavarian general staff prior to the war as well as the chief of staff of the German Sixth Army upon the outbreak of hostilities in 1914. Subsequently, Krafft functioned as both the original commander of the German *Alpenkorps* as well as the chief of staff of the German Fourteenth Army (14. *Armee*) during the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo.³⁹ *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo* is an in-depth, operational and tactical history of the offensive, combining traditional military history preoccupations with a more vivid, engaging, and occasionally sentimental narrative form clearly targeted at broader popular appeal. The work is based on both the author’s personal experiences as one of the key figures behind the operation as well as archival sources and input from other – primarily German – officers who participated in the offensive.⁴⁰

Another, albeit far briefer, more narrowly-focused, and certainly more explicitly tendentious monograph on the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo – published in 1926 as a direct reaction to the first volume of Krafft’s history – is *Das „Wunder von Karfreit“: im besonderen der*

³⁵ Ibid. V-IX.

³⁶ See Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielflicht*, 470, n. 582, for a brief outline of his career.

³⁷ Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I. Die Schlacht von Tolmein Und Flitsch [12A]* (Oldenburg: Stalling, 1926); *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II. Die Verfolgung Über Den Tagliamento Bis Zum Piave [12B]* (Oldenburg: Stalling, 1926).

³⁸ For a biography of Krafft, see: Thomas Müller, *Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen (1862–1953). Porträt eines bayerischen Offiziers* (München: Kommission für bayerische Landesgeschichte, 2002).

³⁹ For more on Krafft and his military career prior to the Isonzo Offensive, see: Roland Kaltenegger, *Das deutsche Alpenkorps im ersten Weltkrieg: von den Dolomiten nach Verdun, von den Karpaten zum Isonzo* (Graz [u.a.]: Stocker, 1995), 14-17; Jordan, *Krieg um die Alpen*, 175-179.

⁴⁰ On the *Schlachten des Weltkrieges* series and its significance in broader German military historiography in general, as well as the complicated publication history of Krafft’s volumes in particular, see Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik*, 194-216.

*Durchbruch bei Flitsch und die Bezwungung des Tagliamento*⁴¹ by the Austrian General der Infanterie (GdI) Alfred Krauss (1862-1938)⁴² Krauss, likewise a career general staff officer, served as the commandant of the *k.u.k. Kriegsschule* before the war and in several high-level staff positions on the Balkan and Italian fronts. During the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, however, he served as the commander of the Austro-Hungarian I Corps (*k.u.k. I. Korps*), the northernmost constituent formation of 14. Armee. In his work, Krauss – writing primarily based in his own personal experiences – detailed the operational history of his corps with the explicit aim of highlighting the contribution of his troops to the Central Powers’ success, while simultaneously directing pointed criticism at both subordinates and superiors alike.

In addition to these longer military historical works, the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo was a popular subject of shorter periodical and newspaper articles in the interwar period, many of which focused on specific engagements or the performance of specific units during the campaign. This thesis incorporates several articles from the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung*, the official organ of the Austrian Officers’ Association (*Österreichischer Offiziersverband*), written to commemorate the tenth and twentieth anniversaries of the offensive in 1927 and 1937, respectively.⁴³

Several Austrian interwar monographs, all of which were clearly directed towards the general public, addressed the subject of the Habsburg-German alliance through an apologetic, often polemical lens, especially focusing on the contribution made by the old Austro-Hungarian army to the common cause. In all of these works, the joint offensive during the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo occupies a prominent position in the respective author’s depiction of the lost war. Krauss’ provocatively titled *Die Ursachen unserer Niederlage: Erinnerungen und Urteile*

⁴¹ Alfred Krauss, *Das „Wunder von Karfreit“: im besonderen der Durchbruch bei Flitsch und die Bezwungung des Tagliamento*. 2. Aufl (München [u.a.]: Lehmann, 1937).

⁴² For a brief outline of Krauss’ life and career, see Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 191-192, n. 184;

⁴³ Ludwig Goiginger, “Der Durchbruch bei Flitsch und die Kämpfe um Grappe-Gebiete 1917,” *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* Folge 28 (Wien, 15.07.1927), X. <https://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=daz&datum=19270715&zoom=33>; “Der Durchbruch bei Flitsch und die Kämpfe um Grappe-Gebiete 1917,” *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* Folge 29 (Wien, 22.07.1927), X. <https://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=daz&datum=19270722&zoom=33>.

“Flitsch-Tolmein. Zum zehnten Jahrestage,” *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* Folge 42 (Wien, 21.10.1927), X. <https://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=daz&datum=19271021&zoom=33>; Friedrich Nürnberger, “Ehrentage des 3. Regiments der Tiroler Kaiserjäger,” *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* Folge 42 (Wien, 21.10.1927), X. <https://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=daz&datum=19271021&zoom=33>; Eugen Redl, “Die Tagliamentoforcierung und das Baon IV/bh. 4.,” *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* Folge 42 (Wien, 21.10.1927), X. <https://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=daz&datum=19271021&zoom=33>; Oskar Regele, “Vor zwanzig Jahren – zwölfte Isonzoschlacht,” *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* Folge 43 (Wien, 22.10.1937), X. <https://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=daz&datum=19371022&zoom=33>; Adolf Zimmer, “Die k.u.k. 1. Inf.-Div. in der Durchbruchsschlacht bei Flitsch-Tolmein im Oktober 1917,” *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* Folge 42 (Wien, 21.10.1927), X. <https://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=daz&datum=19271021&zoom=33>.

aus dem Weltkrieg (The Causes of our Defeat: Recollections and Judgements from the World War),⁴⁴ originally published in 1920, attributed the Central Powers' defeat not to the superiority of the enemy coalition, but to the systemic failure of the German – and above all, Austro-Hungarian – political and military leadership to develop and implement an effective common strategy. *Generalmajor* (GM) Anton von Pitreich (1870-1939),⁴⁵ another Austrian former staff officer, criticized both the lack of unified leadership among the Central Powers as well as the lack of recognition and respect for the achievements of the Austro-Hungarian army in his 1930 book *Der österreichisch-ungarische Bundesgenosse im Sperrfeuer* (The Austro-Hungarian Ally under Barrage).⁴⁶

Deutsch-österreichisches Soldatentum im Weltkrieg (German-Austrian Soldiery in the World War)⁴⁷, a similar work published in 1937 by the former Habsburg staff officer Carl von Bardolff (1865-1953)⁴⁸, recognized the weaknesses inherent in the political and military structures of the Habsburg Monarchy while nonetheless praising the worthy sacrifices of German-Austrian troops. Even more explicitly partisan – and, in contrast to the aforementioned works, expressly anti-German – is the 1931 polemic *Deutschland als Verbündeter: Kaiser Karls Kampf um den Frieden* (Germany as an Ally: Emperor Charles' Fight for Peace)⁴⁹ written by Karl von Werkmann (1878-c.1953)⁵⁰, the last secretary to Emperor Charles I (1887-1922, r. 1916-1918). In his work, Werkmann defends both the war effort of Austria-Hungary as well as, more specifically, the decisions made by its final monarch by attacking German wartime leadership and treatment of its Habsburg ally.

Werkmann composed his polemic in response to one of the first and most foundational works on the wartime Dual Alliance, *Unser österreich-ungarischer Bundesgenosse im Weltkriege* (Our Austro-Hungarian Ally in the World War),⁵¹ published in 1920 by the Prussian *Generalleutnant* (GLt) August von Cramon (1861-1940).⁵² Cramon, the German

⁴⁴ Alfred Krauss, *Die Ursachen unserer Niederlage: Erinnerungen und Urteile aus dem Weltkrieg*. 2. (Durchges. Aufl. München: Lehmann, 1921).

⁴⁵ For a brief outline of Pitreich's life and career, see Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 468, n. 579.

⁴⁶ Anton Pitreich, *Der österreichisch-ungarische Bundesgenosse im Sperrfeuer*. 1.-10. Tsd. (Klagenfurt: Kollitsch, 1930).

⁴⁷ Carl von Bardolff, *Deutsch-österreichisches Soldatentum im Weltkrieg* (Jena: Diederichs, 1937).

⁴⁸ For a brief overview of Bardolff's career and works, see: Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 245-246, n. 373; Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 220.

⁴⁹ Karl von Werkmann, *Deutschland als Verbündeter: Kaiser Karls Kampf um den Frieden* (Berlin: Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1931).

⁵⁰ For an outline of Werkmann's career, see Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 373, n. 297.

⁵¹ August von Cramon, *Unser österreich-ungarischer Bundesgenosse im Weltkriege: Erinnerungen aus meiner vierjährigen Tätigkeit als bevollmächtigter deutscher General beim k. u. k. Armeeoberkommando* (Berlin: Mittler, 1920),

⁵² For a biographical outline of Cramon, see Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 327-328, n. 159.

plenipotentiary at the Austro-Hungarian Army High Command (*Armeeoberkommando*, hereafter AOK) from 1915 to 1918, was one of the central figures in Habsburg-German inter-military relations during the war. As the key intermediary and arbitrator between the AOK and the German Supreme Army Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, hereafter OHL) for the majority of the war, Cramon possessed a unique insight into the functioning of the Habsburg-German military alliance. In his 1920 work, Cramon emphasized his unique point of view⁵³ and experiences in his evaluation of Austria-Hungary's performance in the Great War, positioning himself as an informed, balanced judge of the Habsburg military's strengths and shortcomings. More than a decade later, in response to Werkmann's book, Cramon published another work expressly focused on the Habsburg-German alliance relationship, *Deutschlands Schicksalsbund mit Österreich-Ungarn* (Germany's Alliance of Fate with Austria-Hungary).⁵⁴ Given his instrumental role in communication and coordination between the two high commands – as well as his postwar publication of his experiences and views – Cramon is one of the most commonly cited sources on the topic of Habsburg-German military relations in virtually every work on the subject.

1.3.4. Memoirs

In addition to these military-historical works authored by Austrian and German officers, a selection of memoirs written by former Habsburg staff officers provides more individual, personal, and often more quotidian insight into the relationship between the Austro-Hungarian officer corps and their German colleagues. Two of the works in question are published autobiographies that appeared in the interwar period, while the others are edited, critical editions compiled by later historians from previously unpublished manuscripts.

Generaloberst (GO) Arthur Arz von Straussenburg (1857-1935)⁵⁵ was the second chief of the Austro-Hungarian general staff from March 1917 until the end of the war. His 1924 memoir, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges: 1914-1918* (On the History of the Great War 1914-1918)⁵⁶, provides a valuable perspective on Habsburg-German military relations, both because of Arz's experiences as a corps commander directly under German command as well as his position as head of the AOK in the final years of the conflict. Arz naturally therefore

⁵³ Interestingly, in his memoir, Glaise claimed that the text was actually written by himself and Paul Fleck (1875-?), Cramon's adjutant in the AOK: Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 328.

⁵⁴ August von Cramon and Paul Fleck, *Deutschlands Schicksalsbund mit Österreich-Ungarn: von Conrad von Hötzendorf zu Kaiser Karl* (Berlin: Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1932).

⁵⁵ For a brief biographical outline of Arz, see Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 129-130, n. 212.

⁵⁶ Arthur Arz von Straussenburg, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges: 1914 - 1918; Aufzeichnungen* (Wien [u.a.]: Rikola-Verlag, 1924).

played a major role in the planning and execution of the joint offensive in Italy in autumn 1917, and his memoirs correspondingly convey the viewpoint of the Habsburg high command for these events. The aforementioned Carl von Bardolff published his memoir *Soldat im alten Österreich: Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben* (A Soldier in Old Austria: Memoirs from my Life)⁵⁷ in 1938. Although Bardolff was not himself involved in the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, his experiences as chief of staff of the Habsburg 2. Armee on the Eastern Front included some of the first larger-scale coordination between Austro-Hungarian and German formations and thus offer some useful contextualization for subsequent events.

The memoirs of Edmund Glaise von Horstenau⁵⁸, first composed at the end of the Second World War and subsequently edited and published by the prodigious Austrian military historian Peter Broucek provide, on the one hand, important insight for the above-mentioned historical works for which Glaise acted as an author/editor. At the same time, Glaise's wartime experiences as the press officer in the operations section of the AOK from 1915 constitute in themselves an enlightening source on Habsburg-German military relations at the highest level, as Glaise worked very closely with Cramon in his composition of material for public dissemination.⁵⁹ Another Habsburg general staff officer whose assignments in army staffs and the AOK brought him into repeated contact with the Germans was Theodor von Zeynek (1873-1948).⁶⁰ Similar to Bardolff, Zeynek's experiences with German superiors in integrated formations during joint operations on the Eastern Front serves as a point of comparison and contrast with the later developments in Italy. Notably, like Glaise, Zeynek only composed his memoirs decades after the end of the war.⁶¹

The final two memoir works incorporated in this thesis belong to lower-ranking staff officers who directly participated in the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo. The most extensive personal account of the Italian campaign analyzed here is that of FML Alfred Jansa (1884-1963)⁶², whose memoirs were also edited and published by Peter Broucek.⁶³ Jansa, like all of the above figures a career staff officer, provides extensive recollections and impressions of direct cooperation with German officers, as he spent a considerable portion of his wartime service

⁵⁷ Carl von Bardolff, *Soldat im alten Österreich: Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben*. 1.-4. Tsd (Jena: Diederichs, 1938).

⁵⁸ Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielflicht*.

⁵⁹ A brief summary of Glaise's wartime activity in the AOK in *ibid.* 26-34.

⁶⁰ Theodor von Zeynek and Peter Broucek. *Ein Offizier im Generalstabskorps erinnert sich* (Wien [u.a.]: Böhlau, 2009).

⁶¹ A brief biography of Zeynek can be found in *ibid.* 62-72.

⁶² A brief biographical outline for Jansa can be found in Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielflicht*, 191, n. 183.

⁶³ Alfred Jansa and Peter Broucek, *Feldmarschalleutnant Alfred Jansa: ein österreichischer General gegen Hitler; Erinnerungen* (Wien [u.a.]: Böhlau, 2011).

acting as a liaison officer to German staffs. As a general staff major, he acted as the AOK liaison to 14. Armee during the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo and therefore occupied one of the most important positions in mediating between the two armies during the campaign. In addition to his wartime experiences themselves, Jansa's perspective is even more interesting on account of his postwar life. He was chief of staff of the Austrian *Bundesheer* from 1936-1938 and, because of his opposition to the *Anschluss*, the Nazi government forcibly re-settled him and his family to Erfurt.⁶⁴ Jansa wrote his memoirs after the Second World War and, as is made clear in the introduction he included for his recollections⁶⁵, he very expressly composed the account of his Great War service through the prism of hindsight. The second memoir work of an Austrian officer involved in the Isonzo Offensive is that of *Hauptmann* Constantin Schneider (1889-1945).⁶⁶ Schneider, an artilleryist by training, served as a staff officer in the 44. *Schützendivision* in Italy which, as will be further detailed below, was not subordinated to German command during the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo.⁶⁷ Schneider's account therefore represents a distinct, alternative perspective to the German intervention on the Italian Front, given that he, for the most part, only indirectly experienced this intervention. Schneider began writing his memoirs during his internment as a prisoner of war in 1918-1919 and, interestingly, seemingly intended for his recollections to be published for a wider readership.⁶⁸

1.4. Historiography

As has been made clear above, the Dual Alliance and its military dimension during the Great War became the subject of historical analysis already in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. Within this interwar historiography, the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo assumed a position of particular importance as one of the seminal episodes of the Habsburg-German military alliance. However, as the overwhelming majority of military-historical works were written by former Austro-Hungarian and German officers, the above-mentioned characteristics of officer autobiographical accounts – evident concern for personal reputation and institutional prestige, and the resultant apologetic, justificatory tone – are also apparent in this scholarship, including the official historical works. Given that exclusive committees of staff officers wrote and edited both official works, one can consider both ÖULK and *Der*

⁶⁴ For Jansa's life and career after the Great War, see the corresponding memoir sections in *ibid.* 427-740; for his time as chief of the Austrian general staff, 585-671; for his retirement, forcible resettlement by the Nazis, and post-Second World War life, 675-740.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 107-110.

⁶⁶ Constantin Schneider and Oskar Dohle, *Die Kriegserinnerungen 1914-1919* (Böhlau: Wien et al. 2003).

⁶⁷ A brief biography of Schneider is in Dohle, *Die Kriegserinnerungen*, 11-14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 15-18.

Weltkrieg to be expressions of their respective general staff corps' collective viewpoint. In a way, each official work thus constitutes a sort of "institutional autobiography." In the aftermath of the Second World War, which precipitated a general aversion to military history in Austria and Germany, the consequence of this narrow, officer-dominated basis of prior scholarship was widespread historiographical stagnation. Especially in Austria, postwar historical literature simply perpetuated the traditional, apologetic "officers' history" (*Offiziersgeschichte*) without any subjection to critical evaluation until late in the twentieth century.⁶⁹

1.4.1. Interwar "Offiziersgeschichte"⁷⁰

The impetus to compose an official history of the war first arose in Austria-Hungary almost immediately after the outbreak of the conflict. Already in 1914, the AOK began discussing the possibility of a joint project with the OHL to publish a military history of the war aimed at the general public. However, in further course of the war, both internal Austro-Hungarian conflicts – within the AOK and between the high command and the *Kriegsarchiv* – as well as a German lack of interest in such a common endeavor ensured that such a comprehensive, common project never materialized.⁷¹ Instead, the publication of popular military historical works largely fell to the War Press Office (*Kriegspresseamt*) of the AOK and the "Literary Group" of the *Kriegsarchiv*, where the officers involved utilized military history as an important component of wartime propaganda. This form of military historical writing – selective, purposeful, and monopolized by a small clique of officers – provided the prototype for subsequent official historiography in interwar Austria.⁷² In October 1917, during a professional consultation at the AOK headquarters in Baden bei Wien, the then-director of the *Kriegsarchiv*, Maximilian von Hoen (1867-1940), expounded upon the desired form, content, and extent of future military-historical writing. In his proposed guidelines, Hoen explicitly strove towards the monopolization of military historiography through officer "eyewitnesses" – that is, officer-authors who directly participated in the described campaigns. To this end,

⁶⁹ Überegger, "Vom militärischen Paradigma zur ‚Kulturgeschichte des Krieges’?," 94-97; Jeřábek, "Die österreichische Weltkriegsforschung," 953.

⁷⁰ On the significance of "Offiziersgeschichte" in Austrian historiography on the First World War, see: Überegger, "Vom militärischen Paradigma zur ‚Kulturgeschichte des Krieges’?," 63-97; Jeřábek, "Die österreichische Weltkriegsforschung;" Johann Christoph Allmayer-Beck, Peter Broucek, Manfred Rauchensteiner, "Der Erste Weltkrieg in der österreichischen Geschichtsschreibung zwischen 1914 und 1984," in: *Neue Forschungen zum Ersten Weltkrieg: Literaturberichte und Bibliographien von 30 Mitgliedstaaten der "Commission Internationale d'Histoire Militaire Comparée,"* ed. Jürgen Rohwer (Koblenz: Bernard & Graefe, 1985), 267-278.

⁷¹ Überegger, "Vom militärischen Paradigma zur ‚Kulturgeschichte des Krieges’?," 64-65.

⁷² Ibid. 65-67.

exploiting their control over the relevant documentary sources, the *Kriegsarchiv* should aim to publish a comprehensive history of the war as rapidly as possible, in order to cement the Habsburg officer corps' interpretation/depiction of events in popular discourse.⁷³

Although complicated and delayed by the turbulent politics of the First Austrian Republic, the ultimate result of this program was ÖULK, the composition of which began in 1926, after Glaise became director of the *Kriegsarchiv*. Headed by Glaise and Kiszling, the authorship committee of seventeen former and active staff officers created a historical work that, in terms of methodology and content, exemplified traditional general staff military-historical writing.⁷⁴ To be sure, the Austrian officer-authors of the interwar period were not a monolith. In addition to both personal conflicts and professional differences of opinion, former Habsburg officers in the First Austrian Republic were divided into two broad political camps: pan-German nationalists, who favored unification with Germany, and loyalists to the old Habsburg monarchical ideal, who supported Austria's continued independence.⁷⁵ The authors of ÖULK occupied a somewhat intermediary position. As typified by Glaise and Kiszling, the officers active in the *Kriegsarchiv* represented a decidedly German nationalist perspective, but were simultaneously explicitly preoccupied with preserving the legacy of the old Habsburg army and state. As a consequence, the committee behind ÖULK excluded representatives of both extremes – anti-Austrian, pan-German zealots like Alfred Krauss as well as their anti-nationalist opponents.⁷⁶ The resulting work is characterized by a clear interest in asserting and preserving the prestige and tradition of the old Habsburg army, an aim facilitated by the pragmatic omission of problematic, potentially controversial subjects.⁷⁷ Broader political and social questions, any subjects beyond the purely military – and “military” in the narrowest, operational-tactical sense – are conspicuously absent. Likewise, issues of military leadership and strategic decision-making – that is, questions that could invite serious criticism of the army's leadership – are similarly eschewed in favor of a fatalistic narrative of a heroic, yet ultimately doomed struggle. The lively debates between former Habsburg officers present in other interwar media, above all military periodicals, were deliberately omitted in favor of presenting a more united front.⁷⁸

⁷³ Ibid. 66-67.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 78.

⁷⁵ Jeřábeck, “Die österreichische Weltkriegsforschung,” 954.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 954-955.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 956.

⁷⁸ Überegger, “Vom militärischen Paradigma zur ,Kulturgeschichte des Krieges’?,” 78-80.

The extremely restricted access maintained by the *Kriegsarchiv* to its holdings, combined with the generally-accepted notion that the composition of military history was the natural preserve of the technical “experts” – that is, the officer corps – resulted in the lasting de-facto monopolization of the military history of the First World War by the operationally-focused, pointedly apologetic *Offiziersgeschichtshistoriographie*.⁷⁹ The long-term consequence of this was the lack of a critical, scientific, academic-historical engagement with the military history of the Great War in Austria for most of the twentieth century. Even after the beginnings of a more systematic, critical analysis of officer historiography from the 1960s onwards, the influence of the interwar works remains substantial in both academic and popular historical writing.⁸⁰

The positions represented by Austrian officer historiography towards their former German ally, as well as the relationship between Austrian and German officer-authors in the interwar period, were complex.⁸¹ Indeed, Martin Schmitz characterizes this relationship as essentially a continuation of the wartime alliance dynamic between Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany: mutual dependence and common interest marred by reciprocal suspicion and resentment.⁸² On the one hand, Austrian and German officer-historians had a considerable interest in maintaining a common front in their historical works, especially with regards to the war guilt question and the wartime military performance of the Central Powers. Likewise, prior to the *Anschluss*, officers of both states were reliant on the goodwill of the opposite archive for access to their holdings. At the same time, the prevailing interest of Austrian and German officers in asserting the prestige of their respective institutions led to bitter debates and institutional friction, especially when it came to discussing issues of credit and blame for common victories and defeats.⁸³ Several of these specific controversies will be discussed in detail below. Nevertheless, the desire to avoid controversy, facilitate institutional and interpersonal cooperation, ensure publication, not to mention the growing predominance of pan-German nationalist sentiment among Austrian officer-historians, resulted in the relative neglect of a critical analysis of Habsburg-German coalition warfare until after the Second World War.⁸⁴ For the most part, interwar officer historiography thus – at least ostensibly –

⁷⁹ Ibid. 73-74.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 96-97; 108-109.

⁸¹ On the relationship between interwar Austrian and German official historiography, see: Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik*, 326-332; Martin Schmitz, “Verrat Am Waffenbruder? Die Siedlice-Kontroverse Im Spannungsfeld von Kriegsgeschichte Und Geschichtspolitik,” *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 67, no. 2 (2008): 385–408, <https://doi.org/10.1524/mgzs.2008.67.2.385>.

⁸² Schmitz, “Verrat Am Waffenbruder?,” 393-394.

⁸³ Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik*, 326-332.

⁸⁴ Allmayer-Beck, Broucek, and Rauchensteiner, “Der Erste Weltkrieg in der österreichischen Geschichtsschreibung,” 270; on pan-German sentiments among Austrian officer-authors, see Überegger, “Vom militärischen Paradigma zur ‚Kulturgeschichte des Krieges’?,” 86.

attempted to present a united front of friendly camaraderie for the former Dual Alliance partners.⁸⁵

1.4.2. Contemporary Scholarship

As emphasized above, previous critical, academic historiography on the Habsburg-German military relationship has mostly focused on the high-level negotiations and strategic disputes between the two high commands. Until relatively recently, the alliance in itself was the subject of surprisingly sparse scholarship. Interestingly, the initial impetus for the analysis of the wartime Dual Alliance originated in Anglophone historiography. Gordan A. Craig published an article in 1965 on the cohesion of the Habsburg-German alliance, in which he primarily concentrated on the incompatible personalities of the chiefs of the general staff and their inability to achieve effective strategic coordination.⁸⁶ Gerard Silberstein's 1970 *The Troubled Alliance*, a diplomatic history centered on competing Habsburg and German interests in the Balkans, and Gary Shanafelt's 1985 *The Secret Enemy*, a broader analysis of Austro-Hungarian diplomatic and military policy towards the German Empire, remain the only full-length monographs on the subject. Both works consistently appear in the citations of both English and German scholarship. Norman Stone's 1983 article on the wartime Dual Alliance, part of an anthology on military coalitions in the twentieth century, as the aforementioned works, emphasized the power imbalance between Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany and the resulting tensions and contradictions in interests.⁸⁷ Gunther Rothenberg's 1976 *The Army of Francis Joseph*⁸⁸, still the only English-language monograph on the subject, placed somewhat more emphasis on the collaboration between the two militaries while still highlighting the fundamental conflicts in the alliance. In German-language scholarship, one early work with a relatively uncommon narrow military-technical focus was the 1979 article by Peter Broucek on the Habsburg-German negotiations for a common military convention during the war. The relevant chapters in volume six of the monumental *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918*, dealing with the Habsburg Monarchy as a greater power and the relationship between the monarchy and the German Empire

⁸⁵ Peter Broucek, "Die deutschen Bemühungen um eine Militärkonvention mit Österreich-Ungarn (1915–1918)," *Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, Mitteilungen* 87, Nr. JG (1979): 440–70, here 440. <https://doi.org/10.7767/miog.1979.87.jg.440..>

⁸⁶ Gordon Alexander Craig, "Die militärische Kohäsion des österreichischen-deutschen Bündnisses 1914–1918," in: *Krieg, Politik und Diplomatie*. Erw. u. aktualisierte Neuausg., ed. Gordon A. Craig (Wien: Zsolnay, 2001), 63–76.

⁸⁷ Norman Stone, "The Austro-German Alliance, 1914–18," in *Coalition Warfare: An Uneasy Accord*. Waterloo, ed. Keith Erick Neilson and Roy A. Prete (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983), 17–28.

⁸⁸ Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1998).

respectively, place more emphasis on the political, diplomatic, cultural, and economic ties between the Germanic powers.⁸⁹ A 1996 anthology on the Dual Alliance, a joint project of Austrian and German historians, included contributions from Manfred Rauchensteiner⁹⁰, Wilhelm Deist⁹¹, and Wolfgang Mommsen⁹² on the *k.u.k. Armee* in the alliance framework, the military dimensions of the alliance in general, and the Habsburg-German wartime relationship respectively. Whereas the first two chapters concentrate above all on the lack of pre-war coordination and planning between the allies, Mommsen emphasized the subordinate, indeed subjugated role of wartime Austria-Hungary as an object of German imperialism.

In more recent scholarship, several historians have directed their attention towards the more specific institutional relationship between the Austro-Hungarian and German militaries, rather than the macroscopic alliance. While these works represent a welcome shift to a more in-depth investigation of Habsburg-German inter-military relations, their focus tends to skew chronologically earlier – the prewar and early war period – as well as thematically towards the high commands. Günther Kronenbitter has written two anthology chapters on the highly ambivalent, often fractious relationship between the two officer corps during the war, with a particular focus on the strategic discord between the two high commands during the initial months of the conflict in 1914-1915.⁹³ Holger Herwig's 2014 article on coalition warfare likewise concentrates on the failure of the Central Powers to coordinate their initial campaigns in 1914.⁹⁴ Tim Hadley's 2016 book on German military attaché reporting from Vienna in the prewar period provides a unique and detailed insight on Habsburg-German military relations prior to 1914, but the scope of the work sadly excludes all but the initial months of the

⁸⁹ Bridge, "III. Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten;" Kořalka, "Deutschland und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918."

⁹⁰ Wilhelm Deist, "Militärische Aspekte des Zweibundes," in: *Der „Zweibund“ 1879: das deutsch-österreichisch-ungarische Bündnis und die europäische Diplomatie; Historikergespräch Österreich - Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1994*, ed. Helmut Rumpler (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 261-275.

⁹¹ Manfred Rauchensteiner, "Die k. u. k. Armee im Zweibund," in: *Der „Zweibund“ 1879: das deutsch-österreichisch-ungarische Bündnis und die europäische Diplomatie; Historikergespräch Österreich - Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1994*, ed. Helmut Rumpler (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 245-260.

⁹² Wolfgang Mommsen, "Das Deutsche Reich und Österreich-Ungarn im Ersten Weltkrieg," in: *Der „Zweibund“ 1879: das deutsch-österreichisch-ungarische Bündnis und die europäische Diplomatie; Historikergespräch Österreich - Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1994*, ed. Helmut Rumpler (Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 383-407.

⁹³ Günther Kronenbitter, "Waffenbrüder. Der Koalitionskrieg der Mittelmächte 1914-1918 und das Selbstbild zweier Militäreliten." In *Mythen und Legenden in der Geschichte*, ed. Volker Dotterweich (München: Vögel, 2004), 157–186; Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern. Der Koalitionskrieg der Mittelmächte 1914/15 zwischen Sachzwang und Ressentiment, "in: *Die vergessene Front - der Osten 1914-15: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, ed. Gerhard P. Groß (Paderborn/Wien [u.a.]: Schöningh, 2006), 121-146.

⁹⁴ Holger H Herwig and Gary Sheffield, "Disjointed Allies: Coalition Warfare in Berlin and Vienna, 1914," in: *War Studies Reader*, ed. Gary Sheffield (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010), 84–102.

conflict.⁹⁵ Similarly, in his recent analysis of Habsburg officers' wartime experiences, Martin Schmitz included a lengthy subchapter on coalition warfare, focusing above all on experiences with their German allies. Martin Müller's 2003 study specifically analyzes the significance of coalition warfare within German grand strategy, assessing Germany's defeat to be largely a consequence of German (and Austro-Hungarian) military leadership to implement an effective, combined strategy of "annihilation" in the Clausewitzian sense.⁹⁶

The more recent general histories of the Central Powers during the First World War naturally address the ambiguous relationship between Austria-Hungary and the German Empire, but emphasize the political, diplomatic, and economic dimensions over the purely military. Herwig's *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary*, Alexander Watson's *Ring of Steel*, as well as Rudolf Jeřábek's chapter in volume eleven of *Die Habsburgermonarchie* on the First World War all do not go into detail on the particulars of Habsburg-German coalition warfare, merely highlighting the strategic disagreements between the high commands, the cultural conflicts between the officer corps, and the growing military dependence of Austria-Hungary on Imperial Germany. Hughes and DiNardo include a brief subchapter on coalition warfare in their institutional history of the Imperial German Army, and while they acknowledge its significance, Imperial Germany's (in)ability to conduct an effective coalition war is not the main focus of their analysis. Rauchensteiner, in his *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, elaborates much more, especially on the tensions and conflicts between the two militaries, drawing on most of the aforementioned literature as well as a number of autobiographies and memoirs of German and Austro-Hungarian officers. Nick Lloyd's 2024 *The Eastern Front* uses similar sources with a more operational focus and provides an illuminating comparison in coalition warfare between the Central Powers and the Entente. Possibly the most detailed, in-depth recent history of the Habsburg-German military relationship can be found in Prit Buttar's four-volume series on the Eastern Front of the Great War.⁹⁷ Although Buttar's works constitute more of a traditional, operational military history geared towards a more popular audience, the sheer extent of his history – which synthesizes official histories and memoirs as well as secondary literature from Austro-Hungarian,

⁹⁵ Tim Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance: German Military Attaché Reporting from Vienna, 1879–1914* (Lanham, MD [u.a.]: Lexington Books, 2016).

⁹⁶ Martin Müller, *Vernichtungsgedanke und Koalitionskriegführung: das Deutsche Reich und Österreich-Ungarn in der Offensive 1917 / 1918; eine Clausewitz-Studie* (Graz: Stocker, 2003).

⁹⁷ Prit Buttar, *Collision of Empires: The War on the Eastern Front in 1914* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014); *Germany Ascendant: The Eastern Front 1915* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2015); *Russia's Last Gasp: The Eastern Front, 1916–17* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2016); *The Splintered Empires: The Eastern Front 1917–21* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2017).

German, and Russian sources – provides more concrete information on joint Habsburg-German military operations than any other contemporary work.

In contrast to interwar Austrian and German historical literature, modern academic works on the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo are comparatively scarce, especially in Anglophone scholarship. Lloyd's aforementioned book – which, despite the title, covers the Italian Front as well – as well as Nicola Labanca's chapter in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*⁹⁸ provide general overviews. Paolo Morisi's 2018 study of Austro-Hungarian and Italian storm troops, despite its narrow focus, offers one of the more detailed accounts of the Italian Front in English and is valuable for its utilization of German- and Italian-language sources.⁹⁹ The German-language literature is more extensive. The 2015 anthology *Krieg in den Alpen*, a comparative history of the Austro-Hungarian and Italian experiences on the Italian Front, is a good, concise general overview.¹⁰⁰ Alexander Jordan's *Krieg um die Alpen*, while not specifically centered around the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, analyzes the broader Habsburg-German relationship on the Italian Front in some detail. As for the Isonzo sector in particular, Rolf Wörsdorfer's 2022 monograph concentrates more on the social, cultural, and memory-political dimensions of the twelve Battles of the Isonzo.¹⁰¹ In contrast, a 1997 two-volume PhD dissertation by Hermann Schöckl at the University of Vienna, drawing heavily on Austrian archival sources, constitutes an extremely detailed military history of the Isonzo Front in 1917 down to the tactical level, but only covers the Habsburg-German offensive for the period of the initial breakthrough.¹⁰² The 2008 anthology *Waffentreue: die 12. Isonzoschlacht 1917*, a companion volume for a 2007 exhibition by the Austrian State Archives on the offensive, is one of the few newer scholarly works dedicated to the Isonzo Offensive itself. While a useful overview of the logistical and operational aspects of the campaign, its chapters mostly summarize the contents of older, interwar literature and memoirs.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Nicola Labanca, "The Italian Front," in: *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 266–296.

⁹⁹ Paolo Morisi, *Hell in the Trenches: Austro-Hungarian Stormtroopers and Italian Arditi in the Great War* (Warwick: Helion & Company, 2018).

¹⁰⁰ Nicola Labanca (ed.), *Krieg in den Alpen: Österreich-Ungarn und Italien im Ersten Weltkrieg (1914 - 1918)* (Wien [u.a.]: Böhlau, 2015).

¹⁰¹ Rolf Wörsdorfer, *Isonzo 1915/17: Völkerschlachten am Gebirgsfluss* (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2022).

¹⁰² Hermann Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917*, Dissertation, Universität Wien, 1997.

¹⁰³ Manfred Rauchensteiner, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ed.), *Waffentreue: die 12. Isonzoschlacht 1917; Begleitband zur Ausstellung des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs, 23. Oktober 2007 - 1. Februar 2008*, (Wien: Fassbaender, 2007).

1.5. Organization

The subsequent work is organized into four chapters. The following chapter charts the longer-term development of the military alliance between Austria-Hungary and the German Empire from the initial ratification of the Dual Alliance in 1879 through the outbreak of war in 1914 – and the consequent beginning of concrete Habsburg-German military cooperation – up to the beginning of 1916. This chapter provides the broader alliance-political and grand strategic context of the wartime Dual Alliance and charts the evolution of the relationship between the Austro-Hungarian and German armies on the Eastern and Balkan fronts, illuminating the background of Habsburg-German inter-military relations prior to the joint offensive in Italy. Given the relatively unique position of the Italian Front in the strategic framework of the Dual Alliance, the significance of this theater in the Habsburg-German military relationship is handled in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 provides both the specific strategic context of the Central Powers' offensive in Italy – the major shift in alliance relations in 1916, the previous role of the Italian Front in the coalition warfare of the Central Powers, the strategic position of Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany in 1917 – as well as a concise history of the operations there from the initial assault in October up to the suspension of the offensive in early December. By detailing the relevant events of the campaign, this chapter illustrates the coordination and integration of the two armies at the strategic and operational levels as well as all of the concomitant complexities and tensions therein. Utilizing the postwar officer historiography and memoir literature, in combination with selected wartime operations documents, chapter 4 analyzes some of the key issues of Habsburg-German inter-military relations in more depth, with the aim of illuminating the profound, multifaceted ambivalence that characterized the Austro-Hungarian and German joint operations in Italy. Specifically, this work investigates the areas of material and organizational integration, command and control, and inter-personnel relations between the two armies, and questions of institutional and personal prestige. The final chapter presents the overall conclusions of the analysis of the aforementioned issues within the macroscopic framework of the wartime Habsburg-German military alliance and proposes additional possibilities for conducting research into this fascinating, but as yet relatively under-researched subject.

2. From Defensive Pact to Brotherhood of Arms – The Dual Alliance 1879-1916

Most of the major wars of the past several centuries were coalition wars, all of which were characterized to some extent by the tension between the military-political necessity of forming alliances on the one hand and the frictions and conflicts of interest between coalition partners on the other. The potential for friction, suspicion, or even outright hostility between military allies, arising from the collision of narrow self-interest with the common purpose, was perhaps most succinctly and pointedly expressed by the Prussian general Gerhard von Scharnhorst (1757-1813), who wrote in 1797 that “every coalition already carries with it the seed of hidden betrayal.”¹⁰⁴ Correspondingly, according to the historian Richard E. Neustadt, alliance politics are “woven” from the four strands of “muddled perceptions, stifled communications, disappointed expectations, and paranoid reactions.”¹⁰⁵ In her work on the Anglo-French alliance during the Great War, Elizabeth Greenhalgh asserts that military coalitions are by nature temporary, and thus change according to changing circumstances, specifically the degree of the common external threat and the necessity of mutual support. She thus identifies four fundamental problems in coalition warfare that complicate the actual implementation of this mutual support: questions of sovereignty, the reconciliation of different interests, personal and power relationships, and the issue of language. Echoing Scharnhorst, the common thread between these issues, and one of most corrosive problems facing the members of a coalition, is, according to Greenhalgh, mutual suspicion.¹⁰⁶

Interestingly, in comparing the Anglo-French coalition with the Dual Alliance, Greenhalgh asserts that the Habsburg-German coalition was easier to manage, as the clear power discrepancy between Austria-Hungary and the German Empire rendered the question of overall leadership in the alliance moot. In contrast to Britain and France, for which the more equitable power balance complicated the issue of coalition leadership for almost the entire war, “the German rider dominated the Austro-Hungarian horse.”¹⁰⁷ Tim Hadley, in his assessment of the prewar Dual Alliance, similarly compares the Habsburg-German relationship with the dynamics within the Triple Entente, albeit with a contrasting focus on the relative deficiency and dysfunction of the Dual Alliance. According to Hadley, the alliance between Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany was a “mass of contradictions.” On the one hand, the Dual Alliance treaty, compared to the Anglo-French and Anglo-Russian

¹⁰⁴ Müller, *Vernichtungsgedanke und Koalitionskriegführung*, 32-33. The original German quote is “Jede Koalition führt schon den Kern des heimlichen Betrugs mit sich.”

¹⁰⁵ Cited in Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 1-2.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 3.

arrangements in particular, was both a more specific, concrete defensive pact as well as a much more longstanding relationship; by the outbreak of war in 1914, Austria-Hungary and the German Empire had been allies for almost 35 years, whereas the constellation of the Triple Entente had only coalesced in the previous decade. Likewise, while Franco-Russian military agreements were more specific, they obviously did not envision actual joint operations between the militaries, whereas for Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany, the necessity of direct military cooperation against Russia had been apparent since the genesis of the Dual Alliance. On the other hand, despite the absence of a formal military alliance, the British and French militaries had already made detailed preparations for joint operations by 1914, while Austria-Hungary and the German Empire – despite their longstanding formal alliance commitments – had done nothing of the sort.¹⁰⁸

In the following analysis of the history of Habsburg-German military relations up to the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, this thesis expands upon the assessment of the Dual Alliance as a particularly paradoxical alliance relationship. While many of the issues that arose between the Austro-Hungarian and German governments and militaries are indeed endemic to coalition warfare in general¹⁰⁹, the wartime Dual Alliance was characterized by an extreme contrast between increasingly close and integrated military cooperation and profound, systemic tensions and conflicts arising from the very power imbalance that promoted, indeed necessitated this cooperation. The clearly dominant role of the German Empire in the Central Powers coalition may have eliminated questions of alliance leadership and facilitated military integration, but it simultaneously generated the dysfunction that haunted Habsburg-German military relations for the entirety of the conflict.

2.1. Prewar Military Relations in the Dual Alliance 1879-1914

As alluded to previously, the longevity of the Dual Alliance between the Habsburg Monarchy and the German Empire up to 1914 stood in stark contrast to the almost shocking lack of concrete ties between the militaries of the two allies. While the exact form and degree of interaction between the Habsburg and Imperial German armies did vary throughout this period, largely a product of the particular military leadership, the growing geopolitical interdependence of Austria-Hungary and Germany was not correspondingly reflected in inter-military cooperation. Ultimately, neither army possessed leadership with the requisite political understanding or diplomatic skill to develop a common strategy prior to 1914. The Dual

¹⁰⁸ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 215-216.

¹⁰⁹ Kronenbitter, “Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern,” 121.

Alliance partners thus pursued independent national strategies that made no consideration of the diplomatic, strategic, or domestic circumstances of their ally.¹¹⁰

The original impetus for the Dual Alliance arose from the altered geopolitical situation in Europe following the unification of Germany in 1871. Under the direction of Reich Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), German diplomacy during the 1870s was preoccupied with preventing the formation of a hostile “Kaunitz Coalition”¹¹¹ of European great powers against the newly ascendant *Reich*.¹¹² In Austria-Hungary, desires for revenge against Prussia-Germany for the defeat of 1866 had largely faded by the late 1870s, while the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister from 1871 to 1879, Gyula Andrassy (1823-1890), consistently pursued improved relations with the German Empire as a means of countering an increasingly hostile Tsarist Russia.¹¹³ Within both Imperial Germany and Austria-Hungary, popular opinion among certain groups also increasingly militated in favor of closer ties between the two “Germanic” powers. German Austrians looked to the Bismarckian *Reich* to support their continued political dominance in the Cisleithanian half of the Dual Monarchy. In the German Empire, many supported a closer association with the Habsburg Monarchy for economic reasons, as well as on political-cultural grounds; a Habsburg-German alliance would not only serve as a replacement for the now-defunct German Confederation (*Deutscher Bund*) but would also strengthen the “German” element in Austria against the perceived encroachment of “Slavic” influence.¹¹⁴

Ultimately, however, the definitive establishment of a Habsburg-German defensive military alliance – sealed by the secret Dual Alliance Treaty of 7 October 1879 – rested on diplomatic and strategic considerations. For the German Empire, the alliance with Austria-Hungary provided security against the feared encirclement by hostile powers as well as, for Bismarck, a tool to influence Austro-Hungarian foreign policy. For Austria-Hungary, a defensive pact with Imperial Germany offered military support in the case of a war against Russia. Contradictory intentions and expectations animated the alliance from the very beginning. Bismarck viewed the Dual Alliance as a strictly defensive pact which, in combination with the 1873 Three Emperors’ League (*Dreikaiserbund*) between Austria-Hungary, the German

¹¹⁰ Herwig and Sheffield, “Disjointed Allies,” 100.

¹¹¹ An allusion to the anti-Prussian coalition of Austria, France, and Russia during the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763), largely established due to the efforts of the Austrian statesman Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg (1711-1794).

¹¹² Kořalka, “Deutschland und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918,” 60.

¹¹³ Bridge, “Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten,” 243-246.

¹¹⁴ Kořalka, “Deutschland und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918,” 73-80; Bridge, “Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten,” 243-244.

Empire, and the Russian Empire as well as the 1887 Russo-German Reinsurance Treaty, aimed to maintain peace and stability in Eastern Europe. In contrast, the Austro-Hungarian political and military leadership of the 1880s saw the alliance with the German Empire as the cornerstone of an ideally more proactive anti-Russian alliance.¹¹⁵ Up until his dismissal in 1890, Bismarck refused to expand the scope of the Dual Alliance beyond the purely defensive, and likewise resolutely opposed any detailed joint offensive planning between the Austro-Hungarian and German general staffs.¹¹⁶ The Triple Alliance concluded between Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany, and Italy in 1882 similarly constituted a purely defensive arrangement with very limited reciprocal obligations.¹¹⁷

While Habsburg-German alliance politics were thus characterized by considerable ambivalence and even tension at the highest political and diplomatic levels from 1879 until the early 1890s, relations between the two militaries during this period were, paradoxically, relatively close in comparison to subsequent years. The first discussions between the Austro-Hungarian and German chiefs of the general staff – at this time, Friedrich von Beck-Rzikowsky (1830-1920) and Helmuth von Moltke the Elder (1800-1891), respectively – occurred in 1882. The joint staff talks during the 1880s – always held in very broad, general terms – concentrated on the scenario of a potential war with Russia and correspondingly, the possibilities of a combined operations in the East, although Moltke – wary of dependence on what he perceived as an unreliable Austro-Hungarian ally – increasingly eschewed any remotely firm long-term commitments.¹¹⁸

Habsburg-German inter-military relations were substantively restricted to the high-level discussions between the general staff chiefs; beyond their personal interactions, there was no broader cooperation between the two general staffs. Therefore, the degree and nature of cooperation during the prewar period was largely the product of the interpersonal relationship between these two individuals.¹¹⁹ The relationship between Beck and Moltke, for example, was relatively friendly and the two men corresponded throughout the 1880s on common strategic deliberations, even if the unflinchingly anti-Prussian attitude of the Habsburg Inspector General Archduke Albrecht (1817-1895) continued to cloud relations between the

¹¹⁵ Bridge, “Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten,” 257-260.

¹¹⁶ Kořalka, “Deutschland und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918,” 83,89; Bridge, “Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten,” 278-279; Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 127.

¹¹⁷ Bridge, “Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten,” 257.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 267; Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 171.

¹¹⁹ Deist, “Militärische Aspekte des Zweibundes,” 262-263.

two armies.¹²⁰ Aside from Albrecht, however, residual resentment for the War of 1866 among Habsburg officers largely eased with time, facilitated by – next to the alliance interest – the social, cultural-linguistic, and professional commonalities with German officers, not to mention the longstanding political, military, and dynastic ties between Austria and the smaller German states.¹²¹ The alliance with the German Empire did influence the development of the Austro-Hungarian army in the late nineteenth century in other ways as well. Beck's reform efforts of the later 1880s, culminating in the Army Law of 1889, were not only inspired by German precedents, but were explicitly motivated by the ambition to achieve some semblance of military parity. The establishment of corps organization, the transition to a territorial system of recruitment and garrisoning, the creation of the *Landsturm* militia, and the eventual increase of the military budget in 1889 were all manifestations of this influence.¹²²

To generalize, however, the prewar relationship between the Austro-Hungarian and German chiefs of the general staff were “businesslike, distant, not particularly trusting, and laden with traditional preconceptions.”¹²³ While increasingly vague, largely defensive plans for a war against Russia continued to be discussed into the 1890s, both sides endeavored to avoid any definitive, concrete commitments. Both militaries sought to preserve their freedom of operational planning as much as possible, and thus never seriously discussed the possibility of a joint supreme command in a future conflict.¹²⁴

The second phase of the prewar military relationship between Austria-Hungary and Germany, spanning the period from c. 1890 to 1906, nevertheless witnessed a reversal of the alliance dynamic of the 1880s. At the highest political-diplomatic level, the German attitude towards Austria-Hungary as an ally fundamentally shifted upon the advent of the more assertive foreign policy of the Wilhelmine era. Under Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859-1941, r. 1888-1918), Imperial Germany resolved upon a more overtly anti-Russian attitude in the 1890s and, correspondingly, a more emphatic, public, and firm alliance with the Habsburg Monarchy.¹²⁵ At the same time, however, the growing and progressively more violent internal turmoil within the Dual Monarchy during the 1890s led German political and military leaders to increasingly doubt the military capabilities of their Habsburg ally, who seemed to be slipping

¹²⁰ Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 113-114.

¹²¹ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 34-35.

¹²² Rauchensteiner, “Die k. u. k. Armee im Zweibund,” 247-248; Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 78.

¹²³ Deist, “Militärische Aspekte des Zweibundes,” 262.

¹²⁴ Ibid. 263-265.

¹²⁵ Kořalka, “Deutschland und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918,” 92-94; Bridge, “Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten,” 279.

into the ranks of the second-rate powers.¹²⁶ Simultaneously, the appointment of Alfred von Schlieffen (1833-1913) as chief of the Prussian General Staff in 1891 precipitated a major change in Habsburg-German inter-military relations. Under Schlieffen's predecessor Alfred von Waldersee (1831-1904), the Prussian chief of staff from 1888 to 1891, the German military had exhibited a renewed interest in a potential joint offensive in the East.¹²⁷ In the course of the 1890s, however, Schlieffen gradually shifted the focus of his strategic planning to a future Western Front facing France; from 1897 onwards, Schlieffen abandoned all plans for a combined Habsburg-German offensive in the East. Now, the German army would maintain a defensive posture in the East, while concentrating the vast majority of its forces for a decisive offensive in the West.¹²⁸

This German strategic reorientation to the West naturally reduced the necessity of direct cooperation with the Austro-Hungarian military. At the same time, Schlieffen's utter contempt for the Habsburg army, which he viewed as weak, unreliable, and irrational, only reinforced his conviction that close military cooperation with Austria-Hungary was unnecessary. Given his patent unwillingness to communicate his plans, his relationship with Beck was unsurprisingly poor.¹²⁹ As a consequence, from 1896, contact between the two general staff chiefs – and thus, de facto, any meaningful contact between the two militaries as institutions – virtually ceased. For more than a decade, the militaries of the two allies went their separate ways in preparing for a future conflict in which they would presumably have to fight together.¹³⁰ From 1896 to 1907, no high-level talks occurred between the Habsburg and German general staffs; communication between the leadership of both armies was reduced during this period to the perfunctory exchange of Christmas cards.¹³¹ Thus, while Imperial Germany had now resolved on a more firm geopolitical alignment with Austria-Hungary, its military leadership simultaneously decided on the opposite policy towards the Habsburg army.

The third and final phase in prewar military Habsburg-German military relations began less than a decade before the outbreak of the First World War and coincided with both a significant shift in the strategic position of both states as well as leadership changes at the head of their respective armies. After a period in the late 1890s/early 1900s during which Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany drifted apart, the gradual coalescence of an anti-German alignment

¹²⁶ Ibid. 99, 107.

¹²⁷ Ibid. 89.

¹²⁸ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 179-181.

¹²⁹ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 130-131, 134-135.

¹³⁰ Bridge, "Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten," 283, 288-289.

¹³¹ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 310.

between France, Russia, and Britain, coupled with the deterioration of Austria-Hungary's position in the Balkans, resulted in the renewed significance of the Dual Alliance for both states from around 1908. Despite continued tensions – above all surrounding the Habsburg Monarchy's evident military inferiority – as well as divergent interests in the Balkans, German diplomatic support was essential for Austria-Hungary during the Balkan crises of 1908-1909 and 1912-1913, whereas Austria-Hungary now more than ever represented Imperial Germany's only reliable ally.¹³²

The revival of the Dual Alliance in the geopolitical sphere was matched with a concomitant renewal of ties between the Habsburg and German armies. The turning point occurred in 1906, as Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf (1852-1925) and Helmuth von Moltke the Younger (1848-1916) assumed leadership of the Habsburg and German general staffs, respectively.¹³³ The first meeting between the two general staff chiefs occurred in May 1907 – incidentally, the final year in which the Austro-Hungarian general staff prepared a mobilization plan for a potential war with Germany. For Conrad, both perceived external and internal threats impelled a revivification of the practically moribund military ties between the allies.¹³⁴ The joint strategic deliberations intensified from 1909, from which point the two general staff chiefs corresponded more regularly and Moltke, for his part, gave Conrad more firm assurances of German participation in joint operations in the East.¹³⁵ At the beginning of 1909, occasioned by the Bosnian Annexation Crisis, Conrad and Moltke agreed on the outlines of a common strategy in the event of a future two-front war. While the German army would still concentrate the majority of its strength in the West, Moltke confirmed that – contrary to the letter of the Dual Alliance treaty – a Russian intervention in a Balkan conflict against Austria-Hungary would constitute a *casus foederis* for Germany.¹³⁶ The First Balkan War in 1912-1913 similarly occasioned another round of strategic discussions between Conrad and Moltke.¹³⁷ Parallel to the high-level strategic discussions between Conrad and Moltke, the resumption of closer military ties between Austria-Hungary and Germany was also reflected in the more intensive cooperation between the allies' military intelligence

¹³² Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 33-37; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 66, 75; Kořalka, "Deutschland und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918," 127-128.

¹³³ Rauchensteiner, "Die k. u. k. Armee im Zweibund," 254.

¹³⁴ Ibid. 255-257.

¹³⁵ Deist, "Militärische Aspekte des Zweibundes," 268-269.

¹³⁶ Kořalka, "Deutschland und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918," 131.

¹³⁷ Bridge, "Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten," 326.

services, the more regular attendance of Habsburg and German officers at the maneuvers of the opposite military, as well as officer exchanges between the two armies.¹³⁸

And yet, despite this relative intensification of military cooperation between the Dual Alliance partners, the relationship between the Habsburg and German armies prior to 1914 remained a decidedly distant one. Despite a formal military alliance dating back more than thirty years by 1914, there was no formal military convention between Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany; everything remained grounded in individual, personal agreements between the two chiefs of the general staff.¹³⁹ And these discussions, while certainly an improvement over the total lack of communication that characterized the Schlieffen era, still left much to be desired. The Conrad-Moltke exchanges between 1909 and 1914 were strategic discussions in the broadest possible terms; only the general intentions of each army in the case of war, not concrete plans, were shared – much less concrete plans for any combined operations. For much of the period, neither chief of staff possessed detailed knowledge of his counterpart's mobilization scheme. To make matters worse, the strategic consultations between Conrad and Moltke were not only vague but colored by mutual dissimulation and reciprocal manipulation. Through their ambiguous, equivocal promises of support for a combined effort in the East, both men sought to entice their counterpart into a firmer, more substantial commitment to that theater so that they could each retain more operational freedom for their separate offensive plans. The fact that the commander of the German 8. *Armee* – the sole German army stationed in the East upon mobilization and thus the authority theoretically responsible for joint operations with the Austro-Hungarians – was not aware in August 1914 of any directive for an offensive in support of Austria-Hungary exemplifies this lack of a serious intention to conduct a coordinated campaign.¹⁴⁰

The ultimate absence of concrete ties between the two general staffs exemplified – as well as, fundamentally, produced – a profound disconnect between these two military institutions that would find themselves in 1914 facing a numerically and materially superior enemy coalition in a multifront war. Even after 1906, contact between the officer corps of the two armies remained minimal. Despite the opportunities for communication, there was evidently little interest in it in either officer corps. For example, despite the joint presence at maneuvers, there was apparently no constructive discourse on tactics or doctrine between the

¹³⁸ Rauchensteiner, "Die k. u. k. Armee im Zweibund," 256.

¹³⁹ Ibid. 249-250.

¹⁴⁰ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 311-312; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 71-74.

militaries.¹⁴¹ As a result, the vast majority of Habsburg and German officers lacked detailed knowledge, much less understanding of the allied army. As a whole, both institutions ironically possessed far more comprehensive information on their prospective enemies than on their ally of thirty-five years.¹⁴² Correspondingly, significant differences in mentality and culture – especially with regards to the multiethnic nature of the *k.u.k. Armee* – remained between the two institutions, the lack of understanding for which would lead to mistrust and resentment between allied personnel.¹⁴³

August von Cramon famously bemoaned German prewar ignorance of its Habsburg ally in his 1920 book, to some extent blaming German lack of knowledge of the *k.u.k. Armee*'s weaknesses – and strengths – and the resultant lack of support for the Central Powers' ultimate defeat.¹⁴⁴ In his book on prewar German military attaché reporting, Hadley adopts a very critical view of this claim. He interprets Cramon's assertion of German ignorance of Austro-Hungarian military shortcomings as a deliberate attempt to shield the Prussian/German General Staff from responsibility for the deficient coalition warfare of the Dual Alliance, instead conveniently shunting culpability on the defunct AOK.¹⁴⁵ While Hadley assesses the possibility of many German officers, including high-ranking figures, lacking detailed knowledge of the *k.u.k. Armee* as "credible, if inexcusable," he argues that the quantity and quality of information delivered by the German military attachés in Vienna – as evidenced by the surviving files – should have given the German political and military leadership ample knowledge of the Austro-Hungarian military's limitations.¹⁴⁶

Prussia had maintained a military attaché in Vienna since 1854, and just as for the militaries of the other great powers, the Prussian General Staff possessed a section dedicated to the collection and evaluation of information pertaining to the Habsburg army.¹⁴⁷ From 1879, the German military attaché in Vienna received blanket authorization for contact with the section chiefs of the Habsburg general staff, and although the attaché reports of the first few years of the Dual Alliance focused on mostly trivial affairs, from 1883 the attaché received express instructions to gather detailed information on the readiness of the *k.u.k. Armee* for war.¹⁴⁸ Hadley explains the lack of interest in Austria-Hungary among the prewar German officer

¹⁴¹ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 214.

¹⁴² Rauchensteiner, "Die k. u. k. Armee im Zweibund," 256-257.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 256

¹⁴⁴ Cramon, *Unser österreich-ungarischer Bundesgenosse im Weltkriege*, 43.

¹⁴⁵ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 212-213.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 27, 51-52.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 61.

corps – despite the wealth of information on the issues of the military budget, reform efforts, and the nationalities problem – not as a consequence of ignorance per se, but rather of the dismissive attitude of German officers towards the *k.u.k. Armee* combined with the German Empire’s strategic reorientation towards the west.¹⁴⁹ Only after the war began and the shortcomings of the Habsburg army became painfully apparent to the German officer corps as a whole did German officers begin to take an active interest in improving the performance of the *k.u.k. Armee*.¹⁵⁰

2.2. The Foundations of Coalition Warfare 1914-1916

The Dual Alliance partners thus did not find themselves in a favorable position to conduct coalition warfare in 1914. Overall, in the decades since 1879, Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany had failed to establish the institutional or even personal foundation for cooperation based in mutual trust; by the outbreak of war, the time for establishing such trust was long past.¹⁵¹ In comparison with the much more recent Franco-Russian and Anglo-French alliances, Austria-Hungary and the German Empire were not only remarkably unforthcoming with each other, but also singularly failed to establish common standards of military readiness.¹⁵² Consequently, upon the outbreak of war in 1914, Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany both initially waged completely separate, albeit equally high-risk campaigns in Serbia/Galicia and Belgium/France with no concrete plan for a common strategy.¹⁵³ Only the failure of these initial offensives and the magnitude of the Russian threat to both states finally necessitated the direct, close cooperation between the two armies. And yet, at this point, the decades of relative neglect of inter-institutional ties would come to bear bitter fruit. On the one hand, joint operations between the two armies would necessarily be conducted on an improvisational, ad-hoc basis. On the other hand, the increasing power discrepancy between the two allies would simultaneously compel more extensive and intensive collaboration as well as generate the resentments and animosities that would impair this very effort.

Given the divergent strategic priorities of the Austro-Hungarian and German general staffs, as well as the mutual concern for preserving both military sovereignty in general and operational freedom in particular, close cooperation between the Habsburg and Imperial German armies was not envisioned in 1914, much less prepared for, even on the theoretically common front

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 211-217.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 217.

¹⁵¹ Deist, “Militärische Aspekte des Zweibundes,” 275.

¹⁵² Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 21.

¹⁵³ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 104-105.

against Russia.¹⁵⁴ Initially, upon mobilization in July and August, the only significant measures immediately implemented to improve military cooperation between the Dual Alliance partners were an intensification of intelligence-sharing and the reciprocal dispatch of military representatives to the AOK and OHL.¹⁵⁵

The German officers assigned to the AOK, the military attaché Karl von Kagenneck (1871-1967) and the first German military plenipotentiary Hugo von Freytag-Loringhoven (1855-1924), certainly played a consequential role in the early days of Habsburg-German coalition warfare, however. Their intercession on behalf of the OHL forced Conrad to definitively commit more forces to face the Russians in Galicia, as in his desire to expeditiously crush Serbia, he had delayed the full deployment of Habsburg formations to Galicia, thereby leaving the Eastern flank of the Central Powers – above all, the German eastern border – dangerously exposed.¹⁵⁶ This episode exemplified how, already at the very beginning of the war, the conflicting, uncoordinated strategies of the Dual Alliance partners not only hindered military cooperation, but generated profound suspicion and mistrust between the allies' military leadership. The events of the first six months of the war, namely the rather sudden imperative for the two armies to wage a joint campaign in the East, would establish patterns of behavior between the two armies that would persist for the rest of the war.¹⁵⁷

Somewhat ironically, the earliest instance of direct, albeit very small-scale Habsburg-German military cooperation in the field occurred on the Western Front. Already in August, Conrad had agreed to send four batteries of Škoda 30.5 cm heavy siege howitzers – at that point, one of the most advanced heavy artillery designs in the world – to the West, to assist the Germans in the reduction of Belgian and French fortifications. The Habsburg heavy artillery contingent, despite only consisting of eight guns, played a significant role in the successful sieges at Namur and Antwerp, and their employment in the West until March 1915 represented an unusually harmonious and decisive episode of Habsburg-German military cooperation.¹⁵⁸ On the Eastern Front, the Habsburg and German armies conducted entirely separate campaigns in Galicia and East Prussia during the initial months of the war. The *k.u.k.* I. Korps, headquartered in Krakow, had indeed already received instructions before the war to initiate contact with Prussian *Landwehr* formations in Silesia in anticipation of potential joint

¹⁵⁴ Kronenbitter, "Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern," 122.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 123.

¹⁵⁶ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 154-160.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 179.

¹⁵⁸ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 134; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 122.

operations. However, the AOK's understanding of German plans for the Eastern Front – based only on Moltke's vague assurances of support after a hypothetical victory in the West – left the concrete questions of the extent, timing, and command arrangements of German operations in the East unanswered.¹⁵⁹ To complicate matters, the OHL largely kept its Habsburg ally in the dark as to the course of operations in the West.¹⁶⁰ Already at the beginning of August, Moltke had informed Conrad that, despite prewar discussions, the 8. *Armee* in East Prussia would remain on the defensive for the time being. Nevertheless, the Austro-Hungarian armies in Galicia immediately commenced offensive operations in August 1914. This decision lay not only in German pressure to divert Russian efforts away from its Eastern border, but also in the fundamentally offensive operational and tactical ethos of the *k.u.k. Armee* and its chief of staff.¹⁶¹

The subsequent Austro-Hungarian offensive out of Galicia in August-September 1914 thus not only lacked a clear operational goal – a joint concentric offensive with the Germans was not a possibility – but was also practically doomed from the start by the *k.u.k. Armee*'s pervasive deficiencies in leadership, tactics, and armament, not to mention the immense numerical and material superiority of the opposing Russian forces.¹⁶² Indeed, the initial Austro-Hungarian operations in Serbia, Galicia, and the Carpathians in 1914 and early 1915 were nothing short of disastrous for the *k.u.k. Armee*; by the end of 1914, from an initial field army strength of around two million personnel, Austro-Hungarian forces had already suffered an appalling 189,000 dead, 490,000 wounded, and 278,000 prisoners of war, not to mention significant material losses.¹⁶³ The army was reduced to little more than fifty percent of its establishment strength, and forty-four percent of the peacetime Habsburg officer corps had been lost. While the *k.u.k. Armee* would gradually recover its numerical and material strength over the course of 1915, it would never be the same again; while all of the belligerent armies experienced an evolution in capabilities precipitated by the loss of their professional core and its replacement by reservists and civilian conscripts, this process occurred in the Habsburg army far more rapidly than in other forces.¹⁶⁴

In the context of the Habsburg-German military relationship, Austria-Hungary's military catastrophes of 1914-1915 wrought three distinct, if interrelated consequences that set the

¹⁵⁹ Kronenbitter, "Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern," 124.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 125.

¹⁶¹ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 174-175, 180-181.

¹⁶² Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 148-150.

¹⁶³ Ibid. 158.

¹⁶⁴ Buttar, *Collision of Empires*, 407, 418.

course of subsequent wartime relations. Firstly, the near-total defeat of the *k.u.k. Armee* in Galicia nigh-instantaneously made direct German military support – and therefore, some form of joint operations – not merely desirable for the AOK, but urgently necessary. Thus, the gradual process of Austria-Hungary’s increasing military dependence on – and therefore, military subordination to – Imperial Germany had already begun within the initial months of the war.¹⁶⁵ Secondly, the beginnings of this ever more unequal relationship between the militaries triggered a protracted power struggle between the Habsburg and German high commands, as the AOK – above all, Conrad personally – battled to preserve Austro-Hungarian military autonomy and prestige in the face of growing German dominance. At the highest levels, this struggle primarily manifested itself in the recurring debates on strategic priorities and the question of unified command.¹⁶⁶ Thirdly, the failure of the Central Powers’ separate offensive campaigns in 1914 very quickly aroused reciprocal recrimination between the two allies. Austro-Hungarian and German military figures both criticized their ally for their failure to achieve victory and, in the case of the Habsburg military leadership, attributed their own lack of success in no small part to the supposed lack of German support.¹⁶⁷

The first concrete discussions of – or, more accurately, requests for – direct German military support for the *k.u.k. Armee* began in September, just as the armies of the two allies were experiencing dramatically different outcomes in their Eastern operations: the spectacular victory at Tannenberg for the Germans and the crushing defeat in Galicia for the Austro-Hungarians. Conrad’s response to the success of 8. *Armee* in East Prussia was to demand an immediate southward thrust by German forces into Congress Poland, theoretically to link up with Habsburg forces in Galicia, though both the German refusal and the subsequent Austro-Hungarian retreat rendered the point moot.¹⁶⁸ From the beginning of September, the near daily requests for German assistance sent by the AOK to the German general headquarters generated ill feelings among both high commands; Conrad resented having to request German support, while the German response to these requests – openly attributing Austro-Hungarian reversals to tactical, organizational, and leadership deficits in the *k.u.k. Armee* – only generated more animosity.¹⁶⁹ At any rate, critical situation in Galicia and the resultant threat to

¹⁶⁵ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 158.

¹⁶⁶ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 246-247.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 194-195; Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 313.

¹⁶⁸ Kronenbitter, “Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern,” 124.

¹⁶⁹ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 194-195.

German Silesia impelled a redeployment of German forces in the East, and on 15 September, the OHL established a new 9. *Armee* in Silesia by transferring four corps from East Prussia.¹⁷⁰

On 18 September, the chief of staff of this new army, Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937) – former chief of staff of the victorious 8. *Armee* and future *Erster Generalquartiermeister* as well as de facto head of the OHL – met with Conrad for the first time at Neu Sandez. While Ludendorff expressed admiration for Conrad himself, his assessment of the *k.u.k. Armee* was likewise less than positive. He criticized the “huge excess of officers” in the Habsburg general staff, which he further described as “having too many theories” and as being “a stranger to war.” More pointedly, he criticized the lack of initiative shown by Austro-Hungarian officers and the broader weaknesses of the army that rendered it unable to carry out the “bold” plans of its “clever and distinguished” chief.¹⁷¹ At this point, not least of all on account of its poor performance thus far, the leadership of the German army showed no interest in military domination over its Habsburg ally; in fact, quite the opposite was true. On 23 September the OHL declared its opposition to overly close cooperation with the *k.u.k. Armee*, as such close ties would jeopardize the German army’s operational freedom. Nevertheless, at the same time, the two general staffs agreed on the necessity of a coordinated offensive in the East, which was to be conducted by the Austro-Hungarian armies in Galicia in conjunction with the neighboring 9. *Armee*. In this instance, a German thrust into Russian Poland was intended to facilitate a Habsburg counteroffensive to drive back the Russian armies in Galicia.¹⁷²

The Habsburg-German autumn offensive in the East during September and October 1914, which ultimately resulted in defeat for the Central Powers, marked the first instance of direct, large-scale cooperation between the Austro-Hungarian and German armies.¹⁷³

Correspondingly, it was during this campaign that the ambivalent, strained dynamic that characterized Habsburg-German military cooperation for the rest of the war first manifested itself. In light of recent military disasters and the distasteful necessity of soliciting German support, Conrad was determined to achieve victory on his own terms to as great of an extent as possible in order to restore both his own personal credibility as well as that of the Monarchy. Consequently, he refused to transfer large *k.u.k.* formations to Russian Poland in

¹⁷⁰ Buttar, *Collision of Empires*, 239.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 316; Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 59-60.

¹⁷² Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 247.

¹⁷³ For a more detailed account of the Central Powers’ 1914 autumn offensive, see Buttar, *Collision of Empires*, 314-355.

support of the German offensive to the Vistula, fearing that they would then fall under German operational command.¹⁷⁴

Operational and tactical coordination between the 9. *Armee* and the adjacent *k.u.k.* 1. *Armee* was also poor, not least of all because of the determination of the Habsburg leadership to maintain its independence. At one point in mid-October, the OHL induced Kaiser Wilhelm himself to directly appeal to Emperor Francis Joseph (1830-1916, r. 1848-1916) for a joint concentration against Warsaw. At Conrad's urging, Archduke Friedrich (1856-1936), the nominal commander-in-chief of the Austro-Hungarian military, refused this request so that the Habsburg 1. *Armee* could conduct its own offensive plan.¹⁷⁵ Inter-military relations at lower levels were also often less than harmonious. The Habsburg liaison officer assigned to the German forces advancing on the Vistula made a point of highlighting, perhaps even exaggerating the Germans' lack of success.¹⁷⁶ The eventual failure of Habsburg-German efforts in the second half of October predictably generated mutual resentment. The Austro-Hungarian formations in 1. *Armee*, for example, resented the failure of the German *Garde-Reserve-Korps* to support their attack the Russian bridgehead at Ivangorod. For their part, the increasingly hard-pressed German troops on the left bank of the Vistula faced the inability of 1. *Armee* on the opposite bank to advance with a mixture of irritation and resignation.¹⁷⁷

One consequence of the failure of the Central Powers' autumn offensive was the first instance of lower-level integration between the Austro-Hungarian and German armies. In the aftermath of the Habsburg-German retreat from the Vistula, the Austro-Hungarian 2. *Armee* was transferred north in order to maintain continuity with the German 9. *Armee* massing around Łódź and linking 2. *Armee* in turn to the *k.u.k.* 1. *Armee* further south was the German *Armeeabteilung Woyrsch* (Army Detachment Woyrsch, abbreviated AA Woyrsch) under the Prussian GO Remus von Woyrsch (1847-1920). Comprised of Silesian *Landwehr* formations, the AA Woyrsch, originally the *Landwehrkorps*, had briefly fallen under Austro-Hungarian operational control in September, and during the autumn offensive had formed the link between the German and Habsburg armies.¹⁷⁸ In November, the *Landwehrkorps* – which at this point, also had operational control over the Habsburg 27th Infantry Division (*k.u.k.* 27. *Infanterie-Truppen-Division*) – was expanded to an army-level command and again subordinated to Habsburg operational control, the first time in the war that Austro-Hungarian

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 338.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 339.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 341-343.

¹⁷⁸ Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 40-41.

and German divisions and brigades were combined.¹⁷⁹ In November and December 1914, 2. *Armee*, in close cooperation with German formations – especially the *Armeeabteilung Woyrsch* – fended off limited Russian attacks south of Łódź.¹⁸⁰ The parlous state of Habsburg forces in Galicia at the end of the year also necessitated German support. The dispatch of the German 47. *Reserve-Division* in December to the *k.u.k.* 4. *Armee* south of Krakow, where it participated in the Austro-Hungarian victory at Limanowa–Lapanow, represented but the beginning of an increasingly integrated Habsburg-German war effort in the East.¹⁸¹

Carl von Bardolff was chief of staff of 2. *Armee* under *General der Kavallerie* (GdK) Eduard von Böhm-Ermolli (1856-1941) during this period, and he devoted considerable space in both of his works to his experiences working with the Germans in late 1914 and early 1915. Before the war, Bardolff had been a member of Franz Ferdinand's (1863-1914) military cabinet, where he cultivated good relations with the German military and naval attachés. In his memoir, he praised his German colleagues for their attempts to learn and engage with Austria-Hungary's internal issues, as well as their ability to ameliorate difficulties in inter-allied relations. At the same time, Bardolff "greatly regretted" the very limited contact he had with the German attachés during this time, lamenting that closer cooperation would have been a "very natural" preparation for the war.¹⁸² Bardolff's postwar life and career is also important to consider when evaluating his retrospective depiction of wartime relations with the German army. A convinced pan-German nationalist and racist, Bardolff was chairman of the right-wing *Deutscher Klub* in Austria and subsequently served as an officer in the *Wehrmacht* during the Second World War.¹⁸³

Bardolff's account of 2. *Armee*'s relationship with German command authorities in 1914-1915 is on the whole positive, though not without clear allusions to conflicts and tensions between Habsburg and German personnel. Bardolff recognized the weaknesses of the *k.u.k. Armee* of 1914 in comparison to its German ally as well as the necessity of German support for Austria-Hungary on the Eastern Front. He painted this support as a natural, intrinsic part of a military alliance as a common undertaking, not failing to mention the similar service rendered by the *k.u.k. Armee* hitherto in facing the brunt of Russian offensive efforts in 1914. Likewise, Bardolff emphasized the heroic nature of the Austro-Hungarian defeat in Galicia, not failing

¹⁷⁹ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 252; Buttar, *Collision of Empires*, 388-390.

¹⁸⁰ Buttar, *Collision of Empires*, 388-390.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 397.

¹⁸² Bardolff, *Soldat im alten Österreich*, 119-120.

¹⁸³ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 220.

to note the numerical and material discrepancy as well as the supposed unreliability of certain nationalities in contrast to the sacrifices made by German Austrians.¹⁸⁴

For the Habsburg-German military relationship, in *Deutsch-österreichisches Soldatentum im Weltkrieg*, Bardolff fundamentally attributed any tensions and misunderstandings between the armies to the German lack of knowledge of Austria-Hungary and its army.¹⁸⁵ Conversely, with regard to 2. *Armee* and its German counterparts in 1914-1915, he credited the positive relationship there to a “lack of prejudice towards each other.”¹⁸⁶ Towards the end of the booklet, he emphasized how for him and Böhm-Ermolli, it was “always a pleasure to work with the Germans.”¹⁸⁷ In his memoir, however, Bardolff, alluded much more to the resentments that arose from the clear power imbalance between the armies, noting that the Austro-Hungarian dependence on the Germans defined the nature of their cooperation and that this distinction “had its disadvantages here and there.”¹⁸⁸ Later in the text, Bardolff indeed expressed some of these mixed feelings himself, noting how German help in the East “came late” and that this assistance did generate concerns for prestige and reputation among Habsburg officers concerned for their own capabilities.¹⁸⁹

Overall, however, Bardolff placed the most emphasis on the significance of this episode for the history of Habsburg-German relations and the fundamentally positive, functional nature of the relationship. According to Bardolff, the 2. *Armee* staff, upon its transfer to Silesia in November, felt immense joy at the prospect of closely working with the Germans. He similarly noted how both Conrad and Freytag sent telegrams expressing their well-wishes and underscoring the significance of 2. *Armee*’s deployment as the first instance of large-scale close cooperation between Habsburg and German formations. The army staff was correspondingly greeted with a warm reception in Oppeln by its German liaison officer.¹⁹⁰ Bardolff detailed how significantly intermixed Habsburg and German formations had become by early 1915, to the extent that it required significant staff work to disentangle them.¹⁹¹ Upon the transfer of 2. *Armee* to the Carpathians in early 1915, Woyrsch even sent a telegram – reprinted in Bardolff’s text – in which he expressed his warmest gratitude for 2. *Armee*’s

¹⁸⁴ Carl von Bardolff, *Deutsch-österreichisches Soldatentum im Weltkrieg*, 20-23.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 20-21.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. 37.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 39.

¹⁸⁸ Bardolff, *Soldat im alten Österreich*, 119-120.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 236-237.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 221-223.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 225.

“outstanding achievements” in its cooperation with AA Woyrsch as well as his “highest regard” for the officers and men of the Habsburg formation.¹⁹²

To be sure, Bardolff made clear that relations were not entirely smooth, notably recalling an incident in the Carpathians in early 1915 between 2. Armee and the neighboring German *Südararmee*.¹⁹³ In a dispute concerning command arrangements in the face of an Austro-Hungarian withdrawal, the command of *Südararmee* sent Bardolff’s staff a “very petulant” (*sehr gereizt*) telegram, just as the AOK transferred the right-flank formations of 2. Armee to German command. Böhm-Ermolli and Bardolff subsequently appealed to the AOK, threatening to resign. Only a personal visit and a formal, “very polite” apology from the *Südararmee* chief of staff – arranged by the AOK – resolved the episode. In his memoir, Bardolff nevertheless put a rather positive spin on this series of events, posing the question “what can trust, camaraderie, and chivalry not overcome?”¹⁹⁴ For Bardolff, coalition warfare between Austria-Hungary and Germany was definitely not smooth, but commitment to the common purpose and, above all, communication and reciprocal recognition between the allies could overcome all frictions. For all these reasons, liaison officers and their particular qualities were essential. According to Bardolff, even those Habsburg officers who mistrusted and resented the “Prussians” were overall satisfied with the form of cooperation with the Germans. Moreover, even though there certainly were those on both sides who “did not want anything to do with a ‘Prussian’ or an ‘Austrian’,” they were “of no use” and could “only do harm.”¹⁹⁵ In the end, Bardolff likewise stressed the mutual acceptance of differences as key to establishing a good rapport: “whenever the German comrade snarled in Prussian, then I blustered back in Austrian.”¹⁹⁶

Bardolff’s depiction of Habsburg-German military relations at the army level – not without friction, but basically positive – contrasts sharply with the contemporary relationship between the high commands of the two armies. The beginning of joint operations in autumn 1914 – as well as the lack of success of said operations – triggered an intense debate between AOK and OHL concerning overall leadership of Central Powers forces on the Eastern Front. During the operations in October, Conrad was fiercely critical of 9. Armee’s “adventure” on the Vistula,

¹⁹² Ibid. 226.

¹⁹³ See below in the section on 1915.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. 235; See also Bardolff, *Deutsch-österreichisches Soldatentum im Weltkrieg*, 37-38.

The exact quote is “was können Vertrauen, Kameradschaft und Ritterlichkeit nicht alles überwinden!”

¹⁹⁵ Bardolff, *Soldat im alten Österreich*, 227-228.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 228. The exact quote “Wenn einmal der deutsche Kamerad preußisch schnarrte, dann polterte ich österreichisch zurück.”

particularly regarding the separate command arrangements and resultant lack of coordination, especially as Conrad believed that the OHL was still preoccupied with the Western Front. At the same time, he consistently refused additional German support during the autumn offensive, fearing that increased German participation would justify a German takeover. Nevertheless, given the dire situation at the end of October, Conrad found himself forced to request with even more urgency the large-scale transfer of German forces to the East.¹⁹⁷ This, however, did indeed precipitate deliberations in both militaries on the question of unified command. Conrad had already refused to countenance the subordination of the *k.u.k. 1. Armee* to German operational control during the offensive, and could only envision a unified command under the AOK, which was clearly not an option for the Germans. After a series of high-level discussions between Austro-Hungarian and German military and diplomatic authorities in early November, in which the Germans made their serious interest in the matter clear, a proposal developed by German deputy Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann (1864-1940) received the approval of Francis Joseph's military chancellery. Under this arrangement, Archduke Friedrich would function as the nominal head of a joint supreme command, with Ludendorff serving as his chief of staff. Conrad and *Generalfeldmarschall* (GFM) Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934), who had just been appointed supreme commander of German forces on the Eastern Front (*Oberbefehlshaber Ost*, hereafter abbreviated *Ober Ost*), would respectively command the Habsburg and German armies in the East.¹⁹⁸

Even though Francis Joseph and Archduke Friedrich were willing to concede to this arrangement – not least of all because of mounting criticism of Conrad's leadership – Conrad threatened his resignation, and in the end, this first attempt at establishing a unified high command for Habsburg and German forces on the Eastern Front had failed by 6 November. The question would not be revisited again until 1916. Conrad subsequently justified his opposition to a joint supreme command in both practical and terms; practically, he asserted that the German military lacked all understanding – and therefore sensibility – for the realities of maintaining and commanding a multiethnic force like the *k.u.k. Armee*. In political terms, he framed his opposition as the defense of Austro-Hungarian self-determination in the face of German domination, though the element of self-interest in preserving his own authority as de facto head of the Austro-Hungarian military cannot be ignored.¹⁹⁹ In addition to setting the stage for Conrad's persistent suspicion of German intentions, which characterized the rest of

¹⁹⁷ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 249-250.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 252-255.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. 254-256.

his tenure as Habsburg chief of the general staff, the experiences of September-November 1914 established the basic pattern for the relationship between Conrad and the OHL until his dismissal in March 1917. In times of difficulty, Conrad would demand German support, complaining bitterly when it was not forthcoming and invariably attributing Austro-Hungarian reverses to a lack of German assistance. However, as the German presence on the Eastern Front grew, the OHL increasingly insisted on greater and greater control of operations in which German formations were involved, which only stoked Conrad's resentment.²⁰⁰ This inverse relationship, in which greater German participation in combined operations increased the resistance of the AOK to German control, ensured that all of the arrangements for combined operations would be ad hoc, resting on uneasy compromises. The AOK consistently sought to preserve at least nominal command of Habsburg forces, therefore safeguarding its prestige, while the OHL endeavored to protect its formations from the consequences of expected Austro-Hungarian failures.²⁰¹

The basic contours of the Habsburg-German military relationship established more or less on the spot in 1914 – increasingly collaborative, but simultaneously increasingly combative – continued to develop in 1915. Correspondingly, the year would witness not only two large-scale and resoundingly successful joint offensives by the Austro-Hungarian and German armies, but also the almost complete breakdown of relations between the two high commands by year's end. This ostensibly contradictory result was in fact the logical consequence of the Central Powers' military success. Both chiefs of the general staff, Conrad and his German counterpart Erich von Falkenhayn (1861-1922), were ultimately most concerned with their own strategic priorities and autonomy; Conrad and the AOK in particular strove to uphold Habsburg sovereignty and prestige in the face of a growing power imbalance with Germany. The successful offensives of 1915 consequently provided the Austro-Hungarian and German military leadership with the freedom to once again to their separate strategic ways.²⁰² In this sense, closer cooperation between the Habsburg and German armies in the field paradoxically facilitated less coherent and coordinated coalition warfare on the macroscopic level.

Conrad never forgave the Germans for their supposed "faithlessness" in failing to launch a supporting offensive from East Prussia in August 1914, in contravention of Moltke's vague prewar promises. He characterized the Habsburg catastrophe in Galicia not only as a consequence of the failure of the German Empire to live up to its alliance obligations – both

²⁰⁰ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 187, 199.

²⁰¹ Kronenbitter, "Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern," 129.

²⁰² Ibid. 142-143.

for failing to conduct a supporting effort in the East and for failing to achieve victory in the West – but also as an Austro-Hungarian sacrifice insufficiently appreciated by its German ally.²⁰³ Conrad was not alone in his resentment of the Germans. Kageneck detected palpable *Schadenfreude* at the AOK in October 1914 with respect to German reversals in France, while the Austro-Hungarian representative at the OHL, Joseph Stürgkh, noted during Conrad's visit to the German headquarters in January 1915 the duplicity of the other Habsburg officers present, who all spoke ill of the Germans behind closed doors. However, it was indeed Conrad who most pointedly expressed the widespread antipathy and suspicion of the Habsburg upper ranks towards the Germans when he greeted Stürgkh with the question, “so what are our secret enemies, the Germans, up to, and what is that play-actor, the German Kaiser, doing?”²⁰⁴ While Conrad remained increasingly dependent on German military assistance, he remained “in the depths of his heart” hostile to the Germans, suspicious of their motives and deeply resentful of their “brutal arrogance and inconsideration” and “custom to denigrate all that is Austrian.”²⁰⁵ For his part, Stürgkh echoed the feelings of humiliation and resentment felt by many Habsburg officers towards their reliance on German assistance, comparing his advocacy for Austro-Hungarian interests at OHL to “a beggar asking for alms.”²⁰⁶ To be sure, not all Habsburg officers – even in the AOK – shared Conrad's aversion to the Germans. Admiration for German military capabilities – and thus a critical appraisal of the Habsburg army and its leadership in comparison – also grew among many Austro-Hungarian officers as a result of wartime experiences.²⁰⁷

On the other side of the fence, many German officers possessed less than positive sentiments towards the Habsburg military and, above all, towards its officer corps. For their part, German officers expressed frustration at the Austro-Hungarian military's perceived incompetence and the supposed superficiality of its leadership, while also chafing at the perceptible resentment among Habsburg officers that the Germans interpreted as ingratitude.²⁰⁸ Pervasive German ignorance of the multiethnic Habsburg army as well as ethnic chauvinism also heavily colored German perceptions.²⁰⁹ Ludendorff's first personal experiences with Austro-Hungarian troops in the Carpathians in early 1915 are exemplary of this viewpoint. An encounter with a sentry

²⁰³ Schmitz, “Verrat Am Waffenbruder?” 385-387; Kronenbitter, “Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern,” 125-126.

²⁰⁴ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 190, 198.

²⁰⁵ Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 237-238, 230.

²⁰⁶ Shanafelt, *The Secret Enemy*, 46-47.

²⁰⁷ Kronenbitter, “Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern,” 135-136.

²⁰⁸ Shanafelt, *The Secret Enemy*, 43.

²⁰⁹ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 199.

who could not speak German did give Ludendorff for the first time a greater appreciation for the particular challenges of the *k.u.k. Armee* – which is perhaps more than could be said for many German officers. At the same time, his evaluation of Habsburg troops based on ethnic differences – contrasting the “brave and loyal” Germans and Hungarians with the supposedly treacherous Czechs and Romanians that undermined the combat capabilities of the former – was certainly not atypical for a German officer perspective.²¹⁰

Many in the German officer corps were particularly critical of the Habsburg army’s high command, attacking both the physical and mental distance between Austro-Hungarian command authorities and their troops, with the comfortable – nigh luxurious – conditions and relaxed, almost peacetime atmosphere of the AOK headquarters at Teschen being a target of especially heavy criticism.²¹¹ Not all Habsburg officers were painted with the same brush. Archduke Friedrich as the figurehead of the Habsburg command commanded little respect among the Germans; Max Hoffmann (1869-1927), one of the most prominent German staff officers on the Eastern Front, described him as a “complete moron with a touch of the grand seigneur” (*ein kompletter Trottel mit dem Einschlag ins Grandseigneurtum*). Interestingly enough, Conrad enjoyed a better reputation among high-ranking German officers, who often praised his supposed strategic and operational brilliance.²¹² Nevertheless, the conviction that Austro-Hungarian troops could only perform well in conjunction with German forces and/or under German operation control gradually gained currency throughout the German officer corps.²¹³

One of the most detailed and illuminating sources on the Habsburg officer corps during the Great War – and of the German officer corps’ views towards it – is a 1917 memorandum written by Hans von Seeckt (1866-1936). Seeckt, the future chief of the *Reichswehr*, served in a number of staff positions on the Eastern Front and correspondingly accumulated much experience working with the *k.u.k. Armee*. Considered one of, if not the leading expert on Habsburg forces in the German army, he was tasked in 1917 with writing an assessment of the Habsburg army based on his experiences in 1915 and 1916, explicitly with a view towards proposing future reforms. While Seeckt acknowledged both the strengths and weaknesses of the Habsburg military, one of its most critical weaknesses in his view was indeed the officer corps.²¹⁴ Fundamentally, Seeckt condemned what he saw as the “self-satisfaction” of the

²¹⁰ Cited in Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 63-64.

²¹¹ Kronenbitter, “Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern,” 135.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 300.

²¹⁴ Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 25.

Habsburg military elite and its corresponding reluctance to consider reforms. In particular, he criticized the excessive theoretical knowledge and deficient frontline experience of Habsburg staff officers, as well as their resultant lack of interest in and understanding for the men in the field. Correspondingly, Seeckt identified the single biggest weakness of the Austro-Hungarian officer corps – at every level – as the lack of concern of Habsburg officers for the troops they commanded. His assessment was substantiated by a field report from an unknown German officer who described the disinterest of Habsburg officers in the welfare of their men – in stark contrast to the high emphasis placed on such in the Prussian/German military ethos – as truly appalling.²¹⁵

This perception of a fundamental difference in professional ethos and institutional culture between the Habsburg and German officer corps constituted a source of particular friction between the allies. A quote from Cramon exemplifies both the significance of this sticking point as well as the prevailing German attitude: “The *k.u.k. Armee*, including its officer corps, was already weak, the German still hard as steel. This was emphasized in public by the German side too often, which therefore caused displeasure and bitterness among our allies.”²¹⁶ Several high-ranking Habsburg officers agreed with Cramon’s assessment, alienated by the all too obvious German sense of superiority. Hermann Kövess von Kövesshaza (1854-1924) and Karl von Kirchbach auf Lauterbach (1856-1939), both Habsburg generals who closely collaborated with the Germans on the Eastern Front, complained of German “egoism” and the often tactless manner in which German officers – even liaisons – interacted with their Austro-Hungarian colleagues.²¹⁷ For his part, Cramon, who served as the German plenipotentiary at the AOK from January 1915 until the end of the war, worked very hard to cultivate good relations with both German and Austro-Hungarian command authorities, and was consequently well-regarded and valued by both.²¹⁸ He took great personal interest in the reform of the *k.u.k. Armee* and its closer integration with the German military apparatus, submitting several proposals for such a scheme over the course of the war.²¹⁹

As the individual most responsible for coordination between the German and Habsburg high commands, Cramon certainly faced a monumental task in mediating between Conrad and

²¹⁵ Ibid. 158-160.

²¹⁶ Kronenbitter, “Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern,” 135. The original quote is “Die *k.u.k. Armee* einschließlich des Offizierkorps ist schon weich, die deutsche noch stahlhart. Deutscherseits ist dies unnötig oft in der Öffentlichkeit betont worden und löste daher Missvergügen und Bitterkeit bei unseren Bundesgenossen aus.”

²¹⁷ Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 227-228.

²¹⁸ Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 146-147.

²¹⁹ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 200.

Falkenhayn, who had succeeded Moltke as chief of the German General Staff in September 1914. Much has been made of the personality conflict between the two men, who in terms of physique, temperament, and communication style could not have been more different; Falkenhayn's open disdain for Austria-Hungary and his blatant assertion of Germany's preeminence in the alliance certainly did not ameliorate matters either.²²⁰ Conrad likened the meeting with Falkenhayn in January 1915, in which he requested German assistance for the beleaguered Habsburg lines in the Carpathians, to "a victor dictating terms to a vanquished enemy."²²¹ However, the fundamental – and insoluble – conflict between the two lay in Falkenhayn's appraisal of the Central Powers' strategic dilemma. In his view, the Central Powers could only achieve an operational victory of sufficient strategic importance in the West. Therefore, all other theaters were of secondary importance – including the Eastern Front shared with Austria-Hungary.²²² Falkenhayn's strategically grounded reluctance to divert forces from the Western Front was only reinforced by his low opinion of the Habsburg army, whose reliability was a constant subject of concern for the OHL during his tenure. Throughout the winter and spring of 1915 – and generally throughout his tenure as chief of the general staff – he was loath to dispatch forces to the East unless absolutely necessary.²²³

The relationship between the AOK and the OHL was further complicated by the internal power struggle in the German military between Falkenhayn and his supporters on the one side and Hindenburg and Ludendorff at *Ober Ost*, as well as their numerous partisans in the German government and military on the other. Given their persistent advocacy for the prioritization of the Eastern Front – and therefore, their own area of command – the duo at *Ober Ost* often found themselves in at least partial agreement with Conrad's interests. Their influence thus constituted another source of pressure on Falkenhayn in his dealings with the AOK.²²⁴ In December 1914/January 1915, for example, before Falkenhayn reversed his earlier refusals, *Ober Ost* notably offered to dispatch formations from their own command to aid Conrad's efforts in the Carpathians. Not for the last time in the years 1915-1916, *Ober Ost* even envisioned a grand, sweeping pincer movement of German and Habsburg armies in the East in exact accordance with Conrad's perennial fixation.²²⁵

²²⁰ Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 48-50.

²²¹ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 197.

²²² Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 314-315; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 300-301.

²²³ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 92-93; Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 157-158.

²²⁴ Kronenbitter, "Von Schweinehunden und Waffenbrüdern," 131-132.

²²⁵ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 93-95; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 303.

In the end, Conrad's active solicitation among German political and diplomatic authorities – which triggered a brief political crisis among the German military leadership – impelled the OHL to send four German divisions to the Carpathians in January 1915 to support Conrad's offensive plans. Along with three Austro-Hungarian divisions, these were organized into the new South Army (*Südarmee*) under the command of GdI Alexander von Linsingen (1850-1935). A combined force from its inception and under the operational control of the AOK, both the *Südarmee* as a whole as well as its constituent formations represented a milestone in the close tactical and operational cooperation of the Habsburg and German armies.²²⁶ The heavy losses incurred by Habsburg forces in the brutal stalemate in the Carpathians necessitated the deployment of another German formation in March 1915, the *Beskidenkorps* under (GdK) Georg von der Marwitz (1856-1929), which was to be held as an operational reserve for the AOK.²²⁷ While German formations in the Carpathians largely experienced the same difficulties of weather, terrain, and supply as their Habsburg counterparts, the Austro-Hungarian need for German troops to hold up their faltering lines pointed to a growing inability of the Habsburg army to achieve any significant results without German support.²²⁸

Linsingen is an intriguing example of a prolific German practitioner of coalition warfare. He spent much of his service on the Eastern Front in command over mixed formations and/or under the operational command of the AOK, but he was apparently not well-suited to such a role. Theodor von Zeynek, who as chief of staff of the *k.u.k. 7. Armee* had to cooperate closely with *Südarmee* during the subsequent Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive, described Linsingen and his chief of staff Stolzmann as “exaggerated examples of the Prussian character” who “seemed cold-hearted” and “did not engage our sympathies,” and therefore “communications over operations were lacking.” Linsingen apparently refused to treat his Habsburg colleagues as equals, which resulted in poor operational coordination with neighboring Austro-Hungarian armies.²²⁹ Upon the later replacement of Linsingen by the Bavarian GdI Felix von Bothmer (1852-1937), Zeynek remarked that the relationship with *Südarmee* “instantly took on a character of friendly cooperation.” Bothmer apparently had the diplomatic skill necessary to

²²⁶ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 300-303. For a history of the Carpathian campaign of 1915, see Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 57-76, 118-156.

²²⁷ Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 148.

²²⁸ Ibid. 156.

²²⁹ Cited in Ibid. 251. Original quote in Zeynek and Broucek, *Ein Offizier im Generalstabskorps erinnert sich*, 230.

command mixed Habsburg-German formations, though even he did not fail to remark upon the apparent unreliability the Austro-Hungarian troops under his command.²³⁰

The experience of Habsburg-German cooperation in the Carpathians, marked from beginning to end by disagreements between the AOK and the OHL as well as German criticism of Habsburg capabilities, left a lasting impression on relations between the two militaries, cementing antipathy between certain officers in both armies. Cramon criticized the “timidity” of Habsburg generals, while Ludendorff railed against Austrian “arrogance, lack of will to resist, and incompetence.” Marwitz noted that German troops should not be overly mixed with Austrian units, and if that were necessary, command over the Austro-Hungarian formations should be asserted. Conrad averred that Austria-Hungary should “abandon its attitude of chivalry towards the Germans.”²³¹ According to Rauchensteiner, the “crumbing façade” of alliance camaraderie gave way to an “alliance of necessity,” although antipathies largely remained hidden. Outwardly, however, the “*Waffenbrüderschaft*” was publicly celebrated with slogans of loyalty, solidarity, camaraderie, and common purpose, many of which appeared in postcards, poems, paintings, and sculptures, as well as on coffee mugs, bowls, jugs, and other merchandise in both countries.²³² At the same time, the experience of Habsburg troops fighting under German command showed that they often performed better, potentially exhibiting a form of “manager effect” in which the desire to impress the allied authorities induced grater efforts. The sensitivity to German military opinion also manifested at higher levels in the continued proclivity of the AOK to summarily dismiss poor performing commanders.²³³

While the winter and spring battles in the Carpathians certainly proved formative for Habsburg-German military relations on the Eastern Front, subsequent operations in 1915 had even greater significance for the evolution of the Central Powers’ coalition warfare. The great Habsburg-German offensive of spring and summer 1915, beginning with the breakthrough at Gorlice-Tarnów in May, not only dramatically altered the strategic balance of the war, but also constituted the largest – and certainly most successful – combined operation of the Dual Alliance partners until autumn 1917.²³⁴ Ironically, despite his completely contrasting strategic priorities, much of Falkenhayn’s strategic planning in 1915 was ultimately dictated by the

²³⁰ Ibid. 286, 343. Original quote also found in above cited page of Zeynek.

²³¹ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 309.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid. 310.

²³⁴ For an operational history of the Central Powers’ summer offensive of 1915, see Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 157-360.

necessity of propping up Austria-Hungary.²³⁵ In addition to preventing further Habsburg reversals on the Eastern Front, the offensive was particularly intended to deter neutral powers – specifically Italy and Romania – from declaring war on the weakened Habsburg Monarchy.²³⁶ Consequently, in April 1915, Falkenhayn resolved to send four corps to Galicia as part of a new 11. *Armee* which, in conjunction with the neighboring *k.u.k.* 4. *Armee*, aimed to break through the Russian lines between the towns of Gorlice and Tarnów. Interestingly, Falkenhayn initially concealed his deliberations from Conrad until less than a month before the offensive began; Cramon, through a purposeful indiscretion, revealed the OHL's plans to Conrad by enquiring about the rail transport capacity south of Krakow. Even then, Conrad only learned of the full extent of Falkenhayn's plans more than a week later.²³⁷

The command arrangements for the joint offensive were a complicated compromise intended to protect the prestige of both armies. 11. *Armee* – to which the *k.u.k.* VI. *Korps* was directly subordinated – was placed under the command of GdK August von Mackensen (1849-1945), with Hans von Seeckt as his chief of staff. Mackensen also received operational command over the Habsburg 4. *Armee* on his northern flank. In turn, 11. *Armee* was formally subordinated to the AOK, which for its part was bound to make important decisions only with the agreement of the OHL. Initially, the only formal objective was to achieve a breakthrough, as Conrad and Falkenhayn disagreed on the feasibility of certain operational objectives.²³⁸ To facilitate management of operations and improve communication with the AOK, Falkenhayn and the majority of OHL personnel relocated at the beginning of May from Charleville-Mézières in France to Pless in Silesia, located just a short drive away from the AOK in Teschen. However, in comparison to the Western Front, the OHL largely gave Mackensen free rein in operational matters.²³⁹ The continued role of German internal conflicts in the command question is important to note; Falkenhayn's agreement to the above compromise had just as much to do with his desire to exclude Hindenburg and Ludendorff at *Ober Ost* from control over operations as with the relationship with the Austro-Hungarians.²⁴⁰ This arrangement initially displeased Conrad, given that real operational control lay in German hands, but Mackensen, aided by Cramon, managed to maintain good communication and, therefore, largely workable relations with the AOK. Indeed, the complicated, improvised common

²³⁵ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 304.

²³⁶ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 313.

²³⁷ Ibid. 311-312.

²³⁸ Ibid. 312-314.

²³⁹ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 306-307.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. 321.

command structure implemented for the Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive, based on individual arrangements between the high commands, established the basic template for Habsburg-German military cooperation on the Eastern and Balkan fronts until 1916.²⁴¹

The Austro-Hungarian and German forces launched their offensive on 2 May, concentrating 126,000 men with 457 light and 159 heavy guns, 260 machine guns, and 96 mortars in a thirty-kilometer section of the front, where the Habsburg-German formations possessed twice the manpower and forty times the heavy artillery compared to the Russian troops facing them. The results exceeded the expectations of both high commands; a steady progression of breakthroughs in May and June ultimately resulted a general Russian retreat along almost the entire Eastern Front. Habsburg Galicia was liberated and, conversely, the armies of the Central Powers occupied large swathes of Russian territory. The Russian Army suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties as well as hundreds of artillery pieces in the initial weeks of the offensive; by the end of 1915, Russian casualties for the year approximated 1.5 million, a devastating blow even for the populous Tsarist Empire. The end result was a complete reversal of the strategic situation of the Central Powers on the Eastern Front, granting Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany both the strategic initiative as well as vital breathing space, and thus allowing both allies to divert resources elsewhere.²⁴² As the other successful large-scale joint offensive of the Austro-Hungarian and German armies during the war – and thus a natural point of comparison for the later offensive on the Isonzo – it is worth examining the operations of spring/summer 1915 in some detail.

The breakthrough at Gorlice-Tarnów and the subsequent advance of the Austro-Hungarian and German armies in summer 1915 illustrated the continued evolution of the inter-military dynamic established in 1914. One aspect underscored by the by the offensive was the material, and to some extent, tactical superiority of the German army, to a great degree a product of its experiences on the Western Front. The concentration of German heavy artillery and the intricate and intensive preparation of the four-hour barrage, facilitated by aerial reconnaissance and an organized fire plan – a practice previously unknown on the Eastern Front – was critical to the success of the initial breakthrough.²⁴³ In the further course of operations in May and June, the German army's advantage in firepower and its more

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy* 314-315; Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 123-125; Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 359-360.

²⁴³ Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 173; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 314-315.

deliberate tactical employment likewise proved to be the decisive element.²⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive was a combined operation between the Habsburg and German militaries – a joint operation of unprecedented scale for the two allies thus far – and, on the whole, progressed fairly smoothly. The Austro-Hungarian authorities organized – quite successfully – the logistical support for the German formations in Galicia, without which the provision of German heavy artillery and the requisite large quantities of ammunition would have been impossible.²⁴⁵

Months of sustained, large-scale close cooperation between Austro-Hungarian and German formations revealed the complicated, ambivalent state of relations between the personnel of the two armies. On the one hand, the arrival of substantial German forces in Galicia in 1915 elicited an overwhelmingly positive reaction from Austro-Hungarian troops along the entire Eastern Front. An *Oberst* Bridler, a Swiss observer embedded in the *k.u.k. Armee*, described a “confident, triumphant, and assured mood” at the front, though he did still note a difference in enthusiasm between German and Habsburg troops. Moreover, Bridler observed a particular enthusiasm among Hungarian soldiers for the German presence, as the Magyars “recognized the Reich Germans as the protectors and liberators of their country” and “made no pretense of their greater sympathy for them than for the German Austrians.”²⁴⁶ This enthusiasm, and its effect on the combat performance of Habsburg troops, only increased in the aftermath of the successful breakthrough, especially among the troops of the *k.u.k. VI. Korps* under the command of Arthur Arz von Straussenburg, who were directly subordinated to 11. *Armee* and fought in close tactical cooperation with the neighboring Prussian *Gardekorps*.²⁴⁷ On the whole, both the Habsburg troops of 11. *Armee* and those of the flanking Austro-Hungarian performed well, which Mackensen attributed to “the proximity of the *Pickelhaube*.” His assessments of Conrad, Arz, and 4. *Armee* commander Archduke Joseph Ferdinand (1872-1942) were similarly positive.²⁴⁸ Nevertheless, in the course of subsequent operations, as the Austro-Hungarian armies on his flanks, slowed by logistical issues, failed to keep pace, Mackensen opined, “if only I had only German troops,” as in his estimation Austro-Hungarian soldiers were “not hardy enough for the demands of war.” In July, the OHL even dispatched the head of its Operations Section to Teschen in an attempt to expedite the Habsburg

²⁴⁴ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 129-130; Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 195.

²⁴⁵ Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 172, 194.

²⁴⁶ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 313.

²⁴⁷ For Arz’s experiences as a corps commander during the 1915 offensive, see Arz von Straussenburg, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges*, 57-92.

²⁴⁸ Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 190-192, 203-204.

advance.²⁴⁹The Central Powers' further advance in summer 1915 was indeed characterized by repeated disputes between Habsburg and German command authorities, usually revolving around German criticism of the inability of Habsburg formations to keep pace with the advance and their reliance on German formations to withstand Russian counterattacks.²⁵⁰

Even, perhaps especially in victory, the issue of prestige and the Austro-Hungarian sensitivity in such matters played a significant role in inter-military relations. The recapture of the great Habsburg fortress of Przemyśl, which Austro-Hungarian operations had repeatedly failed to relieve previously, by a Bavarian division – and Mackensen's subsequent show of "laying the fortress at Francis Joseph's feet" – rankled both the AOK and the imperial court in Vienna. After the initial breakthrough, the AOK had insisted that Habsburg troops liberate Przemyśl.²⁵¹Their failure to do so seemed an especially pointed and painful indication of the Habsburg army's inferiority compared to its German ally. For his part, Mackensen commented on this episode by contrasting the Austrians' "lack of confidence and self-belief" with military feats that only the "Prussian spirit" could supposedly achieve, asserting that the "excellent" Bavarian troops in question shared this spirit.²⁵²Subsequently, Mackensen made sure however that Habsburg troops were the first to liberate Lemberg(Lwów/Lviv), the Galician capital. Despite being in many ways an archetypal Prussian officer, Mackensen's personal qualities and his diplomatic skill – including his acute sensitivity to Habsburg prestige concerns – quickly ensured his great popularity both within the Habsburg military as well as among the broader Austro-Hungarian population. He subsequently led combined Central Powers forces in Serbia and Romania, and is widely considered to be the most able German practitioner of coalition warfare during the Great War.²⁵³ Cramon likewise assessed Mackensen to be the most well-loved German commander in the Habsburg army along with Woyrsch and Bothmer; in contrast, according to Cramon, Hindenburg was "too serious and awe-inspiring," Ludendorff "too cutting and hard," and Falkenhayn "too restless and strong-minded."²⁵⁴

The joint offensive operations of the Habsburg and German armies in 1915, despite their success, continued to exhibit the same frictions over command that had bedeviled all previous combined efforts. In the course of the offensive, Mackensen's 11. *Armee* eventually received

²⁴⁹ Ibid. 225, 297.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 247, 288-290.

²⁵¹ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 321; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 313; Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 210.

²⁵² Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 229.

²⁵³ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 321; for a description of Mackensen, see Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 164-167.

²⁵⁴ Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 167.

operational authority over the Habsburg 3. And 2. *Armeen*, in addition to the 4.²⁵⁵ The Habsburg liaison officer at 11. *Armee*, *Oberstleutnant* Julius Lustig-Prean, noted that during the offensive of 1915, the AOK had effectively ceded control to the Germans, in his view even losing influence over the course of operations.²⁵⁶ An indication of the balance of power was that Falkenhayn, despite his ultimate acceptance of joint command arrangements – which in their nominal structure, propitiated Austro-Hungarian prestige concerns – resolutely refused to allow the AOK to interfere in the assignment of commanders to the German forces under AOK operational control.²⁵⁷ Conrad, true to form, nevertheless contested this loss of authority bitterly. One notable episode from July 1915 revolved around AA Woyrsch, which was still directly subordinated to the AOK. During a dispute between Woyrsch's command and the AOK over operational plans, Falkenhayn directly intervened on behalf of the German staff, ultimately asserting his will over Conrad's orders to his own subordinate forces.²⁵⁸

By the time the Central Powers' advance began to stall in late summer, Falkenhayn signaled his intention to end offensive operations and withdraw substantial German forces for use on other fronts. Predictably, the AOK and OHL were at loggerheads with their strategic priorities; Conrad, whose plans of a grandiose pincer movement – once again supported by *Ober Ost* – had once again been denied by the OHL, preferred a combined offensive in Italy,²⁵⁹ whereas Falkenhayn – aiming to secure the Central Powers' southeastern flank, proposed an operation against Serbia. Falkenhayn again prevailed, once more asserting his views by virtue of Imperial Germany's superior position. In any case, the end of the offensive in the East resulted in the widespread – though by no means total – “de-mixing” of Habsburg and German forces, as combined commands were dissolved and German troops redeployed²⁶⁰

The triumph of the Central Powers' summer offensive was bittersweet for Conrad, given the obvious leading role played by German forces and the AOK's loss of authority on the Eastern Front. An attempt to conduct a solely Austro-Hungarian offensive at Lusk in September 1915 – for which Conrad explicitly rejected German assistance beforehand – backfired spectacularly. The subsequent humiliation of requesting German support in the sector – which resulted in the subordination of all formations there under a German army group command,

²⁵⁵ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 321.

²⁵⁶ Broucek, “Die deutschen Bemühungen um eine Militärkonvention mit Österreich-Ungarn (1915–1918),” 445, n. 19.

²⁵⁷ Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 286.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. 302.

²⁵⁹ See below.

²⁶⁰ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 449–454; Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 318–319.

albeit under AOK control – and the OHL’s admonition against Habsburg “adventurism,” severely damaged Austria-Hungary’s standing with the German Empire. While Austro-Hungarian troops were able to withstand a Russian offensive at the turn of the year 1915-1916 with notable success, the net results of the year’s fighting seemed to indicate that the *k.u.k. Armee* was unable to achieve offensive success without substantial German assistance.²⁶¹

The Central Powers’ joint Serbian offensive in October-November 1915 – a combined Austro-Hungarian, German, and Bulgarian operation – seemed to confirm this assessment.²⁶² Fundamentally, a German intervention in the Balkans – considered by the Habsburg leadership to be its sphere of influence – represented in itself a blow to the monarchy’s power and prestige, and thus lent Habsburg-German cooperation there a palpable element of rivalry.²⁶³ The command arrangements correspondingly aroused controversy, and in the end, a similar arrangement was implemented as previously in Galicia. A German army group under Mackensen held overall operational command over all other Central Powers armies, but was once again formally subordinated to the AOK, whose directives were bound to OHL approval. Orders to Bulgarian formations had to be cleared with the Bulgarian general staff – by the German chain of command – and the German elements of Mackensen’s command were directly subordinated to the OHL. This time, however, the complicated, face-saving arrangements of nominal Habsburg authority were somewhat more transparent, a fact only underscored by the inability of AOK to transfer sufficient forces to the *k.u.k. 3. Armee* in Symria; *3. Armee* ultimately received German divisions instead.²⁶⁴

While the combined forces of the Central Powers were once again victorious in Serbia, in less than two months achieving what three separate Austro-Hungarian offensives in 1914 could not, the successful joint operations significantly increased tensions between the AOK and the OHL, which came to a head over the course of November 1915. Conrad and Falkenhayn once more disagreed on the further conduct of operations; Conrad wanted to continue the Balkan offensive, whereas Falkenhayn, already fully preoccupied with preparations for his planned offensive at Verdun, was finished with sideshows. In the end, to prevent Conrad from entangling German forces in his plans, he withdrew eight of the ten German divisions in the Balkans, in contravention of previous agreements. In retaliation, Conrad, railing against the degradation of the AOK as a “mere conveyor of German orders,” unilaterally dissolved the

²⁶¹ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 166-167, 199; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 457.

²⁶² For the operational history of the Serbian campaign, see Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 361-388.

²⁶³ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 461-462.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 463-464; Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 368-369.

unified command arrangements in Serbia, removing all Austro-Hungarian formations from Mackensen's authority.²⁶⁵ The consequence of this, as well as Conrad's unilateral invasion of Montenegro in January 1916, a notable success for the Habsburg military, temporarily resulted in a complete breakdown of communications between Pless and Teschen. Falkenhayn raged to Cramon that Conrad was "impossible to work with."²⁶⁶

While the Austro-Hungarian and German high commands soon re-established contact in early 1916, they largely did not re-establish cooperation. At the beginning of 1916, the two armies turned away from combined operations and instead prioritized their own separate offensive plans: for Conrad, the long-awaited "Punishment Expedition" (*Strafexpedition*) against Italy, and for Falkenhayn, his long-delayed offensive on the Western Front.²⁶⁷ Rauchensteiner, in his assessment of Habsburg-German coalition warfare in 1915, concludes that "the common approach separated more than divided" Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany.²⁶⁸

3. The Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo – Strategic Dimensions and Operational History

As amply illustrated above, by 1916 the Habsburg and German armies had accumulated extensive experience conducting joint operations with each other. And yet, with one notable exception, this military collaboration had thus far not extended to the Habsburg Monarchy's other major theater of the war – the Italian Front. Up until autumn 1917, the Italian Front therefore constituted an anomaly in the Austro-Hungarian war effort as well as in the Habsburg-German military relationship. The reasons for the German absence in Italy for the first two and a half years of hostilities there were multifaceted – strategic, military-practical, as well as political – and up until the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, this state of affairs suited largely suited both Austro-Hungarian and German interests. In fact, as will be demonstrated below, there was considerable resistance among the Habsburg and German leadership to a German intervention in Italy, and the combined offensive of autumn 1917 was the product of stark necessity ultimately overcoming these countervailing forces. In this respect, the Habsburg-German offensive on the Isonzo – and more generally, the entire history (or lack thereof) of the Dual Alliance military relationship in Italy – exemplify the discord between the Habsburg and German military leadership illustrated above.

²⁶⁵ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 471-473.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. 473-475.

²⁶⁷ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 204-205; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 474, 477.

²⁶⁸ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 471.

In her above cited book on the Anglo-French coalition during the Great War, Greenhalgh applies the concept of military effectiveness developed by Alan Millett and Williamson Murray to coalition warfare, analyzing coalition military effectiveness as the political, strategic, operational, and tactical levels. The success of coalition warfare depends on the resolution of issues between allies at every level. Political and grand strategic interests must be aligned, and the material i.e. economic basis must likewise be established; at the operational and tactical level, combat efficacy is largely the product of harmonization between two different military institutions. Greenhalgh asserts that these issues, fundamentally endemic to coalition warfare, were exacerbated by the sheer scale and intensity of the Great War.²⁶⁹

This chapter will analyze the alliance-political strategic context as well as the operational history of the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo through this prism of military effectiveness. The emphasis here is on the striking discrepancy between the political/strategic and operational/tactical cohesion of the Habsburg-German alliance. The prehistory of the Central Powers' Italian offensive, the course of operations, and the circumstances surrounding their conclusion were all characterized and correspondingly influenced by ambivalent relationship between the supreme political and military authorities of both allies. In contrast, at the operational/tactical level, the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo demonstrated the ability of the Habsburg and German armies to conduct successful joint operations, a capability developed through years of military cooperation and significant integration on other fronts. In terms of its operational success, the 1917 Isonzo offensive can be seen as the zenith of the military capabilities of the Dual Alliance.²⁷⁰

3.1. The Transformation of Alliance Relations in 1916

Just as the Dual Alliance partners were going their separate ways on the grand strategic level, their Entente opponents were endeavoring to do the exact opposite. At the Chantilly Conference in December 1916, representatives from Britain, France, Russia, and Italy agreed to pursue a more coordinated common effort in 1916, with the aim of overwhelming Austria-Hungary and the German Empire via simultaneous offensives on the Western, Eastern, and Italian fronts. The Central Powers, by pursuing their respective "special wars" in France and Italy, thus not only inadvertently played right into the hands of their enemies by further dividing their already overstretched forces, but also thereby neglected their common

²⁶⁹ Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition*, 4-5.

²⁷⁰ Hadley, *Military Diplomacy in the Dual Alliance*, 201-202.

operations on the Eastern Front.²⁷¹ Aside from the Romania campaign, Austria-Hungary and Germany thus largely only conducted joint defensive operations until autumn 1917.

Nevertheless, this period witnessed major political and military upheavals that would ultimately create the conditions for a German intervention on the Italian Front. One of the major consequences of the crisis year of 1916 was a fundamental shift in the military relationship between Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany, which reflected both the former's vastly increased dependence on that latter as well as the growing divergence of interests between the Dual Alliance partners at the highest political and diplomatic levels.

By 1916, the societies of both Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany were showing acute signs of war exhaustion as casualties mounted and resource shortages multiplied, with no end to the fighting in sight.²⁷² The internal situation was markedly worse in Austria-Hungary, with the first food riots in Vienna erupting in May.²⁷³ The superior demographic and material resources of the enemy coalition were beginning to manifest at the front; in 1916, the 289 divisions of the Central Powers faced 356 of the Entente, while the discrepancy in materiel – above all, in artillery and munitions – became more and more pronounced.²⁷⁴

While the armies of the Dual Alliance had largely prevailed in 1915, the cost was enormous; by the beginning of 1916, the *k.u.k. Armee* had suffered more than 2.5 million casualties since the beginning of the war, including almost 57,000 officers and NCOs.²⁷⁵ The Austro-Hungarian and German armies both faced with the monumental task of replacing millions of casualties and adjusting to the material, tactical, organizational, and psychological demands of the war of material.²⁷⁶ The enormous casualties suffered by the *k.u.k. Armee* in 1914-1916 constituted a significant problem not just in terms of manpower, but also for the cohesion of the army. The near-constant crises at the front, the desperate need for replacements and resulting organizational expedients often disrupted the ethnic balance of Austro-Hungarian units. Likewise, the loss of the prewar professional officer corps and the growing reliance on reserve officers also posed difficulties. Reserve officers generally possessed poorer foreign language abilities compared to their professional counterparts and, in the view of the army leadership, were more likely to espouse nationalist sentiments. Consequently, the loyalty of reserve officers, especially those of Czech, Serb, Romanian, or Italian ethnicity, was often

²⁷¹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 280-281, 300-301.

²⁷² Ibid. 330-331.

²⁷³ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 499.

²⁷⁴ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 277.

²⁷⁵ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 451.

²⁷⁶ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 280-287.

questioned by Habsburg – and German – high-ranking officers.²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the Austro-Hungarian army had also successfully adapted to modern warfare in many ways, above all – in comparison to the army of 1914 – in the area of armaments, possessing both quantitatively as well as largely qualitatively greater complements of artillery, mortars, machine guns, and hand grenades.²⁷⁸

After the Eastern Front stabilized in the autumn of 1915, Austro-Hungarian forces began to construct an extensive, heavily fortified, multizone trench system along the frontlines, incorporating some of the techniques developed by the German army on the Western Front, including the erection of deep, reinforced dugouts. While the extent of the defenses did vary from sector to sector, such a figure as Alexander von Linsingen – commander of the eponymous army group (*Heeresgruppe*, hereafter HG) largely consisting of Habsburg formations – was impressed upon his inspection of the works.²⁷⁹ Unfortunately, by June 1916, the defensive combat power of Habsburg-German front south of the Pripyat had reached a low ebb. Not only had the AOK withdrawn the best Habsburg divisions and the majority of the heavy artillery on the Eastern Front for the offensive in Italy, but Austro-Hungarian (and German) soldiers along the front had grown complacent, feeling invincible in their well-constructed trenches.²⁸⁰ However, just as problematic were the pervasive issues in leadership as well as command and control. Not unexpectedly, one German general criticized the distance – both physical and mental – of Habsburg staffs on the Eastern Front from their formations in the field. Likewise, the Austro-Hungarian defenses, while ostensibly physically formidable, were often inconsistent in layout, while the defending formations largely lacked reserves.²⁸¹

At the same time, however, the nature of the chain of command on the southern sector of the Eastern Front, in which Habsburg and German command authorities were deeply intermeshed, was also a complicating factor. Despite the efforts towards “de-mixing” at the end of 1915, the “Austro-Hungarian” sector of the Eastern Front south of the Pripyat Marshes still consisted of mixed formations and joint command arrangements. The German-led *Südararmee* – largely composed of Habsburg troops – was positioned between the *k.u.k.* 7. and

²⁷⁷ Buttar, *Russia's Last Gasp*, 47.

²⁷⁸ For more on the changes in the organization and equipment of the *k.u.k.* Armee by 1916, see: Peter Jung, *The Austro-Hungarian Forces in World War I (1): 1914-16* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 8, 20-25, 35-37; Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph*, 193.

²⁷⁹ Buttar, *Russia's Last Gasp*, 80-81, 129-130.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. 132; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 524-525.

²⁸¹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 307.

2. *Armeen*, and the aforementioned HG Linsingen – which included the Habsburg 4. *Armee* – formed the northern flank of the sector under AOK command.²⁸² Relations between the Habsburg and German command authorities here were particularly poor. In his previous commands, Linsingen had been unable to establish positive working relations with his Habsburg colleagues, and his relationship with 4. *Armee* commander Archduke Joseph Ferdinand in 1915-1916 were colored by mutual hostility. The archduke deeply resented being subordinated to a Prussian officer, and at one point their rivalry even set off a promotion duel between the AOK and OHL; after Joseph Ferdinand had been promoted to *Generaloberst* in February 1916 – thus outranking Linsingen – Falkenhayn arranged for Linsingen to be promoted to the same rank, going so far as to backdate the promotion to precede that of Joseph Ferdinand.²⁸³

Even though the Russian Brusilov Offensive, launched on 4 June, did not take the Habsburg-German forces by surprise, a combination of the aforementioned issues of command and control, the poor quality of Habsburg personnel, deficient tactics, as well as the effects of Russian preparation and offensive tactics resulted in disaster. Within days, large segments of the Central Powers' front collapsed; by the end of June, the k.u.k. *Armee* on the Eastern Front had suffered nearly half a million casualties.²⁸⁴ The AOK was forced to petition the OHL for aid almost immediately. However, the OHL, furious with Austro-Hungarian “fragility” and with German forces already stretched thin, demanded guarantees in the form of increased German control over the Eastern Front. Linsingen forced through the dismissal of Joseph Ferdinand and large Austro-Hungarian formations were transferred to the control of his army group.²⁸⁵ A heated dispute between Habsburg and German command authorities erupted over the proposed appointment of Seeckt as “senior chief of staff” of the disintegrating k.u.k. 7. *Armee*. Zeynek, then chief of staff of that army, refused to be subordinated to a German officer in his own staff and applied for an extended leave.²⁸⁶ Falkenhayn subsequently suggested the subordination of the entire Eastern Front south of the Pripyat Marshes to a unified command under Mackensen, which Conrad promptly refused. A later proposal from the OHL to establish a joint army group under Archduke Charles, heir to the Habsburg throne, with Seeckt as his chief of staff, ultimately prevailed at the end of July, after pressure

²⁸² Buttar, *Russia's Last Gasp*, 67-68.

²⁸³ Ibid. 130-131.

²⁸⁴ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 306-309.

²⁸⁵ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 527-530.

²⁸⁶ Ibid. 530.

from the rest of the Austro-Hungarian political and military leadership forced Conrad to concede.²⁸⁷

The course of operations in the East in the summer of 1916, above all the multiple failed counterattacks of Habsburg and German forces, predictably generated considerable recrimination between the allied armies. The contrast between the two halves of the Eastern Front – *Ober Ost* had enjoyed markedly more success in fending off the Russian offensives – combined with Hindenburg's well-established renown resulted in calls – notably, also within the Austro-Hungarian government – to establish a unified supreme command on the Eastern Front under Hindenburg's leadership.²⁸⁸ Notably, the proposal was supported and opposed by different factions within the governments and militaries of both powers; in Austria-Hungary, the issue was contested between the supporters/detractors of Conrad, whose position in the AOK was increasingly being called into question, while in the German Empire the divide coalesced around the pro- and anti-Falkenhayn camps. In the end, this effort to establish an all-encompassing united front command failed as well; in late July, Hindenburg's authority was extended somewhat further south – not to the entire front – and for the armies south of the Pripyat, he was bound to the directives of the AOK. In theory, such arrangements would ease command and control and facilitate the coordination of the allied armies.²⁸⁹

This back and forth over command arrangements on the Eastern Front was ultimately overshadowed by changes at the very top of the German military leadership. At the end of August, his leadership discredited by the crises on every German front, Falkenhayn was forced to resign as chief of the German general staff. The final straw was the Romanian declaration of war on Austria-Hungary, a possibility Falkenhayn had hitherto dismissed. In his stead, Hindenburg and Ludendorff ascended to head the so-called "Third" OHL. Ludendorff, now the guiding force behind the OHL, was determined to wage the war with the radicalism and ruthlessness that befitted its nature as a total war, aiming to dramatically change the German war effort both in the field and on the home front.²⁹⁰ One of the first steps taken by the Third OHL was to revive the subject of a joint supreme war command. Various proposals for a unified command for all the Central Powers had circulated since 1915, closely connected with discussions surrounding a potential military convention between Austria-Hungary and

²⁸⁷ Ibid. 530-533.

²⁸⁸ Ibid. 533-534.

²⁸⁹ Ibid. 537-540.

²⁹⁰ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 326-329.

the German Empire.²⁹¹ While the question of a military convention continued to be debated, Austria-Hungary could no longer resist on the question of supreme command. More dependent on German military assistance than ever after the Brusilov Offensive and the Romanian declaration of war in August, the Habsburg military acceded to the establishment of the Supreme War Command (*Oberste Kriegsleitung*, hereafter OKL). This agreement subordinated the military forces of the entire Central Powers alliance to the supreme authority of Wilhelm II – and by extension, the OHL. The agreement stipulated that the general staffs of each power regularly send information to the OHL and gave the German high command the authority to coordinate large-scale operations, which included the power to move formations and regulate command relationships.²⁹²

The OKL was not quite as complete of a centralization of power as it seemed. In every matter, the German Kaiser was to seek the agreement of his allied monarchs. In particular, Austria-Hungary managed to secure the insertion of a secret clause intended to ensure the special consideration of its interests.²⁹³ Nevertheless, the OKL represented a significant step, if mostly a symbolic one, in the progressive subordination of the Habsburg army to German control. German political and military figures made no secret that this was their express goal. Ludendorff was expressly interested in incorporating Austria-Hungary and its resources into his plans for a revamped war economy. Cramon, for his part, thanked God that the German General Staff had more or less taken control over all measures of the Central Powers, declaring it the beginning of a new era.²⁹⁴ It must be noted though that by no means all in Austria-Hungary – even in the Austro-Hungarian military were opposed to a greater concentration of authority in the hands of the Germans. The disasters of 1916 had greatly shaken the faith of many in the Habsburg government and military in the abilities of Conrad and the current military leadership; many Habsburg staff officers – even those in the AOK, like then *Pressereferent* Edmund Glaise von Horstenau – had considerable sympathy for the German military leadership.²⁹⁵

In contrast to the early war period, when real low-level military cooperation between the armies was only established in dire emergencies, the upheavals of 1916 led to a much greater degree of integration between lower-level formations. German divisions were more frequently

²⁹¹ Broucek, “Die deutschen Bemühungen um eine Militärkonvention mit Österreich-Ungarn (1915–1918),” 445–449.

²⁹² Ibid. 449–451.

²⁹³ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 551–552.

²⁹⁴ Ibid. 552–553.

²⁹⁵ Ibid. 545–546.

subordinated to Austro-Hungarian corps, especially to reinforce important and/or threatened sectors. In a similar vein, German battalions were sometimes assigned to Habsburg divisions and at a personnel level, some German noncommissioned officers were attached to Habsburg units. From 1916, some Austro-Hungarian armies on the Eastern Front, considering their composition, were almost as “German” as Austro-Hungarian. In many ways, this progressive integration was symptomatic of Austro-Hungarian weakness, as well as German mistrust in Habsburg combat capabilities.²⁹⁶ By late July 1916, eighteen German divisions were deployed south of the Pripyat Marshes as so-called “corset-stays” (*Korsettenstangen*) to hold surrounding Habsburg formations together. As part of its comprehensive strategy to fundamentally refashion the war effort of the Central Powers, the Third OHL also sought to reform the organization and armament of the *k.u.k. Armee*. German artillery was allocated to Habsburg divisions on the Eastern Front, while German training courses in the new defensive and offensive tactics of the Western Front were opened to the participation of Habsburg officers.²⁹⁷ German authority over joint operations was established almost from the beginning in the operations against Romania, where Falkenhayn was sent to command a mixed Austro-Hungarian and German force. The Habsburg-German counteroffensive in the Carpathians was another marked success, though the rapid conquest of the country quickly led to bitter conflicts between Habsburg and German authorities over the division of material spoils.²⁹⁸

The course of combined operations in 1915, despite the significant contribution of the *k.u.k. Armee*, had already underlined the fact that the military relationship between Austria-Hungary and the German Empire was not a partnership of equals.²⁹⁹ The military disasters suffered by the Habsburg Monarchy in 1916 not only exacerbated this discrepancy, but consolidated it. On the Eastern Front, the formerly “Austro-Hungarian” segment of the frontline, the subordination of Austro-Hungarian formations to German commands and the insertion of German officers into Austro-Hungarian formation and unit staffs established de facto German control over the front.³⁰⁰ The OKL, though vague in its provisions and soon to be discarded by the new Habsburg monarch anyway, was a formal admission of the subordinate role of the Habsburg Monarchy in the Dual Alliance. While the new Austro-Hungarian government under Charles I would endeavor to assert its independence from its German ally in 1917,

²⁹⁶ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 316-317.

²⁹⁷ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 271-272.

²⁹⁸ For an operational history of the Romania campaign of 1916, see: Buttar, *Russia's Last Gasp*, 294-398; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 737-738.

²⁹⁹ Buttar, *Germany Ascendant*, 359-360.

³⁰⁰ Buttar, *The Splintered Empires*, 53.

including in military matters, the events of 1916 had largely solidified the widespread, unequal integration of the Habsburg and German armies on the Eastern Front. The question remained though of if and how this dynamic would extend to what was soon to become Austria-Hungary's primary theater of the war: the Italian Front.

3.2. The Italian Front and the Habsburg-German Military Alliance

The separation of the Italian Front in the organization of this thesis reflects the fact that from 1915 until 1917, with one notable exception, Italy lay almost entirely outside of the framework of the Habsburg-German military coalition. While events in Italy absolutely did have direct, discrete consequences for the Habsburg war effort – the Eastern Front in 1916 comes to mind above all – the Italian Front was a Habsburg “private war” until the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo.³⁰¹

The history of Habsburg-German diplomacy surrounding the threat of Italian intervention against the Dual Monarchy in 1914-1915 exemplified how far the German political and military leadership were willing to subordinate Austro-Hungarian interests to German alliance politics – namely to prevent neutral countries from entering the ranks of the Central Powers' enemies.³⁰² As noted above, the Triple Alliance of 1882 was explicitly a defensive alliance. The fact that Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, as well as a particularly cynical interpretation of prior Habsburg treaty commitments to “compensate” Italy for any gains in the Balkan region, not only allowed the Italian government to refuse to assist its Triple Alliance allies upon the outbreak of war, but also established a pretext for Italy to increasingly insist upon Habsburg territorial concessions – from the territory of the Dual Monarchy itself – in autumn/winter 1914-1915.³⁰³ The Imperial German government played an active role in mediating between the Habsburg and German governments during this time, with the German ambassador to Italy Bernhard von Bülow (1849-1929), previously the German Reich Chancellor from 1900 to 1909, playing the key role. The German government was anxious to prevent an Italian entry to the war on the side of the Entente at all costs, and therefore repeatedly, often emphatically encouraged the Habsburg government to accede to Italian demands.³⁰⁴ While not all in the Habsburg government were opposed to the possibility – Conrad, interestingly enough, reluctantly supported the notion for military-strategic reasons –

³⁰¹ Manfred Rauchensteiner, “Einleitung,” in: *Waffentreue: die 12. Isonzoschlacht 1917; Begleitband zur Ausstellung des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs, 23. Oktober 2007 - 1. Februar 2008*, ed. Manfred Rauchensteiner, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (Wien: Fassbaender, 2007), 3-12, here 4.

³⁰² Kořalka, “Deutschland und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918,” 139.

³⁰³ Bridge, “Österreich(-Ungarn) unter den Grossmächten,” 342-345.

³⁰⁴ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 359.

most Austro-Hungarian political figures were resolutely opposed; Francis Joseph even declared that he would rather abdicate than cede the Trentino. Indeed, the Italian demands affected core territories of the Dual Monarchy, many of which had been under Habsburg rule for over four hundred years. Many in the Austro-Hungarian government and military were understandably outraged that their German ally was so willing, even insistent upon pawning away Habsburg territories in what amounted to yielding to the extortion attempts of a nominal ally.³⁰⁵

For their part, German politicians and officers viewed Austro-Hungarian intransigence on the issue of concessions as arrogant, shortsighted, and egotistical, assessing a hostile Italy as a potential mortal blow to the overstretched forces of the Central Powers. Interestingly, in light of Imperial Germany's entry into the war in support of Austria-Hungary, some interpreted the refusal of concessions as both supreme ingratitude and a manifestation of both Austrian pride and Austrian incompetence. Moritz von Lyncker (1853-1932)³⁰⁶, chief of the Prussian Military Cabinet and a passionate Austrophobe, remarked: "...how they imagine the war with Italy is anyone's guess; one might think they would rather go under 'with honor' and take us with them into the abyss." Bülow expressed in a private letter his incredulity that Austria-Hungary "by virtue of its incompetence" would "...after they pulled us into this war...send another two million enemies after us."³⁰⁷ As chancellor, Bülow had in fact first popularized in a 1909 speech the terms "*Nibelungentreue*" ("Nibelung loyalty," a reference to the ethnic/cultural solidarity of the 'Germanic' Hohenzollern and Habsburg states) and "*Schicksalgemeinschaft*" ("community of fate") with regards to the Dual Alliance; the very same Bülow later remarked in 1915 that *Nibelungentreue* did not preclude the "necessary and useful influencing" of Austria-Hungary.³⁰⁸ Adolf Wild von Hohenborn (1860-1925), then Prussian War Minister, echoed this chauvinism when he wrote to his wife that a loss of territory from the "dying camel that is Austria" would in itself be "irrelevant" to the German Empire, but Italy's intervention would be dangerous for the overall military situation.³⁰⁹ Thus, ironically in light of both such elevated rhetoric of solidarity and the original nature of the Dual Alliance as a defensive pact, the threat of an Italian attack on Austria-Hungary only further laid bare the discord and divergence of interests at the heart of the Habsburg-German

³⁰⁵ Ibid. 370-371, 378.

³⁰⁶ See Lyncker's journal entries in: Holger Afflerbach (ed.), *Kaiser Wilhelm II. als Oberster Kriegsherr im Ersten Weltkrieg: Quellen aus der militärischen Umgebung des Kaisers 1914 – 1918* (München: Oldenbourg, 2005) for more of his vitriolic criticism of Austria-Hungary.

³⁰⁷ Ibid. 369.

³⁰⁸ Kořalka, "Deutschland und die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918," 130, 151.

³⁰⁹ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 376.

alliance. Upon the Italian declaration of war, Conrad even declared that Italy had “duped Austria-Hungary for thirty years with German involvement.”³¹⁰

The exact opposite can be said for the collective reaction of the peoples of the Habsburg Monarchy. Italy’s declaration of war on its former Triple Alliance ally on 23 May 1915, described by Francis Joseph as “a perfidy of which history knows not the like,” provided a unifying impetus for the Habsburg Monarchy that was uniquely ubiquitous. The Italian “betrayal” attracted the indignation and anger of all the peoples of Austria-Hungary, both for its breathtaking cynicism and sheer perfidy as well as because of the direct threat it constituted to the German-, Slovene-, Croatian-, and Serbian-speaking populations of the Habsburg territories claimed by Italy. Yet another war with the Italian “hereditary enemy” – the fourth since 1848 – similarly galvanized the Habsburg military leadership. Thus, unlike Austria-Hungary’s other enemies, the Italian Front possessed the unique quality of being the closest equivalent to a genuinely popular “imperial” war.³¹¹ In April 1915, the aforementioned *Oberst* Bridler noted on the Eastern Front that neither the German Austrians nor the Hungarians hated the Russians, which supposedly undermined their will to resist Russian attacks. In contrast, according to Bridler, “only the Italian is hated from time to time” in the *k.u.k. Armee*, though “with ferocity;” his impression was that “a war with Italy would be fought with murderous passion.”³¹²

The commencement of hostilities directly threatened the predominantly German-speaking Alpine provinces of Austria, and thus promoted a particular enthusiasm among their inhabitants, as exemplified by the 18,000 Tyrolean and Vorarlberger volunteer *Standschützen* who constituted a not insignificant component of the initial Habsburg defense in May-June 1915. However, despite the particular cultural significance of the Italian front for German-speaking Austrians, it is indeed important to note that in the course of the conflict, soldiers of all ethnicities from every part of the Habsburg Monarchy served on the Italian Front.³¹³ In fact, during the conflict it became apparent – even to the Habsburg army leadership, for whom the reliability and loyalty of particular nationalities was a constant obsession – that Austro-

³¹⁰ Ibid. 388.

³¹¹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 246-249; Günther Kronenbitter, “Die k.u.k. Armee an der Südwestfront,” in *Krieg in den Alpen: Österreich-Ungarn und Italien im Ersten Weltkrieg (1914 - 1918)*, ed. Nicola Labanca (Wien [u.a.]: Böhlau, 2015), 105-127, here 105-106.

³¹² Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 313.

³¹³ Ibid. 389; Christa Hämmerle, “Opferhelden? Zur Geschichte der k. u. k. Soldaten an der Südwestfront,” in: *Krieg in den Alpen: Österreich-Ungarn und Italien im Ersten Weltkrieg (1914 - 1918)*, ed. Nicola Labanca (Wien [u.a.]: Böhlau, 2015), 155-180, here 161-165.

Hungarian soldiers of every nationality fought reliably and often well in Italy, in contrast to other theaters.³¹⁴

The military dimension of the Dual Alliance's response to the Italian declaration of war only further underscored the above-mentioned divergence of Austro-Hungarian and German policy. At first, both Dual Alliance partners were primarily interested in the threat of a German deployment to the Italian border as a deterrent. Conrad requested a demonstrative deployment in Tyrol in January 1915, but this was refused by the OHL. In late April, Falkenhayn had informed the Italian military attaché in Berlin that, in the event of war, the German army would immediately dispatch twenty divisions to assist Austria-Hungary. However, subsequent discussions between Falkenhayn and Conrad revealed that this was pure bluster without any real intention behind it.³¹⁵ In mid-May, prior to Italy's formal entry into the war, Conrad proposed the suspension of the offensive in the East and an immediate joint offensive in Italy with twenty divisions. Falkenhayn, although forced to temporarily abandon plans for a combined attack on Serbia to allow for the transfer of Austro-Hungarian forces to the Italian border, refused.³¹⁶ Predictably, one major sticking point was the issue of command. Given the proximity to Bavaria, Falkenhayn made any large-scale German deployment to Tyrol contingent on German overall command, which Conrad naturally refused.³¹⁷ For this reason, as well as more fundamentally, the German unwillingness to become deeply entangled in a war with Italy, the OHL ultimately only dispatched one formation to Tyrol in 1915, the *Alpenkorps* under the command of Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen. Falkenhayn's primary concern was to protect Bavaria in the event of an Italian breakthrough in the Dolomites; correspondingly, the *Alpenkorps* received express orders to maintain a strictly defensive posture. Italy and the German Empire would in fact remain at peace until August 1916, when Italy, under diplomatic pressure from its allies, finally declared war on the *Reich*.³¹⁸

The deployment of the *Alpenkorps* to Tyrol from May to October 1915, while not particularly notable in an operational-historical sense, was of some significance in the history of

³¹⁴ Rudolf Jeřábek, "Militärisches Potential und Kriegsverlauf 1914-1918," in: *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848 - 1918. Band 11, Die Habsburgermonarchie und der Erste Weltkrieg, 1. Teilband, Der Kampf um die Neuordnung Mitteleuropas, Teil I, Vom Balkankonflikt zum Weltkrieg*, ed. Helmut Rumpler, Adam Wandruszka, and the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2016), 209-283, here 264-265.

³¹⁵ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 376.

³¹⁶ Ibid. 395; Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 132-133.

³¹⁷ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 396.

³¹⁸ Ibid. 397.

Habsburg-German military relations.³¹⁹ For one, until autumn 1917, the relatively brief sojourn of the *Alpenkorps* constituted the only significant German military presence on the Italian Front. Secondly, both the formation and deployment of the *Alpenkorps* during this period illustrates the complex, ambivalent relationship between the Habsburg and German militaries. Upon its arrival in South Tyrol, the *Alpenkorps* was subordinated to the local Austro-Hungarian command and deployed to the most active defensive sector. GdK Viktor Dankl (1854-1941), commander of Habsburg forces in Tyrol, supported a more active defense – i.e. involving localized counterattacks – and naturally sought to utilize the powerful German formation for such purposes. This was, of course, in direct contravention of the *Alpenkorps*' directives from OHL, and Falkenhayn even petitioned Wilhelm II for a direct order forbidding German troops from setting foot on Italian soil. In the resulting controversy, Dankl threatened to resign and Francis Joseph, enraged by the Germans' lack of solidarity, ordered his military chancellery in June to omit all references to the *Waffenbrüderschaft* in communications with German authorities.³²⁰

Relations between the *Alpenkorps* and Habsburg personnel were ambivalent. Alfred Jansa, then a staff officer at KdSWF, denigrated the German assistance as “merely a division,” whereas Alfred Krauss, at the time the KdoSWF chief of operations, gave the German liaison officer special treatment, letting him come and go at headquarters as he pleased.³²¹ In stark contrast to his publications, Krafft expressed strongly negative views of Habsburg officers and personnel in his private correspondence, comparing the “inferior” Austro-Hungarian army and its “incompetent” officers highly unfavorably to his German troops. Relations between lower-ranking personnel seem to have been decidedly more positive, with many of the *Standschützen* militiamen apparently finding more esteem and camaraderie with the Bavarian, Prussian, and Württemberg troops of the *Alpenkorps* than with the regular personnel in the *k.u.k. Armee*. In any case, despite the obvious tensions, both contemporary and subsequent public discourse celebrated the “Tyrolean Deployment” of the *Alpenkorps* as one of the most notable and praiseworthy manifestations of the Habsburg-German *Waffenbrüderschaft*.³²²

³¹⁹ For a recent, more critical history of the *Alpenkorps* in 1915 and its broader significance in historiography and popular memory, see Immanuel Voigt, *Das Alpenkorps an der Dolomiten-Front 1915: Mythos und Realität* (Bozen: Athesia, 2014). Older and more detailed, conventional military-historical works on the *Alpenkorps* are: Roland Kaltenegger, *Das deutsche Alpenkorps im Ersten Weltkrieg: von den Dolomiten nach Verdun, von den Karpaten zum Isonzo* (Graz [u.a.]: Stocker, 1995); Günther Hebert, *Das Alpenkorps: Aufbau, Organisation und Einsatz einer Gebirgstruppe im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Boppard am Rhein: Boldt, 1988).

³²⁰ Voigt, *Das Alpenkorps an der Dolomiten-Front 1915*, 67-75; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 398.

³²¹ Jansa and Broucek, *Feldmarschalleutnant Alfred Jansa: ein österreichischer General gegen Hitler*, 263, 266.

³²² Voigt, *Das Alpenkorps an der Dolomiten-Front 1915*, 98-106.

While the history of the *Alpenkorps* in 1915 does therefore embody many of the typical frictions of the wartime Dual Alliance, in other ways it also illustrates the fact that the Habsburg-German military relationship was neither completely antagonistic nor completely one-sided. The *Alpenkorps*, the first formation in the Imperial German Army specially trained, equipped, and organized for mountain warfare, was in fact heavily influenced by Austro-Hungarian military precedents in many regards. The Habsburg military was one of the first armies in the world to establish dedicated mountain warfare units, and therefore the *Alpenkorps* derived much of its organization and equipment from the mountain units of the *k.u.k. Armee* and *k.k. Landwehr*. During the war, the German *Alpenjäger* even directly utilized Austro-Hungarian mountain artillery pieces in its operations. Similarly, not only did *Alpenkorps* training adopt much from preexisting Austro-Hungarian manuals, but Habsburg personnel also directly participated in joint training exercises with the *Alpenjäger*.³²³ The famous Edelweiss insignia, already utilized by some Habsburg mountain units and later the general symbol of all subsequent German mountain units (*Gebirgsjäger*), was originally awarded to the *Alpenkorps* by the Habsburg command authorities in Tyrol. It is interesting to note, however, that the German army's official recognition of this "award" from Habsburg military authorities was not finalized for some time, as the matter became a subject of much bureaucratic wrangling.³²⁴ After Tyrol, the *Alpenkorps* would again conduct joint operations with Habsburg troops in Serbia, Romania, and of course, once again in Italy in 1917.³²⁵

After the withdrawal of the *Alpenkorps* in late 1915, the primary significance of the Italian Front in the framework of Habsburg-German military relations was its role as a source of strategic disagreement as well as its status as a Habsburg "separate war." Falkenhayn had repeatedly refused throughout 1915 to dispatch more German troops to Italy, and in early 1916 the Italian Front again became a point of contention between the high commands. Not only did Falkenhayn pointedly refuse to involve any German troops in Conrad's planned offensive in Tyrol (the aforementioned *Strafexpedition*), but the desire of both the OHL and the AOK to withdraw formations from the Eastern Front for their separate offensives – and of course, the concomitant demand for the opposite command to replace said formations – triggered more ill will between the armies.³²⁶ The fact that the AOK did not even initially

³²³ Kaltenegger, *Das deutsche Alpenkorps im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 28-36.

³²⁴ Voigt, *Das Alpenkorps an der Dolomiten-Front 1915*, 88-92; see also Kaltenegger, *Das deutsche Alpenkorps im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 40-42.

³²⁵ See Kaltenegger, *Das deutsche Alpenkorps im Ersten Weltkrieg* for the subsequent operations of the *Alpenkorps*.

³²⁶ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 477.

inform the OHL of its exact offensive plans for Italy is clearly indicative of this.³²⁷ Fundamentally, the question Italy increased mutual suspicion between the commands; Conrad felt that German business interests in Italy motivated its lack of intervention, whereas Falkenhayn saw a German intervention in Italy as only serving Austria-Hungary's interests.³²⁸ As noted above, Conrad's concentration of the *k.u.k. Armee's* best troops and the majority of its artillery in Italy for his offensive in May-June 1916 left the Eastern Front dangerously vulnerable to the eventual Brusilov Offensive. The *Strafexpedition's* ultimate failure and the simultaneous disaster in the East in fact convinced some Habsburg staff officers in the AOK that Cramon's proposal of a Habsburg redeployment to the Western Front was of some merit.³²⁹ The Habsburg Italian Front was naturally excluded from the progressive integration of Habsburg forces under German-dominated joint commands on the Eastern and Balkan Fronts. This independence from German influence, as well as the consequence that the largely successful defensive efforts from 1915-1917 were thus the sole achievement of the *k.u.k. Armee*, lent the Italian Front not only a special military-political status for the Habsburg military, but also a particular significance in the pride, self-belief, and self-image of the Austro-Hungarian officer corps.³³⁰

3.3. The Strategic Situation of the Central Powers in 1917

While Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany had weathered the storm of the great Entente offensives of 1916 without foundering, there was little occasion for triumphalism in 1917. Their armies, while still intact, were exhausted by a year of relentless battles of material, while their populations were suffering from widespread deprivation. The failure of diplomatic overtures at the end of 1916 seemed to render a negotiated peace a distant prospect.³³¹

There was a striking contrast between the increasingly radical, maximalist war aims of the Third OHL and the deteriorating strategic position of the Central Powers. Both resource shortages and morale problems were a growing problem for the German army in the field, which was beginning to show the same signs of strain as all other belligerent armies in 1917. These issues, combined with the ever-increasing material superiority of the enemy coalition, forced the German army to remain on the defensive on the Western Front, forced to fight off several major Anglo-French offensives in the spring and summer.³³² The Austro-Hungarian

³²⁷ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 242.

³²⁸ Ibid. 506.

³²⁹ Ibid. 424-425, 514.

³³⁰ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 155; Kronenbitter, "Die k.u.k. Armee an der Südwestfront," 116.

³³¹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 417.

³³² Ibid. 416, 460, 482-483.

army, despite ongoing reform efforts, suffered from resource shortages, a growing manpower deficit, as well as an increasingly severe desertion epidemic in the course of 1917.³³³ On their common Eastern Front, Habsburg and German forces successfully resisted the last major offensive of the disintegrating Russian army, though the relative fragility of Habsburg formations – as exemplified by a notable incident involving the mass rout of Czech troops – seemed to once again underscore the *k.u.k. Armee*’s dependence on its German ally. Nevertheless, the result was the gradual stabilization, and eventually neutralization of the Russian Front from July onwards and a resounding victory for the Dual Alliance.³³⁴ Indeed, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George had even compared Habsburg-German military cooperation – “Austrian guns and German infantry, with German infantry stiffening Austrian arms” – favorably to that of the Entente at the beginning of 1917.³³⁵

At the same time, the Russian Revolution in March and the United States’ entry into the war in April added a hitherto absent ideological dimension to the war, which constituted a major threat not only to the morale and discipline of the Central Powers’ armies in the field, but also exacerbated the legitimacy crisis of the Austro-Hungarian and German governments vis à vis their populations.³³⁶ On the home front in Austria-Hungary and the German Empire, the material situation – and as a consequence, the morale and cohesion of the wartime societies – continued to deteriorate. Indeed, the primary driving force behind the progressive destabilization of Austro-Hungarian and German society was deprivation and the distributional conflicts that accompanied and exacerbated it. The “Turnip Winter” of 1916-1917, which witnessed particularly acute shortages of food and fuel in both states, constituted a major turning point.³³⁷ The inability of both the German and Habsburg governments to effectively and fairly ration limited resources both undermined solidarity, particularly exacerbating ethnic tensions in Austria-Hungary, as well as severely damaged the legitimacy of the governments among their populations.³³⁸ In Austria-Hungary, the dualist political structure exacerbated the issue of resource allocation, particularly with regard to the food supply; the Hungarian government’s decidedly self-interested policies plagued relations with the Austrian government and contributed greatly to increased interethnic tension in the

³³³ Ibid. 506-508.

³³⁴ Buttar, *The Splintered Empires*, 138-192.

³³⁵ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 311.

³³⁶ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 450.

³³⁷ Ibid. 341.

³³⁸ Ibid. 357-59.

monarchy.³³⁹ From 1916, despite its considerable prewar agricultural base, the Habsburg Monarchy found itself increasingly reliant on German food imports.³⁴⁰

The social and political consequences of material deprivation were dire. In addition to exacerbating societal tensions and undermining government legitimacy, shortages also sowed division between the front and the home front, as in a reversal of the dynamic of 1914-1915, Habsburg and German soldiers often found themselves better supplied than their families back home.³⁴¹ On the home front, disaffection and desperation increasingly manifested as political unrest. Demonstrations and strikes had multiplied in frequency and grown in number of participants since 1916; in 1917, there were 252 public demonstrations in Bohemia alone. Political unrest in the Austrian half of the monarchy had climaxed in October 1916, when the socialist and radical pacifist Friedrich Adler (1879-1960) assassinated the Cisleithanian minister-president Karl von Stürgkh (1859-1916) in Vienna.³⁴² Political unrest continued to mount in both Austria-Hungary and in the German Empire in 1917. Widespread strikes and demonstrations occurred throughout the Habsburg Monarchy in Spring 1917, while in the German Empire, growing political divisions manifested in the peace debates in the Reichstag and the ousting of longtime Reich Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg (1856-1921).³⁴³

Probably the most consequential political change of 1916-1917 for the Habsburg-German military coalition however was the accession of Emperor Charles I in November 1916. Charles ascended the throne of the Habsburg Monarchy at an “incomparably critical” moment in its history.³⁴⁴ Unlike the relatively hands-off approach of Francis Joseph in his final years, Charles resolved to personally and actively intervene in all political and military matters in Austria-Hungary, determined to extricate his empire from the ravages of war, the threat of foreign domination, and the danger of internal dissolution. However, his reform efforts, while well-intended, ultimately achieved the opposite of his intentions. The dissolution of the de facto AOK military dictatorship in Cisleithania and the concomitant relaxation of censorship, amnesty of political prisoners, and reconconvocation of the Cisleithanian parliament all aimed to restore popular faith in and support for the monarchy, but were ultimately a case of “too little, too late,” in the end only hastening its dissolution. The amnesty of political dissidents and the

³³⁹ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 660.

³⁴⁰ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 342.

³⁴¹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 371-372.

³⁴² Ibid. 372-373.

³⁴³ Ibid. 455-459.

³⁴⁴ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 643.

relaxation of the army's disciplinary code in particular alienated both the Habsburg officer corps and the allied German military.³⁴⁵

This was a problem, as aside from political reform, perhaps the monarch's greatest priority was to establish his personal control of the military, with regards to both to the chief of the general staff and to the Germans. He had already dismissed Archduke Friedrich and assumed personal command of the military in December 1916. In February 1917, Conrad – as well as a number of other staff officers in the AOK – were removed and replaced by the monarch's chosen appointees. Many of the members of this "Second" AOK – including Arz, who replaced Conrad as chief of the general staff – were experienced troop officers, though it was noted by other contemporary Habsburg officers that there were few senior officers left to fill the higher posts. Arz in particular and the Second AOK in general were regarded as both pliant to the will of the monarch as well as largely dependent on the OHL with regards to major decisions, both of which resulted in a considerable loss of prestige for the AOK within the army.³⁴⁶ The relocation of the AOK to Baden bei Wien in February 1917, intended both to increase the monarch's personal control over the high command as well as improve its notoriously lack of military vigor, had the effect of significantly reducing the exchange of information with the OHL, now located in Bad Kreuznach in western Germany. Ironically, another consequence of this was the increased dependency of the Austro-Hungarian forces on the Eastern Front on the German command and logistical apparatus.³⁴⁷

In contrast to this reality on the ground, Charles was determined to reassert Austria-Hungary's military sovereignty at the highest levels. His relations with the German military had never been particularly warm. As heir to the throne, Charles had been offended by a remark made to him at OHL about the supposed inability of Habsburg soldiers to march; while his relationship with Seeckt when the latter was his chief of staff was largely cordial, Charles had been steadfastly opposed to the OKL.³⁴⁸ Now, as monarch, he viewed the Third OHL as a de facto military dictatorship, and was determined to escape its control; according to Glaise, he referred to Ludendorff as a "that vile Prussian" (*dieser ekelhafte Preuße*) and believed that after the war, Austria-Hungary needed to be more than a "Hohenzollen satrapy."³⁴⁹ Consequently, one of the first steps taken by Charles after his accession in 1916 was the de facto dismantlement of the OKL, which he viewed as patently incompatible with his

³⁴⁵ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 451-454.

³⁴⁶ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 686-689.

³⁴⁷ Ibid. 703.

³⁴⁸ Ibid. 631, 549.

³⁴⁹ Glaise von Horstenau and Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 427.

monarchical status and personal command of the military. Issues of joint command returned to the previous system of individual expedients agreed between the two high commands.³⁵⁰

The gaping power differential between the allies created certain fundamental tensions between the Dual Alliance partners. Imperial Germany's disproportionate military and economic power increasingly lent it the character of a hegemon, rather than an ally, and the expansive war aims of the Third OHL triggered resentment among war-weary Austrians and Hungarians, who did not want to sacrifice their lives and welfare for German interests. Likewise, as the German Empire increasingly constituted the essential prop maintaining the current dualistic political order from 1916, it increasingly drew the ire of those groups in Austria-Hungary opposed to the status-quo.³⁵¹ Moreover, even their joint military successes had created conflicts of interest between Austria-Hungary and the German Empire, above all surrounding occupation regimes and future political arrangements in Eastern and Southeastern Europe.³⁵² However, despite its growing fragility, Austria-Hungary was still Imperial Germany's most important and only reliable ally. Cramon was of the opinion that the Austro-Hungarians were only too well aware of the fact that propping up the Habsburg Monarchy was in the German Empire's interest, as "if Austria were to go to the dogs, Germany's demise would be the inevitable consequence."³⁵³ For its part, the AOK determined in a July 1917 report on the material conditions of the monarchy that its military and economic survival was inextricably intertwined with and dependent on the alliance with the German Empire.³⁵⁴

For Charles, however, all problems – military, economic, and diplomatic – were dominated by the question of the relationship to the German Empire. He not only viewed the alliance with Imperial Germany as an association of necessity but increasingly feared German hegemony and the reduction of the Habsburg Monarchy to satellite status as a nearly equal threat to military defeat by the Entente.³⁵⁵ Consequently, throughout 1916 and 1917, the Habsburg government conducted secret negotiations with the Entente powers aiming at securing a separate peace for Austria-Hungary. These efforts were ultimately doomed to fail – the interests of the Entente coalition increasingly militated in favor of the complete dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy, especially since it was at this point largely perceived as a German

³⁵⁰ Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 322.

³⁵¹ Ibid. 315-316.

³⁵² Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 269-270; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 738, 776.

³⁵³ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 540.

³⁵⁴ Ibid. 773.

³⁵⁵ Ibid. 598-99; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 318-320.

satellite. However, Charles efforts to extricate his realm both from the war and from the Dual Alliance underscore the deep divisions between Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany in 1917.³⁵⁶ The fact that Austria-Hungary refused to declare war on the United States in 1917, mirroring German policy towards Italy in 1915-1916, was but one particularly striking example of the significant strategic disharmony in the Dual Alliance.³⁵⁷

3.4. Plans for a Joint Offensive in Italy

Nevertheless, over the course of the summer of 1917, the situation of both Dual Alliance partners shifted to the extent that a reversal of the two above-mentioned long-term trends – the absence of a German presence on the Italian Front and the underlying strategic discord between Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany that explained this absence – occurred in a surprisingly short time span. The immediate causes of this reversal were military, namely a significant success for the Central Powers on the Eastern Front and a serious reversal for Austria-Hungary on the Italian Front. The longer-term causes, however, lay in the ultimate inability of Austria-Hungary to achieve military or geopolitical independence from the German Empire and the strategic necessity for Imperial Germany to prop up its foundering Habsburg ally. By late 1917, both of these realities were apparent, as was the perception that the strategic window for the Central Powers to achieve some sort of decisive military success was closing.³⁵⁸ The end result of this constellation of factors was the somewhat surprising unanimity between the two high commands – though not without reciprocal reservations – that a combined offensive in Italy was not only desirable, but imperative.

The immediate impetus for a joint Habsburg-German offensive in Italy was the progressively worsening position of the *k.u.k. Armee* in its “private war.” For more than two years, the Italian Front had remained a bloody stalemate, with comparatively little movement of the frontlines – even compared to the Western Front – at the cost of hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides.³⁵⁹ More than any other theater of the Great War, the Italian Front was determined by its geography, which could be divided into three broad regions: the Alpine region from South Tyrol to the Upper Isonzo and Carinthia; the region of the Isonzo river

³⁵⁶ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 683-684, 771-777; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 463-466.

³⁵⁷ Ibid. 649-650; Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 315.

³⁵⁸ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 774, 777; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 468.

³⁵⁹ For an overview of the history of the entire Italian Front, see: Labanca, “The Italian Front;” Jordan, *Krieg um die Alpen*, 215-271. For the Isonzo sector in particular, see: Wörsdörfer, *Isonzo 1915/17*. For an assessment of the organizational, tactical, and material development of the Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies with particular focus on assault troops, see Morisi, *Hell in the Trenches*, 294-307.

valley; and the Karst plateau region between the Isonzo and the Adriatic Sea.³⁶⁰ Contrary to popular memory in Austria and Italy, in which a romanticized, often idealized conception of the “war in the mountains” still predominates, the crucial sector of the Italian Front was in the south, between the Isonzo and the sea.³⁶¹ Given the extreme logistical limitations imposed on the movement of large armies by this geography, it had long been clear to Luigi Cadorna (1850-1928), the chief of the Italian general staff from 1914 to 1917, that the only possible route for a decisive offensive against the Habsburg Monarchy lay between the Alps and the Adriatic: across the Isonzo and the Karst to the major seaport of Trieste – a major Italian war goal – and then onwards through the “Ljubljana Gap” into the heart of the monarchy.³⁶²

Thus, from June 1915 to September 1917, the Italian army concentrated the majority of its strength in eleven separate offensives against Austro-Hungarian positions east of the Isonzo. While the Italian army did manage in the course of these offensives to gradually push back the Habsburg army across the Karst, aside from the capture of the city of Görz (Gorizia/Gorica) during the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo in August 1916, the ultimate result of all of these battles was heavy casualties for little tangible gain.³⁶³ Aside from the Tyrol Offensive of May-June 1916, the numerically-inferior *k.u.k. Armee* was been forced to remain on the defensive for the entirety of the war, largely relying on superior firepower and the stubborn resolve of its troops to endure these horrific material battles waged in appalling physical conditions.³⁶⁴ By 1917, both sides were suffering from physical and moral exhaustion, but the Italian advantage in manpower and materiel, combined with the dire manpower and supply situation in the Habsburg army began to turn the tide.³⁶⁵ The Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo in August-September was a particularly costly attritional struggle – both armies suffered over 100,000 casualties – but this time, the Italians managed to break through the Habsburg lines in several places, forcing the *k.u.k. Armee* to withdraw ten kilometers by mid-September. The Habsburg Isonzo Armies (*Isonzoarmeen*) under GO Svetozar Boroević (1856-1920), known as the “Lion of the Isonzo” for his successful defense of the sector since 1915, now found themselves at the breaking point. Lacking sufficient artillery, facing ammunition shortages, and lacking sufficient replacements for the casualties suffered, it seemed that the *Isonzoarmeen* might be able to withstand a twelfth Italian offensive. Given

³⁶⁰ Labanca, “The Italian Front,” 267-268; Jordan, *Krieg um die Alpen*, 87-97.

³⁶¹ Wörsdörfer, *Isonzo 1915/17*, 10.

³⁶² Labanca, “The Italian Front,” 269-270.

³⁶³ Ibid. 275-284.

³⁶⁴ Ibid. 275-277.

³⁶⁵ Ibid. 282-284.

the geography of the region and the layout of the rail network, a further withdrawal would necessarily be much further indeed, potentially even bringing the Italian army to the gates of Trieste or beyond. By the beginning of September, the gravity of the situation had impressed upon both Habsburg and German officers that something needed to be done to restore the Austro-Hungarian position in Italy.³⁶⁶

Despite the repeated, emphatic refusal of the OHL to intervene on the Italian Front, officers in both general staffs had developed plans for a joint Habsburg-German offensive in Italy by September 1917. Before his dismissal as chief of staff and reassignment to the army group in Tyrol, Conrad had developed yet another grand offensive scheme by early 1917: a sweeping, simultaneous two-pronged thrust from Tyrol and the upper Isonzo to completely encircle and destroy the Italian army in Venetia. Given the *k.u.k. Armee*'s obvious lack of strength to conduct such a grand operation alone, German assistance in the range of twelve to sixteen divisions was envisioned, but Hindenburg rejected this proposal in February 1917.³⁶⁷ Not all within the OHL agreed with Hindenburg and Ludendorff's disinterest in the Italian Front, however. Georg Wetzell (1869-1947), head of the Operations Section of the OHL from 1915 to 1918, was one of the few German officers who understood the realities of a multifront coalition war and correspondingly had a much more positive view of a potential German intervention in Italy. In late 1916, he presented a memorandum to Ludendorff underscoring the potential of a German offensive in Italy to positively influence the deadlock in the West. In June/July 1917, Wetzell composed two more memoranda on the subject, respectively highlighting the seriousness of Austria-Hungary's military situation and advocating for a two-pronged joint offensive in the upper Isonzo valley. Ludendorff, however, remained unconvinced; though he admitted that such an offensive could positively impact Imperial Germany's other fronts by drawing in Entente forces, he doubted an offensive in Italy could be of decisive significance.³⁶⁸ Much like his rival Falkenhayn, Ludendorff was fundamentally anti-Habsburg in his policy views, an attitude that only grew stronger after 1916 and the increasing Habsburg-German antagonism over war goals.³⁶⁹

The crisis triggered by the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo fundamentally altered such considerations, also for Austria-Hungary. Even prior to this, the AOK had resolved that an offensive was the only way to restore the situation on the Isonzo front; in July 1917, Alfred

³⁶⁶ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 378-382; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 780-781.

³⁶⁷ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 777-778.

³⁶⁸ Müller, *Vernichtungsgedanke und Koalitionskriegführung*, 83-87.

³⁶⁹ Ibid 82-83.

von Waldstätten (1872-1952), head of the Operations Section of the AOK, had also drawn up a plan for a double-pronged offensive on the upper Isonzo, albeit one only involving Austro-Hungarian divisions.³⁷⁰ Aside from the longstanding German refusals, there were also significant reasons on the Austro-Hungarian side to persist in their lone struggle in Italy, above all the vehement opposition of the monarch to a German intervention. For Charles, a German presence on “his” Italian Front not only could undermine the prestige and morale of the *k.u.k. Armee* but could have more serious military and diplomatic ramifications as well. Aside from potentially precipitating a British or French intervention in Italy – itself a potentially disastrous prospect – a major joint offensive with the Germans could sabotage his secret peace negotiations with the Entente.³⁷¹

Arz and Waldstätten, however, did not agree with their monarch. On 23 August, Arz formally requested German assistance, initially only in the form of troop relocations on the Eastern Front to free up Habsburg divisions for Italy; Cramon, however, had already reported to the OHL that the Habsburg high command sought German participation in an offensive on the Isonzo. Wetzell argued strongly in favor of German military assistance for Austria-Hungary, and on 25 August both Wetzell and the AOK developed plans for a combined offensive involving ten to thirteen divisions, seven or eight of which would be German. Instead of attacking on the lower Isonzo – the location of most of the fighting since 1915 – the operational area was set between the villages of Flitsch (Bovec/Plesso) and Tolmein (Tolmin/Tolmino) in the upper Isonzo valley, a hitherto neglected sector. The exact goal of the operation beyond an “improvement of position” remained unclear, however.³⁷²

On 29 August, Waldstätten met with Ludendorff, Hindenburg, Wetzell, and Cramon in Bad Kreuznach, where Ludendorff again expressed skepticism at the efficacy of a combined offensive in Italy. Ludendorff elaborated that, at most, six German divisions with 288 guns could be made available, adding that the shorter the duration of the operation, the more likely the OHL would agree to provide German support. When in response to Ludendorff’s skepticism, Waldstätten insisted upon the urgent necessity of support in Italy, it was decided in the OHL to send Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen on a fact-finding mission to the Isonzo front at the beginning of September.³⁷³ For his part, Charles was still opposed to a large-scale German presence in Italy. On 26 August, he had written a letter to Kaiser Wilhelm, requesting

³⁷⁰ Ibid 88.

³⁷¹ Ibid. 89.

³⁷² Ibid. 88-89.

³⁷³ Ibid. 90

that the Germans merely relieve Austro-Hungarian divisions on the Eastern Front for redeployment to Italy, or at most, only dispatch some heavy artillery for support. On 2 September, Wilhelm replied that he could not accede to such a request but expressed optimism that a joint offensive in Italy would take place.³⁷⁴ Indeed, in the end, Wilhelm and Hindenburg seem to have forced the issue, convinced by Krafft's report that the Habsburg *Isonzoarmeen* – and therefore, potentially Austria-Hungary itself – were on the verge of collapse.³⁷⁵ More cynical considerations of self-interest also motivated the German change of policy towards the Italian Front. Beyond averting the collapse of the *k.u.k Armee*, Cramon asserted that a German intervention in Italy would serve to further bind Austria-Hungary to the German alliance, with the promise of territorial gains possibly even convincing the Habsburg government to abandon its support of a peace without annexations.³⁷⁶

In the end, despite their initial opposition, both Ludendorff and Charles were forced to approve the plans. On 2 September, Charles authorized the AOK to formally request German military assistance, while on 8 September, after receiving Krafft's report, Ludendorff gave his assent as well.³⁷⁷ Conveniently, the successful German offensive at Riga freed up the OHL operational reserve, most of which could now be sent to Italy.³⁷⁸ Upon receiving German confirmation, Waldstätten informed the AOK with the words “loyalty to arms has been secured” (*Waffentreue gesichert*), which subsequently gave the operation its codename.³⁷⁹

3.5. Deployment and Logistical Preparations

The OHL initially allocated seven German divisions, drawn from the Western and Eastern fronts, for the new 14. *Armee* forming on the Isonzo front, six of which actually arrived to participate in the offensive. The 14. *Armee*, under the command of Prussian GdI Otto von Below (1857-1944) with GLt Krafft as his chief of staff, was a diverse, mixed force of Prussian, Bavarian, Württemberg, as well as Austro-Hungarian divisions under one Bavarian, one Württemberg, and two Austro-Hungarian corps commands. Below, having previously held commanded Central Powers forces in Macedonia in 1916, was experienced in both coalition and mountain warfare.³⁸⁰ The army structure, as well as its incorporation into the

³⁷⁴ Ibid. 90-91. For more on Charles' deep ambivalence towards the offensive, see below.

³⁷⁵ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 782.

³⁷⁶ Broucek, “Die deutschen Bemühungen um eine Militärkonvention mit Österreich-Ungarn (1915–1918),” 460.

³⁷⁷ Felberbauer, “Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung,” 16-17.

³⁷⁸ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 782.

³⁷⁹ Felberbauer, “Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung,” 17.

³⁸⁰ For the order of battle of Austro-Hungarian and German forces, see: Müller, *Vernichtungsgedanke und Koalitionskriegführung*, 94-95; Felberbauer, “Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine

Habsburg chain of command in Italy, thus exemplified the improvised, yet substantial integration that characterized Habsburg-German military cooperation in the late war period.

The northernmost formation of *14. Armee*, deployed in the Isonzo basin near Flitsch, was the *k.u.k. I. Korps* under Alfred Krauss, often referred to as “Gruppe Krauss.” Krauss’ command was a mixed force consisting of the *k.u.k. 3. “Edelweiss” Infanterie-Division* (hereafter abbreviated ID) of Upper Austrian, Salzburger, and Tyrolean regiments; the *k.k. 22. Schützen-Division* (SchD) of Styrian and Tyrolean *Landwehr* troops; the *k.u.k. 55. ID* of Carinthian and Bosnian composition; and the German *Jäger-Division* (JgD) of elite Prussian and Württemberg light infantry. Krauss had been transferred from the Eastern Front on account of his extensive prior experience in Italy, and his German Austrian and Bosnian formations were chosen especially for their reliability as well as their mountain warfare experience and equipment.³⁸¹ South of Gruppe Krauss, with its forces concentrated around the northern part of the bridgehead at Tolmein, was the Bavarian *III. Korps* command under GLt Hermann von Stein (1859-1928), known as Gruppe Stein. Stein’s command incorporated the *k.u.k. 50. ID*, an ethnically-mixed formation also specialized in mountain warfare, the Prussian 12. And 117. ID, as well as the *Alpenkorps*. Gruppe Berrer, the Württemberg *LI. Korps* under GLt. Albert von Berrer (1857-1917), deployed in the southern section of the Tolmein bridgehead with the Württemberg 26. ID and the Prussian/Bavarian 200. ID, the latter of which being another light infantry formation specialized for mountain warfare. Finally, the southernmost sector of *14. Armee* was occupied by Gruppe Scotti, the *k.u.k. XV. Korps* under FML Karl Scotti (1862-1927), comprised of *k.u.k. 1. ID*, also of mixed ethnic composition and trained for mountain warfare, and the Prussian 5. ID. Several additional Austro-Hungarian divisions as well as considerable German and Austro-Hungarian heavy artillery formations were also directly subordinated to the army command.³⁸²

The joint command arrangements for the offensive both conformed to the now well-established model as well as reflected the special status of the Italian Front for the Habsburg military. *14. Armee* was formally subordinated to the Austro-Hungarian *Südwestfront* (KdoSWF) under FM Archduke Eugen (1863-1954), and thus to Charles as supreme warlord and commander-in-chief, but all orders and directives to Below were to be first submitted to the OHL.³⁸³ Moreover, Below’s army was flanked on either side by Austro-Hungarian armies

Durchführung,” 17-21. A comprehensive order of battle can be found in Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 197-210.

³⁸¹ Felberbauer, “Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung,” 17-20.

³⁸² Ibid.; Müller, *Vernichtungsgedanke und Koalitionskriegführung*, 94-95.

³⁸³ Ibid 94.

subordinated to different Habsburg command authorities: in the north, situated in the Carnic Alps was the *k.u.k.* 10. *Armee* under the command of HG Conrad, which was not subordinated to KdoSWF; south of 14. *Armee* were the 2. And 1. *Isonzoarmeen* of HG Borojević, which were under Eugen's authority.³⁸⁴

The deployment of Habsburg and German reinforcements to the Isonzo front and the associated logistical preparations for the offensive were a nigh-herculean undertaking for the German and Habsburg authorities that occupied most of September and October. The concentration of such large forces with such immense quantities of materiel, exacerbated by fuel and rolling stock shortages, the extremely limited transportation capacity of the underdeveloped infrastructure in the mountainous deployment area, as well as the often unfavorable autumn weather, led to several postponements of the offensive start date.³⁸⁵ Despite the intrinsic near-impossibility of concealing such large-scale preparations, the Habsburg/German forces undertook great efforts to maintain secrecy and deceive the Italians as to the timing and location of the attack. German radio stations broadcast false information, the *Alpenkorps* made a demonstrative stop in Tyrol, and German troops were moved to the deployment zone at night and at the latest possible moment.³⁸⁶ The OHL also transferred significant air and flak assets with the 14. *Armee*, which both established air superiority over the front and conducted careful, detailed reconnaissance of Italian positions in preparation for the preliminary barrage.³⁸⁷

3.6. The Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo 24 October – 3 December 1917

The Habsburg and German formations of 14. *Armee* had amassed more than 1800 guns and mortars in the attack sector, around 500 of which were heavy pieces, as well as more than a million artillery shells, one tenth of which contained poison gas. Although the opposing armies were roughly equal in manpower, the Habsburg-German force thus possessed a roughly 3:1 firepower advantage, magnified by the German employment of new gas types and tactics for its use.³⁸⁸ After some back and forth between German and Habsburg command

³⁸⁴ Felberbauer, "Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung," 17.

³⁸⁵ Ibid. 21-25; Jordan, *Krieg um die Alpen*, 330-332.

³⁸⁶ Jordan, *Krieg um die Alpen*, 332; Felberbauer, "Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung," 21.

³⁸⁷ Felberbauer, "Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung," 21-22.

³⁸⁸ The most detailed operational histories of the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo in modern scholarship are: Felberbauer, "Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung;" Jordan, *Krieg um die Alpen*, 320-366. See also Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 393-403; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 777-798. The most detailed operational histories overall remain Krafft's work and the pertinent chapters of ÖULK and *Der Weltkrieg*, all three of which are the primary basis for the above-cited works.

authorities in September, the allies had set an initial operational goal of pushing the Italian armies back beyond the Austrian-Italian border and across the river Tagliamento, which would greatly improve the Austro-Hungarian position in Italy. By setting the upper Isonzo as the focal point of the assault, 14. *Armee* aimed to outflank the Italian armies on the Isonzo front, breaking through in the mountains and pushing out into the Venetian plain in the Italian rear. Correspondingly, 14. *Armee*'s increasingly placed more emphasis on the right flank of the army – Gruppen Krauss and Stein – as the most important attack sector. After several delays, the start date for the offensive was set to 24 October.³⁸⁹ In the days leading up to the offensive, to the great outrage of the AOK – and the Germans – several Austro-Hungarian deserters, among them officers, alerted the Italians to the impending attack.³⁹⁰

Facing the forces of 14. *Armee* were the troops of the Italian Second Army, with the Third Army opposing the HG Borojević on the former primary sector of the lower Isonzo. Although the Italian high command was aware of Habsburg-German intentions and even of the approximate start date for the offensive, the Second Army was nonetheless caught flat-footed. A number of problems undermined the Italian position on the upper Isonzo. The Italian high command's attention was focused on other sectors; relations with subordinates, and consequently, command and control was poor; the Italian Army in general, based on its two years of war experience thus far, was fundamentally oriented towards the offensive. On the upper Isonzo, a largely quiet sector, the defenders were complacent and the defensive lines were of variable quality and often not constructed with sufficient depth; Second Army likewise lacked sufficient reserves and its troops were thus concentrated in the forward lines. Even more fundamentally, like all of the belligerent armies, the Italian Army was in the throes of a morale crisis in 1917, its particular situation worsened by draconian discipline as well as the high losses suffered in the bloody Tenth and Eleventh Battles of the Isonzo.³⁹¹

The offensive began at 2 AM on the morning of 24 October with a gas barrage, followed after 6 AM by relatively brief, but extremely heavy barrages. The gas attack was particularly effective in the northern sectors, largely neutralizing the Italian artillery and forcing many of the Italian defenders to flee, as their gas masks offered little protection against the novel German gas types. While the assault did not progress equally well in all sectors of 14. *Armee*, notable breakthroughs were achieved by Gruppe Krauss near Flitsch and Gruppe Stein near

³⁸⁹ Müller, *Vernichtungsgedanke und Koalitionskriegführung*, 95.

³⁹⁰ Ibid. 95-96.

³⁹¹ Labanca, "The Italian Front," 285-286; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 787-790.

Karfreit (Kobarid/Caporetto), with the latter breakthrough by the German 12. ID, the furthest penetration in this initial phase, granting the battle its popular name of The Miracle of Caporetto (*Das Wunder von Karfreit*). From 24-27 October, the Habsburg-German forces, largely bypassing Italian strongpoints, managed to secure several lines of advance as well as several significant elevated positions, including Mt. Stol, Mt. Kolowrat, and Mt. Matajur.³⁹² The primary reasons for this success were, aside from Italian weaknesses, the tactical surprise facilitated by the foggy conditions, the efficacy of Habsburg-German artillery fire, and the successful application of German infiltration tactics in the right locations.³⁹³

The vast majority of the outflanked Italian defenders either surrendered or fled, with the Second Army gradually disintegrating into a full rout. Italian morale was shattered. On 25 October, Cadorna gave the order to retreat; by 27 October, the Italian chief of staff gave the order for all Italian forces to withdraw to the Tagliamento. Within five days, by 29 October, Habsburg and German forces had advanced almost sixty kilometers to the river.³⁹⁴ The advance was rapid, but not smooth, plagued by difficult terrain and poor infrastructure, harsh weather conditions and flooding, as well as deficient communications and coordination between the Habsburg and German formations and staffs. As a consequence, while the Italian Second Army had been shattered, its formations dissolving and abandoning their materiel, the Third Army had managed to withdraw behind the river largely intact, albeit without its heavy equipment. The advance of the *Isonzoarmeen*, impeded by logistical difficulties, proceeded at a much slower place.³⁹⁵

On 2 November, a Bosnian battalion of the *k.u.k* 55. ID managed to establish a bridgehead on the western bank of the Tagliamento. By that point, Italian high command had already resolved to re-establish defensive lines on the Piave river, 150 kilometers away from their initial positions on the Isonzo. In the following week, the Habsburg and German troops of 14. Armee and the *Isonzoarmeen* conducted another rapid advance across difficult terrain, driven forward by the constant need to capture Italian provisions as the rush of victory; the further Habsburg and German troops advanced, the more and more precarious their supply position became. By 9 November 14. Armee and HG Borojević had reached the Piave, though all attempts to establish a crossing failed in the face of stiffening Italian resistance. From mid-

³⁹² Felberbauer, "Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung," 25-28; Müller, *Vernichtungsgedanke und Koalitionskriegführung*, 96-97.

³⁹³ Jordan, *Krieg um die Alpen*, 341-345.

³⁹⁴ Lloyd, *The Eastern Front*, 399-400.

³⁹⁵ Müller, *Vernichtungsgedanke und Koalitionskriegführung*, 97-99; Felberbauer, "Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung," 28-29.

November, the Habsburg and German military leadership developed multiple plans to continue the offensive, above all focused on a thrust between the Brenta and Piave river valleys to once again outflank the Italian lines. Multiple attempts by German and Austro-Hungarian troops of Gruppe Krauss to bypass the Italian strongpoint on the Mt. Grappa in late November/early December failed, as did an attempt by HG Conrad to conduct an auxiliary offensive from the Trentino. Heavy Italian resistance, the increasingly unsuitable weather, pervasive ammunition shortages, as well as the gradual arrival of eleven British and French divisions all seemed to weigh against the possibility of further success.³⁹⁶ After joint deliberations between the Habsburg and German command authorities, KdoSWF officially suspended the offensive on 3 December. On 14 December, the OHL announced the end of joint operations in Italy, and over the course of the next month, all German formations were withdrawn from the Italian front.³⁹⁷

The Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo and the following advance to the Piave was not only one of the most successful offensives of the First World War but was also a prime example of successful coalition warfare.³⁹⁸ The Habsburg-German operation had not merely stabilized the Austro-Hungarian position in Italy, but had inflicted a crushing defeat on the Italian army. In a little more than two weeks, the Italian army had been forced back 150 kilometers in total disarray, suffering 10,000 killed, 30,000 wounded, nearly 300,000 prisoners of war, and more than 400,000 missing, the vast majority of which had simply deserted. In addition, the Italian army also lost large quantities of materiel and supplies that were simply abandoned during the retreat, including more than 3100 artillery pieces, 3000 machine guns, and 300,000 rifles. In contrast, the Central Powers' casualties were minimal, with less than 5000 dead.³⁹⁹ Nevertheless, in Austria-Hungary, despite the extensive publicity surrounding the victory, the immediate consequences for the monarchy itself were far less joyous. The immense strain on Austro-Hungarian transportation infrastructure by the logistical preparations for the offensive and the resulting shortages of coal, engines, and rolling stock led to the virtual collapse of the rail network in large parts of the monarchy in winter 1917-1918. The consequent famine in Bohemia contributed significantly to growing anti-Habsburg,

³⁹⁶ Ibid. 99-103; Felberbauer, "Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung," 29-31.

³⁹⁷ Felberbauer, "Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung 31-32.

³⁹⁸ Müller, *Vernichtungsgedanke und Koalitionskriegführung*, 94

³⁹⁹ Felberbauer, "Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung 32-33.

pro-independence sentiment among the Czechs, posing the question of if the great victory in Italy was already of a pyrrhic quality before it even concluded.⁴⁰⁰

4. Habsburg-German Military Relations during the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo

The belated, if when also largely successful combined offensive of the Habsburg and German armies in Italy thus reflected the fundamental macroscopic paradox of the Dual Alliance as a military alliance: divided, in some respects mutually antagonistic political and strategic leadership, whose divergent priorities belied their mutual dependence, combined with military institutions that were nevertheless largely adapted to and capable of direct, close cooperation in the field. And yet, while the course of the Isonzo offensive in autumn 1917 did indeed exemplify how far the Austro-Hungarian and German armies had come since 1914 with respect to coalition warfare, a closer analysis of the literature and personal accounts written by staff officers who participated in these operations reveals the extent to which these contradictions also permeated Habsburg-German military relations at the lower levels. For all of its spectacular success, the cooperation between the two armies during the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo not only exhibited all of the tensions and conflicts that had characterized Habsburg-German military relations elsewhere, but in many ways, represented a particular high point in the progression of these issues. In both of these respects – integration and dissension – the history of Habsburg-German joint operations in Italy as conveyed by the officer sources can be viewed as perhaps the fullest expression of the Habsburg-German inter-military dynamic of the First World War.

Of course, as emphasized in the introduction, given the nature of these sources and the context in which they were written and published, the prism of hindsight – with all of its concomitant problems of bias and distortion – cannot be completely filtered out. It is not a coincidence that the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo featured so prominently in interwar officer literature, especially in that written by former Habsburg officers. The successful offensive operations of the Central Powers – of which the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo was perhaps the most prominent – were one of the most popular topoi for interwar officer-authors. The celebration of these operations as victories of broader world- and military-historical significance served as a compensatory function, allowing officers – above all, those who personally participated in these victories – not only to partially salvage their personal and institutional reputation and prestige, but also to frame their wartime experiences in a positive light in spite of the ultimate

⁴⁰⁰ Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 786; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 476.

defeat.⁴⁰¹ For former Habsburg officers, the significance of the Italian theater as “their war” against the hated Italian archenemy – and the Isonzo Front, with its costly, defensive battles of materiel, as “their Western Front” – corresponded to a special position in their publications.⁴⁰² The consequences of these factors for the portrayal of relations with their German allies were complex. On the one hand, as noted above, there was considerable impetus – political-ideological and well as practical-financial – for authors, especially Austrians, to emphasize harmony, camaraderie, and (pan-)German unity while downplaying tensions and conflicts.

On the other hand, while interwar Austrian officer literature was diverse and by no means unanimously negative in its evaluation of the German “brothers in arms,” there were also clear and pressing motivations for a more critical appraisal of the erstwhile German ally. The resentments and recriminations that had already arisen during the war surrounding shortcomings and defeats received even more impetus in the aftermath of defeat, as officers on both sides endeavored both to exculpate themselves and their institutions and similarly identify potential scapegoats. In particular, for all of their differences, former Habsburg officers were almost unanimous in their opposition to German “defamation” of the *k.u.k. Armee*’s wartime performance.⁴⁰³ Given the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy, the dissolution of the old army, and the resultant erosion of the esprit de corps among its former officers, the legacy and prestige of the vanquished *k.u.k. Armee* constituted the only common denominator among these diverse Austrian officer-authors. Consequently, the defense of this wartime legacy, above all the assertion of the army’s positive achievements, formed one of the foremost concerns in interwar officer literature.⁴⁰⁴

Thus, the image of the Habsburg-German “*Waffenbrüderschaft*” conveyed by the sources analyzed here is just as much, perhaps even more so a reflection of postwar preoccupations and perceptions rather than of the actual wartime conditions. The composite picture painted by the officer literature may skew positive overall, but – especially in combination with memoirs and contemporary operations documents – the ambivalent complexity of the Habsburg-German is still apparent. The following chapter investigates the experience of Habsburg-German coalition warfare during the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo through four

⁴⁰¹ Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 198-199.

⁴⁰² Ibid. 200.

⁴⁰³ Ibid. 247-248.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid. 251.

primary aspects, each of which demonstrate the paradoxical quality of both significant integration and concomitant discord.

4.1. Material and Organizational Integration

The Habsburg-German offensive on the Isonzo, given both the scale of the operations – more than 300,000 troops with over 2000 artillery pieces – as well as the specific conditions of the Italian Front – the geographical challenges and the previous absence of German forces – necessitated extensive and intensive cooperation between the allied armies in almost every regard. The logistics of preparing and sustaining a German-led operation in what had hitherto been an exclusively Austro-Hungarian theater underscore the collaborative nature of the campaign, a fact that most of the non-Austrian historical literature largely neglects in its characterization of the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo as an essentially German victory. This understanding requires qualification. One of the most apparent aspects of the Isonzo campaign of autumn 1917, as conveyed by the sources, is the considerable extent to which the Austro-Hungarian and German armies were integrated in material, logistical, and organizational regards. Three years of combined operations on other fronts resulted in considerable institutional links between the two armies. For all of the political and personal divisions, the military relationship of Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany was deeply interwoven; the armies of the Dual Alliance were not at all completely separate, isolated organisms. However, as exemplified by the joint offensive on the Isonzo, this institutional integration was by no means equitable and indeed reflected the growing power imbalance between the Habsburg Monarchy and the German Empire. The degree to which the Habsburg army was influenced by and to a great extent dependent on its German ally – even on “its” Italian Front – is demonstrated by the indispensable material support rendered by the German Empire for the offensive, the significance of German weaponry and tactics for the success of operations, as well as the degree to which the Habsburg army had itself adopted German equipment and doctrine by 1917.

In his retrospective work on the Dual Alliance, Anton Pitreich characterized Austria-Hungary as a “poor relative” to the German Empire.⁴⁰⁵ Given the overwhelming economic disparity between Austria-Hungary and the German Empire by 1917, any large-scale joint offensive was completely infeasible without German support, a reality that is recognized in virtually all of the sources. Indeed, Arz noted in his memoir that in a meeting with the monarch in April

⁴⁰⁵ Pitreich, *Der österreichisch-ungarische Bundesgenosse im Sperrfeuer*, 6.

1917, he had underlined to Charles the Austro-Hungarian dependence on German iron and coal imports as a significant factor when considering future relations with the *Reich*.⁴⁰⁶ This dependence extended to logistics and transportation as well. Though ÖULK proudly underscores the “brilliant performance” (*Glänzleistung*) of the Habsburg military railway service in the preparation of the offensive – which required a third of the monarchy’s rolling stock – German support in the form of locomotives and railway personnel was also vital.⁴⁰⁷

One of the most glaring discrepancies – and thus one of the most tactically significant facets of German support – was the superior materiel complement of German formations. In his memoir, Arz asserted that the “much more generous endowment of German divisions with weapons of every kind, especially with gas, mortars, and airplanes” was the primary reason why he requested German support for the Italian Front in August, “not because I did not have sufficient trust in our own troops.”⁴⁰⁸ Interestingly, when Arz’s above statement was cited (nearly word for word) by Krafft in *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, it was interpreted by some as a “denigration of the *k.u.k. Armee*,” leading to a clarification and apology in the appendix of the second volume.⁴⁰⁹ Even Charles recognized this reality in his 26 August letter to Wilhelm II, as reprinted in Arz’s book, where he made an exception in his desire to conduct a solely Austro-Hungarian offensive: “only German artillery, especially heavy artillery, would My army and I greet as welcome help on the Italian Front.”⁴¹⁰ The German official history notes the “utmost” efforts of the OHL to concentrate overwhelming firepower for the offensive, eventually further increasing the German artillery complement beyond the initial allocation: 540 guns – 104 of which were of heavy caliber – including the “very newest” models, 216 mortars, a special gas warfare pioneer battalion, numerous technical formations, motorized transport columns, and air forces.⁴¹¹ The contrast between German material might and relative Habsburg weakness is made clear in the text by the implicit comparison between the powerful German air assets and those of the *k.u.k. Armee*, whose “complete inferiority” to the Italian air forces before the arrival of German support exposed German deployment routes to attack.⁴¹² Besides artillery, German formations had especially significant advantage over their Habsburg equivalents in infantry firepower; in October 1917, the German 12. ID

⁴⁰⁶ Arz von Straussenburg, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges*, 156.

⁴⁰⁷ Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6, 502; Felberbauer, “Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung 24.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid. 170-171.

⁴⁰⁹ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II.*, 289.

⁴¹⁰ Arz von Straussenburg, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges*, 171. “Nur deutsche Artillerie, besonders schwere, würde ich und meine Armee als willkommene Hilfe auf dem italienischen Kriegsschauplatze begrüßen.”

⁴¹¹ Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13, 225.

⁴¹² Ibid. 220.

possessed 270 machine guns compared to the 68 and 96 of the Habsburg 3. ID and 22. SchD respectively. By this point, German troops were also equipped with the portable MG 08/15; given the tenuous logistical situation and difficulty of transporting artillery during the campaign, this readily available infantry fire support was a crucial asset.⁴¹³

In his account of the campaign, Krauss underscored the material and technical support I. *Korps* received from the German command authorities, often framing such assistance as an unsubtle critique of the lack of support from the AOK/KdoSWF. In particular, he noted the “brotherly assistance” rendered by GM von Berendt, the 14. *Armee* artillery officer, in dispatching instructors to train Habsburg artillerymen, especially in gas warfare, as well as the later role of German artillery officers in I. *Korps*’ successful opening barrage. Similarly, after arguing with the AOK for a greater artillery provision, Krauss was pleased to receive control over the German *Jäger-Division* with its forty-eight guns, as well a German mortar battalion from 14. *Armee* command, commenting that German mortars were more effective.⁴¹⁴ In fact, in his earlier work, Krauss had complained in reference to this incident that even after three years of war, the *k.u.k. Armee* still lacked a serviceable heavy infantry mortar.⁴¹⁵ In addition to pointing out the role of German artillery and gas support in the attack at Flitsch, the German official history also mentions that the Habsburg infantry divisions held as army reserve lacked their own artillery and had to receive German artillery elements from 14. *Armee*.⁴¹⁶

Krafft was even more explicit in his emphasis on the decisive role played by German artillery firepower and tactics in the offensive. While noting the cooperation between the German and Habsburg artillery in 14. *Armee* – albeit under the unified direction of 14. *Armee*’s German artillery officer – Krafft criticized the insufficient quantity of Habsburg artillery, its lack of adequate ammunition, as well as inferior Habsburg artillery tactics rooted in “lack of experience,” especially regarding gas warfare. For the latter aspect, he blamed the moralizing influence of Charles – as well as his wife the Empress Zita (1892-1989) – in forcing the *k.u.k. Armee* to abstain from using this effective instrument.⁴¹⁷ The Habsburg army in Italy was in fact neither properly equipped nor adequately trained for gas warfare; Austro-Hungarian troops received German gas masks and a lengthier interval between the gas attack and the

⁴¹³ Felberbauer, “Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung 27-28.

⁴¹⁴ Krauss, *Das „Wunder von Karfreit*, “23-26, 35.

⁴¹⁵ Krauss, *Die Ursachen unserer Niederlage*, 222.

⁴¹⁶ Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13, 232-233, 236.

⁴¹⁷ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 183-184.

infantry advance was implemented to accommodate the unfamiliarity of Habsburg troops with lethal gas.⁴¹⁸

The Austro-Hungarian army had gone to war in 1914 with significant deficiencies in leadership, tactics, and equipment – especially in its artillery arm, which was both quantitatively and largely also qualitatively inferior to that of the other belligerent armies.⁴¹⁹ Much of the subsequent doctrinal and material improvements were the direct result of interaction with the German army. The massive extent of German influence on the *k.u.k. Armee* by 1917 is explicitly addressed almost at the very beginning in volume VI of ÖULK. After noting that the majority of Habsburg formations were indeed under the control of the OHL, the text highlights the connection between greater integration and greater German influence: “...the strong mixing of the allied troops, and of the middle and upper commands involved the tactical views and leadership principles of the stronger ally increasingly asserting themselves.”⁴²⁰

Officer exchanges, joint training courses in the new stormtroop tactics, the training of replacements by German NCOs, the adoption of German-style steel helmets, field gray uniforms, and hand grenade designs, as well as the near-wholesale copy of German doctrinal and instructional manuals by the AOK are all mentioned as the vehicles of this influence, though the text does note that some of the German principles contradicted Habsburg military thought.⁴²¹ More pointedly, ÖULK does mention that German material superiority did arouse jealousy at the AOK: Teschen witnessed the accomplishments of the Germans in armaments production and raising new formations “not without jealous renunciation” (*nicht ohne neidvolle Entsagung*).⁴²² In light of this statement, it is interesting to note that the preceding

⁴¹⁸ Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917*. 1, 322,382.

⁴¹⁹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 117-118. More detailed information on the evolution of organization, doctrine, tactics, and equipment of the k.u.k. Armee in the Great War in: M. Christian Ortner, “Die Entwicklung des österreichisch-ungarischen Kampfverfahrens im Ersten Weltkrieg,” in: *Frontwechsel: Österreich-Ungarns “Großer Krieg” im Vergleich*, ed. Wolfram Dornik and Markus Wurzer (Wien [u.a.]: Böhlau, 2014), 421-450; Ortner, “Uniformierung Bewaffnung, und waffentechnische Entwicklung der k. u. k. Armee,” in: *Die Mittelmächte und der Erste Weltkrieg : Symposium 16. bis 18. Juni 2014: Acta.*, ed. M. Christian Ortner and Hans-Hubertus Mack (Wien: Verlag Militaria GmbH, 2016), 316-347; Jung, *The Austro-Hungarian Forces in World War I (1): 1914-16*; Jung, *The Austro-Hungarian Forces in World War I (2): 1916-18* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003).

⁴²⁰ Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6., 43. “...die starke Vermengung der verbündeten Truppen, der mittleren und hohen Kommandostellen brachten es mit sich, daß Führungsgrundsätze und taktische Ansichten des stärkeren Bundesgenossen sich immer mehr durchsetzten.”

⁴²¹ Ibid. 43-45, 52, 56.

⁴²² Ibid. 66-67.

segment on the development of mortars (*Minenwerfer*) makes no mention of a German role or influence, despite the major significance of German designs and production in this area.⁴²³

Krafft underscored the impression made upon the Italians by the novel German infantry tactics,⁴²⁴ and clearly this impression was likewise not lost on the *k.u.k. Armee* as well; firsthand experience with cutting-edge German weaponry and tactics lent an even greater impulse to adopt German means and methods, now even by the hitherto comparatively isolated Habsburg armies in Italy. In preparation for the offensive, the *Edelweiss-Division* had conducted two weeks of assault training; in the pertinent operations documents, the guidelines emphasized the new offensive methods developed on “other fronts,” especially the offensive use of machine guns, which although not explicitly stated, demonstrates the influence of the aforementioned German superiority in machine gun utilization.⁴²⁵ As a divisional staff officer, Constantin Schneider personally experienced the efforts of HG Borojević to disseminate German tactical methods among Habsburg officers in Italy in the aftermath of the offensive.⁴²⁶ The army group command established a training course for higher commanders in Udine for schooling in “modern warfare based on the German model,” which Schneider attended in late 1917/early 1918. Schneider’s divisional commander had previously attended German courses on the Western Front and was correspondingly selected for command of the course. Despite his great ambivalence towards the Germans, Schneider recognized the necessity of adopting German tactical methods, noting the “German mind for organization” (*der deutsche Geist der Organisation*) that had asserted itself among the Central Powers under the Third OHL. Schneider explicitly praised the German “technical wonders” (*Wunder der Technik*) developed on the Western Front but interestingly doubted that German methods and techniques could be successfully adopted by the multiethnic *k.u.k. Armee*.⁴²⁷

Nevertheless, given that Italy was fundamentally a Habsburg theater and that the *k.u.k. Armee* was even in 1917 far more experienced in and better-equipped for mountain warfare, the German formations of 14. *Armee* were to a great extent dependent on their Habsburg allies for much of the materiel and expertise necessary for the offensive. The German official history noted that the *k.u.k. Armee* provided “extensive” support in mountain warfare equipment,

⁴²³ Ibid. 53-54. See Ortner, “Die Entwicklung des österreichisch-ungarischen Kampfverfahrens im Ersten Weltkrieg,” 337-341.

⁴²⁴ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 131.

⁴²⁵ Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917*. 1, 206-207.

⁴²⁶ Dohle (ed.) and Schneider. *Die Kriegserinnerungen 1914-1919*, 512, 519-539.

⁴²⁷ Ibid. 524-526.

alpine training, special alpine supply columns and personnel, and mountain guides.⁴²⁸ ÖULK, after detailing the significant concentration of artillery and ammunition by the *k.u.k. Armee* itself, similarly underscore the Habsburg provision of 30,000 horses for the transport of all artillery – including the German – in the theater.⁴²⁹ The Habsburg authorities likewise deployed thousands of laborers, including prisoners of war, for infrastructural improvements leading up to the offensive.⁴³⁰ One intriguing episode of Habsburg material support was the provision of 1000 Austro-Hungarian field caps for 14. *Armee*. Originally intended to help disguise the presence of German troops, who at first found them “unfamiliar and amusing” (*ungewöhnt und amüsant*), the Habsburg headgear soon proved its eminent suitability for alpine environments, and the German soldiers who received the caps only parted with them reluctantly.⁴³¹ Moreover, in mountain combat, German formations were often reliant on Habsburg mountain artillery; given their much greater mobility, *k.u.k.* mountain artillery units were often the only heavy fire support that could keep pace with the infantry in the mountains, a fact explicitly and repeatedly underlined in Krafft’s history.⁴³² Indeed, in his account, Krafft recognized the Austro-Hungarian material contribution, conceding that the Habsburg authorities had a “quite considerable” task before them, while not failing to note that much of the promised help did not materialize and the troops “often had to fend for themselves.”⁴³³

By late 1917, there were plans to both formalize and further extend the integration of the Austro-Hungarian army into the German military apparatus. Plans for a military convention between the two powers had been circulating for years, many of the more detailed schemes having been devised by Cramon. These considerations gained considerable impetus with the advent of Arz and the Second AOK, and the success of the joint offensive on the Isonzo served as a further boost. Plans for common training guidelines, a reorganization of the general staff along Prussian lines, armament and equipment standardization, and a definitive regulation of the language question were all incorporated in the agreement signed at Spa in May 1918, which essentially envisioned a relegation of the Habsburg army to an equivalent position like that of the Bavarian army within the Imperial German military framework. No

⁴²⁸ Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13, 220, 224.

⁴²⁹ Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6, 503.

⁴³⁰ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 25.

⁴³¹ Cited in Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917*. 1, 193-194.

⁴³² E.g. Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II*, 53-54, 65, 83, 127.

⁴³³ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 23.

steps were taken to actually implement these provisions in the course of 1918, however, and they were rendered moot by the final defeat of the Central Powers in November.⁴³⁴

4.2. Command and Control

As illustrated above, one of the most persistently thorny issues in Habsburg-German joint operations was the question of command, a problem inextricably entwined with issues of political interest, institutional prestige, and interpersonal relations. For nearly two years, the military cooperation between Habsburg and German formations in the field had rested on individual, ad hoc, ostensibly complicated agreements between the AOK and OHL that were designed with political sensibilities in mind and, therefore, always provisional in nature. The crisis year of 1916 brought both a far greater intermixing of formations and personnel on the Eastern Front, but the political changes of 1916-1917 conversely magnified the desire of the Habsburg government to emphasize its political and military autonomy, despite its greater than ever dependence on the German Empire in exactly those areas. The fact that the Italian Front had hitherto been a Habsburg “private war” also complicated the situation of 14. *Armee*, as unlike in the East, the Austro-Hungarian chain of command and force structure in Italy had developed completely independently of the German army. At the same time, the preeminence of German command in the operation – both 14. *Armee* and the OHL – could not be ignored.

All in all, the experience of command and control within 14. *Armee* as well as between it and the other Austro-Hungarian and German command authorities reflected the complexity of this arrangement, the longstanding, recurring conflicts between Habsburg and German authorities, as well as just the fundamental difficulties of high-level communication and coordination in the field during the First World War. As had become standard procedure for Habsburg-German combined operations, the command arrangements for the Isonzo offensive were deliberately multilayered as a prestige-saving, power-sharing compromise. This “command hypertrophy,” however, combined with the fog and friction of operations in difficult terrain and inclement weather, often led to ambiguity, misunderstandings, and animosity between the Austro-Hungarian and German command authorities.⁴³⁵

Among the higher command authorities, both the AOK and the OHL were directly, albeit intermittently involved in the course of operations, their ability to intervene in events limited by physical distance and communications problems. The latter issue, exacerbated by poor

⁴³⁴ See Broucek, “Die deutschen Bemühungen um eine Militärkonvention mit Österreich-Ungarn (1915–1918),” 457–470.

⁴³⁵ Felberbauer, “Die 12. Isonzoschlacht: Der Operationsplan und seine Durchführung;” 19.

communications infrastructure, hostile weather conditions, the rapidity of troop movements, and the consequent distance between command authorities is strongly emphasized in the sources, as is the resultant chronic inability of the high commands to maintain a clear understanding of events.⁴³⁶ The particular communications problems with the Austrian higher commands – the AOK and the KdoSWF – and their resulting failures to coordinate among their subordinate formations generated much criticism, not least of all from German officers.⁴³⁷ Perhaps in response to this, Edmund Glaise-Horstenau and Theodor Konopicky – representatives of the AOK and the KdoSWF respectively – emphasized in their chapter of *Der große Krieg* that 14. *Armee* command also had much difficulty maintaining contact with its constituent units.⁴³⁸

While Krafft did indeed record command and control difficulties at 14. *Armee*, especially during the frantic advance to the Tagliamento, he placed far more emphasis on the inability of KdoSWF to issue timely directives or effectively intervene in disputes between 14. *Armee* and HG Borojević over march routes. He thus asserted that 14. *Armee* often had to “act autonomously to protect its interests,” a clear criticism of KdoSWF to exercise overall command as well as an implicit shifting of blame for coordination problems up the chain of command. While he admitted the significant role of inadequate electronic communications, largely unavoidable, his repeated observation of the distance of the Habsburg command authorities – and their repeated refusal to move their headquarters closer to the front – illustrates Krafft’s ultimate incrimination of the Austro-Hungarian higher-level leadership as the greatest factor in command and control problems beyond terrain, infrastructure, and weather.⁴³⁹ *Der Weltkrieg* very clearly offers German command practice as a stark contrast, emphasizing Below’s habit of responding to communications problems by personally visiting frontline units.⁴⁴⁰ The death of LI. *Korps* commander GLt von Berrer, shot by Italian troops on 28 October while leading his troops from the front, serves as an even more striking example of the differences in German and Habsburg command ethos.⁴⁴¹ In this statement, he directly echoed Krafft, who emphasized the same contrast between the 14. *Armee* command

⁴³⁶ See e.g. Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6, 578; Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 245.

⁴³⁷ Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917*. 2, 487-491.

⁴³⁸ Konopicky and Glaise-Horstenau, “Vom Isonzo zur Piave,” 436.

⁴³⁹ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II*, 104-105, 132-133, 159, 170-171.

⁴⁴⁰ Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 257-258.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid. 254.

and its Habsburg counterparts, while highlighting Below's inclination to personally intervene in the coordination of 14. *Armee*'s forces.⁴⁴²

Indeed, the sources generally do not convey a good impression of the Habsburg command authorities. The AOK under Arz is subject to criticism for alleged shortcomings in fulfilling its overall command duties. Arz spent much of the campaign away from Baden, personally accompanying Charles in the field, and his absence from the AOK, while certainly contrary to the oft criticized distance of Habsburg command authorities, did itself elicit criticism.⁴⁴³

Cramon – and given the authorship question for this work, possibly also Glaise – asserted that on account of his “excessive utilization of his person by the emperor” (*übermäßige Inanspruchnahme seiner Person durch den Kaiser*), Arz lacked both knowledge and an overall perspective of events, and that he largely lost control over what was actually being done at the AOK. Cramon drove home this criticism of Arz as chief of staff by underscoring his subservience to Charles, and therefore his neglect of his command responsibilities: “in a world war, one cannot be chief adjutant and chief of staff simultaneously.”⁴⁴⁴

Criticism of Habsburg command authorities was not limited to the Germans. Krauss attributed the logistical problems that plagued his corps' preparation – and delayed the start of the offensive – in no small part to the AOK's prioritization of German formations in transport and supply, which he described as “inexpedient and unmilitary chivalry” (*unzweckmäßig und unmilitärische Ritterlichkeit*) by the AOK towards the Germans, driven by Arz's desire to be accommodating to the German ally.⁴⁴⁵ Interestingly enough, *Der Weltkrieg* accuses the AOK of the exact opposite, claiming that 14. *Armee* always had to squeeze the necessary reinforcements and supplies out of the AOK.⁴⁴⁶ While both ÖULK and *Der große Krieg* conspicuously omit any real criticism of the AOK or KdoSWF, Alfred Jansa, serving as the AOK liaison officer to 14. *Armee*, echoed many of the perennial German critiques of Austro-Hungarian staffs. In his memoirs, Jansa excoriated the AOK staff who did remain in Baden as well as that of the KdoSWF headquarters in Marburg (Maribor) for their complacency and indolence, remarking that while Habsburg and German soldiers exerted themselves in the field, “the gentlemen (at headquarters) live in profound peace” (*die Herren leben im tiefsten*

⁴⁴² Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II*, 72.

⁴⁴³ Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6, 709 notably offers some mild criticism of Arz for his absence from Baden.

⁴⁴⁴ Cramon, *Unser österreich-ungarischer Bundesgenosse im Weltkriege*, 133-134. “Ich habe oft aber vergeblich betont, dass man in einem Weltkrieg nicht Generaladjutant und daneben Generalstabschef sein könnte.”

⁴⁴⁵ Krauss, *Das „Wunder von Karfreit“*, 34. On the AOK's agreement to excessive supply demands by the OHL, see Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917*. 2, 288.

⁴⁴⁶ Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 226.

Frieden). He went even further in expressly contrasting the habit of Austro-Hungarian staffs to remain far in the rear with the German custom of leading from the front.⁴⁴⁷

Jansa occupied a unique position in the allied command hierarchy, being simultaneously a representative of the AOK as well as the de facto personal liaison for Below among the Habsburg formations; consequently he spent most of the campaign travelling back and forth between the various Habsburg headquarters, endeavoring to ensure the execution of Below's orders and the safeguarding of his interests.⁴⁴⁸ On several occasions, Below dispatched Jansa on delicate missions to the Habsburg army, army group, and front commands in an attempt to induce their cooperation with 14. Armee's intentions. Prior to the beginning of the offensive, Below and Krafft were concerned about the offensive prospects of the neighboring 2.

Isonzoarmee but feeling unable to personally intervene in the affairs of a "foreign army," they sent Jansa to convince its chief of staff to alter the army's infantry tactics. Jansa felt at the time that he could not reveal to the *Isonzoarmee* chief of staff that he was acting on German instructions, as the colonel in question was very sensitive to German critique after his experiences in Galicia.⁴⁴⁹ During the offensive, after KdoSWF failed to effectively arbitrate between 14. Armee and HG Borojević in their power struggle, Jansa took it upon himself to personally ensure that the Habsburg front command move its headquarters closer to the front. In Marburg, he once again felt compelled to conceal his position as a representative of Below, instead stressing to Konopicky the frictions in command and insinuating that the presence of the monarch himself in the field would cast a poor light on Archduke Eugen and his staff if they themselves remained so far behind the frontlines.⁴⁵⁰

The role of Ludendorff and the OHL in the Isonzo offensive is an interesting one, simultaneously far removed from events but casting a long shadow over them. The OHL's views were obviously of decisive weight in all major decisions, especially in the determination of operational goals. Also notable is the decidedly ambivalent relationship between the German high command and the other command authorities, including 14. Armee. Despite his great initial skepticism towards the operation, Ludendorff made repeated attempts to influence operational planning. As noted above, German authorities amended the original operational concept for the offensive, strengthening the right flank of 14. Armee near Flitsch. The OHL originally also intended to send a seventh German division, the Bavarian 8.

⁴⁴⁷ Jansa and Broucek, *Feldmarschalleutnant Alfred Jansa: ein österreichischer General gegen Hitler*, 382-383, 396.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid. 362-363.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid. 366-367.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid. 376, 381, 383-385.

Reserve-Division, to Gruppe Krauss. This considerable augmentation of Krauss' strength, intended by Ludendorff to facilitate a double breakthrough and envelopment of Italian lines on the Isonzo, naturally coincided with Krauss' own desire to command the focal point of the offensive. Interestingly enough, this strange community of interests between the OHL and I. *Korps* was opposed by both the AOK and 14. *Armee*, as it did not correspond to their operational concepts; after the war, Krafft contrasted the Prussian Ludendorff's concept of envelopment with his successful breakthrough tactics, an area in which Krafft claimed the Bavarian general staff possessed a special expertise, therefore asserting a Bavarian capability distinct from the operational methods favored by the dominant Prussian general staff.⁴⁵¹ Because of this opposition, the OHL ultimately redirected the 8. RD to the Western Front, possibly as a face-saving measure. Nonetheless, the amalgamation of German *Jäger* battalions into the *Jäger-Division*, its subordination to Gruppe Krauss, and its reinforcement with artillery assets and three storm battalions (*Sturmabteilungen*) was all ordained by the OHL without consulting the AOK.⁴⁵²

The OHL's ultimate authority over the disposition of German forces – and how it could thus determine the further course of the offensive – was also of constant concern for both the Habsburg commands and for Below. Another particularly fractious incident involved the famous Württemberg Mountain Battalion (*Württembergisches Gebirgs-Bataillon*). In mid-September, Ludendorff threatened to halt its deployment to the Italian Front in order to force the AOK to resolve a dispute in Macedonia between Habsburg and German command authorities in the German general's favor.⁴⁵³ However, the most significant factor in the OHL's involvement in the offensive was Ludendorff's constant concern with the Western Front – where German forces were then fending off a massive Allied offensive – and his repeated desire to divert German forces from Italy to France. Even Arz, whose account of the autumn 1917 is decidedly anodyne in most respects – notes how the OHL had only reluctantly agreed to dispatch German divisions to Italy. He likewise recorded how, at the beginning of November, Ludendorff petitioned the AOK to send three Austro-Hungarian divisions from Italy to the Eastern Front, so that German troops there could be sent to the West. According to Arz, in December, Ludendorff wrote to him that it was impossible to leave German divisions

⁴⁵¹ Based on KA documents cited in Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917*. 1., 252-255.

⁴⁵² Ibid. 258-260.

⁴⁵³ Ibid. 248-249.

in Italy, as German assistance there was only temporary and that the German divisions “belonged on the Western Front.”⁴⁵⁴

At multiple points during the offensive, the OHL weighed a withdrawal of German troops from Below’s army, which would have necessarily meant an end to the offensive. ÖULK asserts that the OHL was fundamentally interested in withdrawing German forces as soon as possible and that the AOK consequently viewed this as a constant threat; in *Der Weltkrieg*, these claims are dismissed as “not convincing.”⁴⁵⁵ Nevertheless, even the German official history chronicles the multiple instances in which the OHL contemplated a partial or full German withdrawal. Already on 28 October, Ludendorff ordered the withdrawal of German artillery units to send to the West; one day later, upon learning of the Italian withdrawal, he announced the provisional withdrawal of several German divisions. His request to Arz for an Austro-Hungarian transfer to the Eastern Front was occasioned by his reversal on the matter and decision to continue the offensive to the Piave.⁴⁵⁶

Upon the advance to the Piave in early November, Ludendorff once again proposed a reduction of German forces, likewise quarrelling again with the AOK over proposed Austro-Hungarian troop transfers to enable a retention of these German forces in Italy.⁴⁵⁷ While it is likely that the threat of withdrawal gave the OHL leverage in its mediation of the disputes between 14. Armee and the Habsburg command authorities,⁴⁵⁸ Krafft – and by extension, the 14. Armee staff – were also critical of Ludendorff’s preoccupation with the Western Front and the consequences of this for their own operations. According to Krafft, 14. Armee was reluctant to comply with the withdrawal of German artillery in late October; in his second volume, Krafft levied implicit criticism at the OHL for its repeated considerations of withdrawal, implying that its rigid fixation on the Western Front undermined the German commitment to the offensive in Italy. He likewise claimed that the 14. Armee had to convince the OHL to not withdraw German troops before the offensive even began.⁴⁵⁹ Moreover, Below’s decision to attempt an encirclement of the Italian Third Army east of the Tagliamento

⁴⁵⁴ Arz von Straussenburg, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges*, 184.

⁴⁵⁵ Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6, 504-505; Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 281.

⁴⁵⁶ Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 253, 257, 277.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid. 280

⁴⁵⁸ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II*, 99 describes an OHL directive of 31 October as “moral support” (Rückenstärkung) against the Austro-Hungarian command authorities.

⁴⁵⁹ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 159, 36-37.; *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II*, 164.

was made without requesting OHL approval, despite clearly being a major operational decision.⁴⁶⁰

One of the major features of Habsburg-German joint operations in Italy, prominently discussed in almost all of the major sources, is the considerable frictions that arose between 14. *Armee* and the Habsburg command authorities – especially HG Borojević and its subordinate *Isonzoarmeen* – in questions of command authority, march routes, and operational jurisdictions. These persistent, fractious disputes, which drew in the involvement of the other Habsburg and German command authorities, seem to have significantly impeded the advance of Habsburg-German forces across Friuli, especially in the week between the breakthrough at Flitsch-Tolmein and the crossing of the Tagliamento. ÖULK, *Der Weltkrieg*, and Krafft all describe these conflicts, though the German sources are both more detailed and more critical. 14. *Armee* had already asserted itself against the AOK in its determination of the initial offensive plan, as well as its control over Gruppe Krauss and its divisions, which originally were directly subordinated to KdoSWF; the Habsburg front command repeatedly attempted to siphon off divisions from Below's command to the northern *k.u.k.* 10. *Armee*.⁴⁶¹ Notably, despite the fact that KdoSWF, as the theater command, technically had the authority to do so, Below patently refused to allow any of his German divisions to be transferred to the command of the neighboring Habsburg armies, repeatedly refusing to implement such directives.⁴⁶²

The conflict with the 2. *Isonzoarmee* and HG Borojević arose after the initial breakthrough. The weather and terrain, communications problems, and the unexpected rapidity of the advance led to severe coordination problems, namely the collision of the southern groups of 14. *Armee* with the northern divisions of the two *Isonzoarmeen*. The preplanned march routes of the various formations did not correspond to the evolving tactical situation, especially as Below, on his own initiative, attempted to maneuver his divisions to cut off and annihilate the retreating Italians east of the Tagliamento, and the result was indeed a literal collision of German and Austro-Hungarian troop and supply columns. This logistical problem rapidly became a command problem, as both 14. *Armee* and the Habsburg army/army group commands not only ordered their subordinate formations to continue the advance with all

⁴⁶⁰ Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6., 579.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid. 550-551. Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 243.

⁴⁶² Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II*, 129.

haste but also tried to assert command over each other's formations located in their previously determined operations zones.⁴⁶³

Der Weltkrieg notes that KdoSWF had given 14. *Armee* authority to determine its boundary with HG Boroević on 26 October, subsequently concluding that Boroević “could not have known” of Below’s “bold intentions” because of the “conditions,” which the text subsequently suggests were, among others, the slow advance of the *Isonzoarmeen* and the location of the Habsburg staffs far in the rear.⁴⁶⁴ The work places great emphasis on the heavy “friction” (*Reibungen*) with the Habsburg headquarters, noting how the three armies (14. *Armee*, 1. And 2. *Isonzoarmee*) “collided” on 31 October; likewise, the text characterizes Below’s resistance to the KdoSWF order – intended as a solution – to transfer command of Gruppe Scotti as “a justified concern over losing control over proven troops right at the moment of decision.”⁴⁶⁵ *Der Weltkrieg* highlights the role of the OHL in arranging a compromise between 14. *Armee* and HG Boroević and opines that the command dispute temporarily assumed “regrettably acrimonious form” (*bedauerlich scharfe Formen*); on the one hand, the text asserts that the collisions were not of decisive significance, but also adds that the success could have been greater without them.⁴⁶⁶ ÖULK, for its part, while noting that the *Isonzoarmeen* commanders had given explicit orders to advance “without any consideration for the bearing of 14. *Armee*” (...ohne jede Rücksicht auf das Verhalten der 14. *Armee*...den Marsch festzuhalten), briefly summarizes that the dispute was quickly resolved after a meeting between Habsburg and German staff officers.⁴⁶⁷ In *Der große Krieg*, Glaise and Konopicky agreed that the “*Reibungen*” east of the Tagliamento could have been averted if the higher commands were better informed, but concluded that “the prize of victory was great enough” (*der Siegespreis war groß genug*).⁴⁶⁸

Krafft, as the former chief of staff of 14. *Armee*, devoted even more attention, as well as more subtle criticism, to these issues. On the one hand, he described the collisions as essentially unavoidable, given the lack of space in the operations area, and even expressed that the “certain conflict of interest” (*ein gewisser Gegensatz zwischen den Interessen*) between the

⁴⁶³ Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6., 598-599; Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 259-270.

⁴⁶⁴ Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 242, 257-263.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid. 265-269. Paraphrased from: “Demgegenüber erfüllte General Below die berechtigte Sorge, dass die erprobten Truppen, mit denen er den entscheidenden Sieg errungen, seinen Einfluss gerade im dem Augenblick entzogen würden, da alles darauf ankam, die erreichten großen Erfolge am Tagliamento zur Auswirkung zu bringen.”

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid. 269-275.

⁴⁶⁷ Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6. 588-589.

⁴⁶⁸ Konopicky and Glaise-Horstenau, “Vom Isonzo zur Piave,” 439.

German and Austro-Hungarian armies stemmed from the “understandable intention of the Austro-Hungarian commands to secure the greatest possible profits of victory” (*die verständliche Absicht...den k.u.k. Truppen einen möglichst großen Anteil an der Ausbeute des Sieges zu sichern*). At the same time, he emphasized the operational freedom granted to 14. *Armee* by the KdoSWF, attributing the considerable friction to the intervention of the AOK on behalf of HG Borojević, which was not communicated to KdoSWF. Below considered the AOK’s direct interference in unilaterally changing the army area boundaries to have endangered the exploitation of the victory. Krafft also noted that Below had to continue to fend off attempts by the AOK to weaken 14. *Armee* by transferring its subordinate units to other commands.⁴⁶⁹ Krafft recounted the acrimony between 14. *Armee* and the k.u.k. II. Korps of the 1. *Isonzoarmee* in particular detail, highlighting the stubborn recalcitrance of the Habsburg command authorities. Given that the 2. *Isonzoarmee* headquarters was too far in the rear, 14. *Armee* attempted to directly coordinate with GdI Kaiser of the II. *Korps*, who according to Krafft, repeatedly refused to change his access of advance to avoid the German columns. In contrast to ÖULK, Krafft wrote of at least two multiple failed meetings with Habsburg commanders, including one at which Kaiser asserted Austro-Hungarian prerogatives in “their” theater, as well as the necessity of his personal intervention as a high-ranking staff officer, in which however he was assisted by information provided by Jansa.⁴⁷⁰ In contrast, Krafft repeatedly noted the efforts of 14. *Armee* to avoid collisions with its neighbors, but after 2. *Isonzoarmee* supported Kaiser and directly ordered II. *Korps* to ignore 14. *Armee*, Krafft had to appeal to KdoSWF and the AOK to intervene.⁴⁷¹

4.3. Inter-Army Personnel Relations

This chronicle of frequent, often acrimonious conflicts between command authorities begs the question of how Austro-Hungarian and German personnel regarded and interacted with each other on a more personal level during their joint operations in Italy. This is simultaneously one of the most fascinating aspects of this historical episode as well as – given the nature of the sources – perhaps the most difficult question to analyze. On the one hand, the marked interest of the officer literature to celebrate camaraderie and alliance solidarity and downplay, if not outright excise conflicts and tensions from their accounts conveys to the reader a palpable sense of deliberate obfuscation for the topic. On the other hand, while the memoirs may deliver a less sanitized, and more detailed portrayal of everyday interpersonal interactions, it

⁴⁶⁹ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 110, 134-135.

⁴⁷⁰ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II*, 99-104, 132-133.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid. 156-157.

is obviously difficult to make generalizations for such a broad topic as Habsburg-German military relations based on a few individual accounts, all of which were colored by varying degrees of hindsight. Also of great significance is the nature of all of these sources as officer accounts; the question of how Austro-Hungarian and German noncommissioned officers and enlisted men related to each other is a connected, but ultimately distinct and perhaps even more opaque issue.

Therefore, the primary conclusion that can be reached by the analysis of these sources is that the relationship between Austro-Hungarian and German military personnel was complex, and the sources from the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo reflect the same ambiguities that manifested elsewhere during the war. Habsburg-German relations could be characterized by professional esteem, personal regard, and alliance solidarity. Likewise, especially among officers, sentiments of shared ethnic identity – that is, German ethnic/national identity – could serve as a further unifying link; the significance of the interwar political and ideological context must be considered for this aspect in particular. At the same time, the perennial sources of friction between the two officer corps are also present in the sources for the combined Isonzo campaign. Austro-Hungarian resentment of perceived German arrogance, egotism, and condescension – as well as German contempt for supposed Habsburg incompetence and unreliability – certainly dampened the feelings of brotherhood even in the face of shared success.

It is notable, albeit not surprising in light of their extensive joint operations, that both Austro-Hungarian and German army authorities issued guidelines aimed at regulating the conduct of their troops towards the personnel of the opposite military. The specific proscriptions, admonitions, and cautions are naturally quite revealing as to the likely issues that affected inter-army inter-personnel relations. A 1916 memorandum from the Prussian War Ministry, directed at the “official and unofficial” (*dienstlich und außerdienstlich*) contact between German and Austro-Hungarian personnel declared “good understanding and reciprocal understanding” (*gutes Einvernehmen und das gegenseitige Verständnis*) to be the fundamental guiding principle in interallied relations. In order to achieve this harmony, particular emphasis was placed on “tactful caution” (*taktvolle Zurückhaltung*) on the part of German personnel, with an explicit admonition to avoid critical statements about the political system and peoples of the monarchy, as well as their specific character, customs, and views. A subsequent

memorandum form 1917 noted that on all of these points, the conduct of German officers and troops still left much to be desired.⁴⁷²

Just as revealing for the Austro-Hungarian side is a similar leaflet issued by KdoSWF in late September 1917 titled “Merkblatt für das Verhalten gegenüber verbündeten Truppen” (Instructions for Conduct towards Allied Troops). The very first sentence encapsulates the notable ambiguity expressed throughout the document: “All necessary support for the German troops **that is reconcilable with our means** is to be ensured in the most comradely manner possible” (*Den deutschen Truppen ist jede notwendige Unterstützung kameradschaftlichst zu gewähren, die mit unseren Mitteln vereinbar ist*). While this statement seems innocuous at first, the further provisions listed, not only strictly limiting the material resources to be given to the Germans, but instructing Habsburg personnel to ensure that the Germans did not oppress the civilian population with requisition demands. The Germans were forbidden to even purchase certain goods – foodstuffs, fuel, and draft animals above all – and should supply primarily supply themselves from their own stores. Further provisions aimed to regulate saluting and rank recognition between the armies, as well as avoid misunderstandings that could arise from the different forms of acceptable address and interaction among officers.⁴⁷³ Taken together, these documents shed some light on the tensions that could arise between Habsburg and German personnel during their joint operations in Italy, namely misunderstandings and resentments stemming from ethnic and military-cultural differences, as well as more practical conflicts over material resources, the latter being of particular significance for the chronically undersupplied armies of the Central Powers in 1917.

Aside from the above-mentioned contempt of German officers for the perceived indolence and incompetence of Habsburg command authorities, German suspicion of the non-German speaking troops of the *k.u.k. Armee* is another source of tension that is manifest in the sources. Cramon, naturally one of the German officers most knowledgeable of – and sympathetic to – the *k.u.k. Armee* probably represented widespread preconceptions among German officers in the evaluation of the various ethnic groups of Austria-Hungary he submitted to the OHL; while only Italians are dismissed out of hand as “bad soldiers;” most of the non-German and non-Magyar ethnic groups – above all the Slavic ethnicities – are noted as possessing varying degrees of unreliability.⁴⁷⁴ These suspicions were most clearly manifest in the German reaction to the desertion of – non-Austrian German – officers and troops in the days preceding

⁴⁷² Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 233-234.

⁴⁷³ Jordan, *Krieg um die Alpen*, 564-566.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid. 387-388.

the offensive. Krafft's commentary on this incident in *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I* stands out for its distinct character, very much different from the "objective," professional tone adopted in the rest of the text. Krafft asserts that the "ever increasing" number of Habsburg deserters were responsible for completely negating the intensive deception and concealment operations conducted by the Germans leading up to the offensive. He acerbically compared the troop morale of the Austro-Hungarian and Italian armies – a criticism even more pointed in hindsight, considering the subsequent collapse of the Italian army: describing the low morale of Italian soldiers, he then opined "but now the Germans now had to with horror make the same observation of the Austro-Hungarian army" (*nun aber mussten die Deutschen mit Schrecken die gleiche Wahrnehmung beim österr.ung. Heere machen*). He placed the greatest emphasis however on the ethnicity of these "traitors," who all came from the peoples that "only with reluctance" still fought for the monarchy (*Verräter, die zumeist den nur mit Widerwillen noch für die Donau-Monarchie kämpfenden Völkern*): Czechs, Serbs, and Romanians.⁴⁷⁵

This vociferous, patently racist condemnation from Krafft, in sharp contrast to his clear, but more subtle criticism of Habsburg command authorities, is all the more notable given that Krafft's public statements on Austria-Hungary and the Habsburg army were largely positive and comradely, albeit in stark contrast sharply with the withering criticism expressed in his private letters.⁴⁷⁶ Krafft was likely not the only German officer who had doubts about the reliability of Austro-Hungarian troops. In his dissertation, Hermann Schöckl interpreted the attack orders for the *k.u.k.* 50. ID – largely comprised of Slavic troops – from the chief of staff of Gruppe Stein to convey mistrust in the offensive abilities of these troops by assigning them a subsidiary role. Moreover, their presence on the right flank of the German 12. ID was apparently considered an operational risk, a concern highly ironic in light of subsequent events; the Bosnian troops of the 50. ID played a major role in facilitating the famous advance of the German 12. ID and thereby the "miracle of Karfreit."⁴⁷⁷ The Germans' consideration of ethnicity in assessing the capability and reliability of Habsburg troops – a tendency fully shared by Austro-Hungarian command authorities, to be sure – was likewise most likely reflected in the fact that the Habsburg divisions placed on the right flank of Gruppe Krauss – the *Edelweiss-Division* and the 22. SchD intended to be Krauss' main assault groups – were both German Austrian formations, though their mountain warfare expertise must also be

⁴⁷⁵ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 41-42.

⁴⁷⁶ See e.g. Müller, *Vernichtungsgedanke und Koalitionskriegführung*, 97, n. 93,94; 101, n.115,116,117.

⁴⁷⁷ Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917*. 2, 394, 399-402.

emphasized there. Indeed, one of the major conclusions drawn by the OHL from the success of the Isonzo offensive was the high combat worth of certain – German Austrian – k.u.k. divisions, which were now considered potentially suitable for combat on the Western Front.⁴⁷⁸ FML Josef Metzger (1870-1921), one of the Habsburg generals most respected by the Germans who would in fact command one of the Habsburg divisions sent to France in late 1918, indeed commented that the Germans always called on the Habsburg army when they needed good mountain troops, which can be interpreted as an assertion against the prevalent German disdain for the *k.u.k. Armee*.⁴⁷⁹

Krafft's suspicions were also extended to the Slovenian population of 14. *Armee*'s deployment area, whose unfriendly disposition towards the German troops contrasted with the behavior of the "core German population" (*kerndeutsche Bevölkerung*) that the army command encountered in nearby Carinthia.⁴⁸⁰ This frosty reception likely had just as much to do with the above-noted issue of requisitioning. Another of the more obviously hostile comments from Krafft involved a series of interactions with a Habsburg *Feldmarschallleutnant* who, according to Krafft, was assigned to monitor 14. *Armee* by Emperor Charles and ensure that the German troops did not abuse the civilian population with requisitioning. This officer, referred to by the Germans as the "oppression general" (*Bedrückungsgeneral*), supposedly could not find anything to report on account of the Germans' exemplary behavior, but did succeed in stirring their resentment.⁴⁸¹ While the extreme deprivation that prevailed in much of the Habsburg Monarchy in late 1917, as well as the perennial risks posed by armies to civilian populations, makes such precautionary measures on the part of the Habsburg military understandable, to the Germans it was just another indication of Austro-Hungarian ingratitude, if not duplicity.

Indeed, many of the frictions that arose between Habsburg and German troops in Italy revolved around practical, logistical issues that assumed greater significance because they occurred between the two armies. Given the poor infrastructure of the region, traffic and logistical problems were probably inevitable with such large forces, but much recrimination was directed between the two armies. FML Scotti blamed the traffic congestion on the main – indeed only – supply road between the Isonzo and the Tagliamento on the German soldiers' lack of march discipline. Interestingly, this may have had much to do with the different

⁴⁷⁸ Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 308.

⁴⁷⁹ Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917.1.*, 247.

⁴⁸⁰ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 22.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid. 22.

driving practices between the Habsburg and German armies, as German army automobiles drove on the right. Unfamiliar with the Austro-Hungarian custom of driving on the left, 14. *Armee* had to eventually deploy bicyclists along the logistical routes to attempt to rectify this chaotic situation. For his part, Krafft conversely laid the blame for these issues with the Austro-Hungarian authorities.⁴⁸² Later in the campaign, as Habsburg units in particular suffered from ammunition shortages, Krafft made the biting remark that KdoSWF possessed almost as many motorized columns as the German army, but the troops were not receiving the desperately needed ammunition as the Habsburg authorities were too preoccupied with transporting looted resources from occupied Italian territory.⁴⁸³

Given the desperate material situation faced by both Austria-Hungary and the German Empire in 1917, it is unsurprising that the division of resources looted from the Italian army and exacted from the occupied territory were a major point of contention between the two armies. Indeed, as mentioned above, one of the greatest impetuses for the rapid advance of the Central Powers' troops was the pervasive supply shortages; Habsburg and German troops thus had to largely live off the land. Arz recorded issues in organizing and implementing separate Habsburg and German occupation zones, noting that attempts to close the border between the two failed on account of the large-scale and chaotic movement of troops. While he mentioned that a German representative was dispatched to HG Borojević to safeguard German interests, he omits any clear reference to resource disputes between Habsburg and German personnel.⁴⁸⁴ Theodor von Zeynek, then head of the quartermaster department of the AOK – and thus well-informed on any and all supply and resource issues – was more explicit. In his memoir, he contrasted the concessions made by Arz to the OHL – after a dispute in which Ludendorff demanded half of all the spoils and half of the occupied territories – with the increasingly desperate material situation in the hinterland, with the likely implication that this concession was ultimately against the monarchy's pressing interests.⁴⁸⁵ Interestingly, *Der Weltkrieg* frames the agreement on the division of spoils partly as compensation from AOK for its refusal in November to transfer Austro-Hungarian divisions from Italy to the Eastern Front. The German official history quotes Arz as offering this concession “in order to secure for Germany the largest possible material advantages for its alliance-friendly behavior” (...um

⁴⁸² Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917.2.*, 386, 368; Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 44.

⁴⁸³ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II*, 238.

⁴⁸⁴ Arz von Straussenburg, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges*, 186-187.

⁴⁸⁵ Zeynek and Peter Broucek. *Ein Offizier im Generalstabskorps erinnert sich*, 286-287.

Deutschland...größtmögliche materielle Vorteile für sein so bundesfreundliches Verhalten zu sichern).⁴⁸⁶

Not all Austro-Hungarian personnel were happy to make such material concessions to the Germans though. Franz Arneitz, an NCO from Carinthia, described the German requisition parties in extremely harsh terms, detailing how the “Prussians” systematically and comprehensively plundered the captured Italian territories, taking everything of value and transporting the plunder back to the *Reich*. This anecdote is notable in several respects. For one, Arneitz underscores the brutality of German behavior, describing it as “barbaric activities that defy any description” (*Dieses barbarische Treiben spottet jede Beschreibung*), adding that even the Italians – the great hereditary enemy – did not behave so barbarically in occupied Habsburg territory. Secondly, the emphasis on the organization of the looting, utilizing motor columns and trains, stands in contrast to the inability of the Habsburg troops to participate – “we Austrians cannot take anything (*Wir Österreicher können nichts nehmen*) – which in combination with his comment that they are “only there to keep our head up and fight at the frontlines throughout the entire advance (*Wir sind nur dazu da, den Kopf herzuhalten und während des ganzen Vormarsches immer in der ersten Linie zu kämpfen*) could be interpreted as jealousy for not being able to partake in the spoils. Thirdly, the contrast between “the Prussians” and the Bavarians, with whom Arneitz states the Austrians can sympathize with more, corresponds to the particular antipathy that so often manifested between German Austrian and North German personnel.⁴⁸⁷

Indeed, Arneitz’ account does reflect this oft-encountered phenomenon: German Austrian personnel in the Habsburg army could often relate more to South German personnel in the Imperial German army, given the commonalities in language and religion. Of course, reality was often more complicated. For one, this was absolutely not a purely Habsburg-German issue; within the German army, tensions between North and South German troops as well as Prussian versus non-Prussian troops were also widespread during the First World War. Moreover, Austro-Hungarian troops certainly did not always get along with South Germans either.⁴⁸⁸ Krafft was, after all, one of the most prominent Bavarian officers of the war, and as demonstrated above, he clearly harbored many of the same anti-Austrian sentiments as so many other German – not just Prussian officers. Indeed, one of the relatively few complaints

⁴⁸⁶ Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 278.

⁴⁸⁷ Franz Arneitz, Franz, Andreas Kuchler, Oliver Rathkolb, *Erlebnisse in dem furchtbaren Weltkriege 1914-1918: Tagebuch eines Frontsoldaten* (Wien: Verlag Kremayr & Scheriau GmbH & Co. KG, 2016), 106.

⁴⁸⁸ Schmitz, *Als Ob Die Welt Aus Den Fugen Ginge*, 232-234.

levied by Krauss against the Germans was directed at Krafft, who according to Krauss, attributed the logistical problems of Gruppe Krauss before the offensive to “Austrian complacency” (*österreichische Gemütlichkeit*). Moreover, one of Krauss’ many, but in this case, particularly intense disputes after the war was with Krafft; he composed *Das Wunder von Karfreit* as a direct response to Krafft’s supposed neglect of his achievements in *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo*.⁴⁸⁹ Relations between Habsburg and South German troops in the field during the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo were also not always particularly friendly. In his famous book *Infanterie greift an*, Erwin Rommel (1891-1944), then a lieutenant in the *Württembergisches Gebirgs-Bataillon*, recounted an incident of particular friction with the *k.u.k. 25. Gebirgs-Brigade*. During an attack in November, Rommel’s unit inadvertently advanced into the combat zone of the recently successful Habsburg brigade, which triggered such outrage on the part of the Habsburg troops that Rommel’s commander was forced to request the complete transfer of the battalion out from the command of the 22. SchD.⁴⁹⁰

The complex relations between Habsburg and German personnel during the joint offensive in Italy, so often colored by camaraderie and tension in equal measure, are exemplified in the memoirs of both Alfred Jansa and Constantin Schneider. Given his extensive experience as a liaison to German commands, Jansa’s memoir is a rich source of information on interactions between the Austro-Hungarian and German officer corps. In light of the question of Austro-Prussian rivalry, Jansa’s relationship with the staff of 14. *Armee* is an interesting account. On the one hand, Jansa displayed a particular antipathy for Prussian officers; he notably criticized Mackensen for being “spitefully Prussian” (*gehässig preußisch*) in his negation of the Austro-Hungarian defensive successes in Italy in 1915; in contrast, during his first period of service under Below in Macedonia in 1916, he praised a Prussian officer colleague by describing him as “kind, modest, and amiable” and therefore “not Prussian at all” (*gütig, bescheiden, und liebenswürdig – gar nicht preußisch*).⁴⁹¹ Likewise, for his service with 14. *Armee*, he explicitly noted that with the exception of chief operations officer Friedrich Wilhelm von Willisen, the entire army staff was comprised of Bavarians. Jansa further underscored the distinction by praising the supposedly superior abilities of Bavarian staff officers compared to Prussians, as unlike the Prussian General Staff, which according to Jansa was too preoccupied with

⁴⁸⁹ Krauss, *Das „Wunder von Karfreit*, “34,40; Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917.2.*, 466-467.

⁴⁹⁰ Erwin Rommel, *Infanterie greift an: Erlebnis und Erfahrung* (Salzburg: Österreichischer Milizverlag, 1995), 395-396.

⁴⁹¹ Jansa and Broucek, *Feldmarschalleutnant Alfred Jansa: ein österreichischer General gegen Hitler*, 295, 312-313.

administration, the Bavarian General Staff in the prewar era could focus on tactical and operational training.⁴⁹² Moreover, Jansa recounted how often he had to defend the capabilities of Austro-Hungarian troops to German officers, on one occasion having to assert that the ethnically-mixed formations of the *k.u.k. XV. Korps* were equal to the German formations of *14. Armee*.⁴⁹³

Nevertheless, Jansa's experiences did not completely correspond to the clichéd Habsburg-German officer relationship at all. For one, his description of his relations with his German colleagues in the *14. Armee* staff are overwhelmingly positive. He cast Below, whom he described as "one of the best German generals" in an extremely favorable light, depicting him as both an intelligent, capable leader as well as a good ally.⁴⁹⁴ He likewise praised Willisen for his camaraderie, noting that the Prussian "proved himself enough to be trusted," noted that "the excellent qualities" (*hervorragende Qualitäten*) of his German colleagues, some of whom he came to count as personal friends, "would remain in vivid memory" (*in lebhafter Erinnerung*).⁴⁹⁵ Above all, Jansa seemed to be very proud of his close, warm relationship with Below, underlining, how Below had personally requested him as liaison to *14. Armee*, his special position as Below's personal representative among Habsburg commands, as well as how the previous Austro-Hungarian liaison to *14. Armee* – in contrast to him – "not work with the Germans." In his account of the aftermath of the offensive, he claimed that Below's personal esteem for him – as well as, presumably, Below's public praise for him – was of great significance for his further military career.⁴⁹⁶ Intriguingly, his depiction of the Bavarian Krafft is markedly less positive than the Prussians Below and Willisen. Jansa noted that Krafft, despite being married to a Viennese woman, harbored great mistrust for Austrians and his demeanor towards Jansa was consequently much less warm and comradely. Fascinatingly, in his final assessment of Krafft, he expressed his negative view of the *14. Armee* chief of staff by referring to him as a "Prussianized Bavarian" (*verpreußter Bayer*).⁴⁹⁷

Schneider, having served in one of the infantry divisions in HG Boroević, seems to have had far less personal interactions with German officers during the Isonzo offensive, but it is his position as a Habsburg officer outside of *14. Armee* that lends his perspective a particularly

⁴⁹² Ibid 359-360.

⁴⁹³ Ibid. 362-363, 368, 390.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid. 329-332.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid. 361-362.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid. 358, 360, 396.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid. 361-362, 390. Krafft's postwar activity as an ardent National Socialist very well may have influenced the anti-Nazi Jansa's retrospective portrayal of him.

interesting quality. Indeed, his depiction of Austro-Hungarian attitudes towards German intervention in Italy is largely negative. According to Schneider, the first rumors of German reinforcements for Italy in September 1917 were received by many officers in the *Isonzoarmeen* with anything but gratitude. Instead, Schneider expressed a sense of resentment and concern for prestige; he described his bitterness towards the rumors, wondering why the Germans would show up after a two-year absence in what had been an exclusively Austro-Hungarian theater. He posed the question, “should our ally now appear here, to tear away the laurels of victory from us?” (*Sollte nun hier der Bundesgenosse erscheinen, um uns den Siegeslorbeer zu entreißen?*)⁴⁹⁸ After expressing frustration with the inability of the *Isonzoarmeen* to advance as quickly as the German formations, Schneider went so far as to characterize the offensive as “no real victory” because of the participation of the Germans: “One would have rather kept this front clean from him, even at the price of failure” (*man hätte diese Front lieber von ihm rein bewahrt, selbst um den Preis eines Misserfolges*).⁴⁹⁹

4.4. The Disputed Laurels of Victory: Prestige, Credit, and Blame

One of the greatest apples of discord between Habsburg and German officers, both throughout the First World War and in the public discourse that followed, was the issue of responsibility, both in a positive and in a negative sense. The question of credit for victories and culpability for defeats, as demonstrated above, plagued the Habsburg-German military coalition almost from the very beginning of the war. Likewise, the sensitivity of the Austro-Hungarian military leadership for asserting and maintaining its prestige increased in direct proportion to the Habsburg Monarchy’s military dependence on its German ally. The consequences of this were not only not at all trivial, but – as exemplified by the issue of command and the compromises it necessitated – played a major role in shaping the dynamic between the two armies. The entire history of the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, from the deliberations surrounding a joint offensive in Italy and the course of operations to the suspension of the offensive and its legacy in interwar discourse, exemplifies this dynamic. Correspondingly, to some extent or another, all of the officer sources incorporated in this thesis allude to, if not outright address the issue. Much of this is a consequence of the ultimate result of the campaign: a decisive victory of unexpected magnitude – but not of sufficient decisiveness or magnitude to achieve anything more than an operation success – that constituted the final major victory of either Austria-Hungary or Imperial Germany before their final defeat. The questions of prestige and

⁴⁹⁸ Dohle (ed.), Constantin Schneider. *Die Kriegserinnerungen 1914-1919*, 473, 476.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid. 488, 516-517.

responsibility manifest in the sources thus reflect an issue of both contemporary, wartime and post facto, interwar significance.

The sources analyzed here therefore demonstrate three facets of this dispute. Firstly, manifest in the sources is the significant role in which concerns for the maintenance of prestige played for Habsburg political and military leadership in their interactions with their German ally in 1917. Secondly, the sources – some of them, in their very topic matter itself – show the continuation of efforts to lay claim to the laurels of victory in the postwar period, above all in the Austrian sources. Thirdly, closely interrelated is the preoccupation of many of the authors with both self-exculpation and accusation in the questions surrounding the potential of the offensive to achieve greater success and the possible reasons why it did not. It is important to emphasize here that these debates were by no means solely defined by an Austrian/German dichotomy. Vitriolic disputes over recognition, responsibility, and recrimination similarly occurred within the Austrian and German camps after the war. Nonetheless, perhaps in this regard more than any did the dysfunction of the *Waffenbrüderschaft* find continuity after 1918.

The sensitivity of Habsburg authorities towards the prestige of their army and its prominence in the course of the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo is very clear in the source material. While other, geopolitical concerns very well may have played a role, in his 26 August letter to Wilhelm II, Charles attributed his desire to wage war in Italy with only Austro-Hungarian troops primarily on prestige grounds, namely the deleterious morale effects of a clear loss of prestige for the *k.u.k. Armee*. Charles claimed in his letter that “because My entire army calls the war against Italy our war...if German troops were to help us, that would have an oppressive, dispiriting effect.”⁵⁰⁰ Even after the joint offensive had been agreed, prestige concerns continued to be of great bearing on the arrangements for the particular form of German intervention and how the *14. Armee* could be integrated into the Habsburg Monarchy’s last realm of military autonomy; the at least superficial preservation of Austro-Hungarian prestige was perhaps even more important in Italy in 1917 than in earlier instances of combined operations. According to Schöckl, the choice of Archduke Eugen as the nominal commander of the operation – that is, the decision to subordinate *14. Armee* to KdoSWF – lay both in dynastic concerns as well as considerations of Eugen’s personal standing with the Germans. On the one hand, the command of the offensive by a member of the House of

⁵⁰⁰ Arz von Straussenburg, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges*, 171. “Würden uns deutsche Truppen helfen, so würde dies niederdrückend, auf die Begeisterung lähmend wirkend.”

Habsburg-Lorraine would lend further weight to the authority of KdoSWF and strengthen its ability to impose its will on the subordinate formations; on the other hand, Eugen's leadership of a successful offensive could greatly enhance the prestige of the dynasty at a time when its standing was historically low. Moreover, Eugen's position as the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order (*Hoch- und Deutschmeister*) would supposedly enhance his personal standing amongst German officers, who would theoretically possess some intrinsic respect for such an old and prestigious office.⁵⁰¹

Concerns for prestige also animated the actions of Habsburg command authorities in the course of the offensive. According to Anton Pitreich, Borojević and his army group had not received command over 14. *Armee*, and therefore over the main effort of the offensive, supposedly because Borojević lacked credibility with the Germans on account of his purely defensive successes. Pitreich claimed that Borojević refused to alter his armies' march routes – thus precipitating the significant frictions with 14. *Armee* – out of bitterness for being passed over in the direction of the offensive. This judgement was echoed by Jansa, who felt that Borojević was jealous of the German success; in this case, given his position at the time, Jansa probably represented the viewpoint of Below and 14. *Armee* in the matter.⁵⁰² Jansa levelled a similar accusation at Krauss, who supposedly kept the German *Jäger-Division* deliberately in reserve so that the Austro-Hungarian formations of his command would receive the most glory. Ironically, according to Jansa, this resulted in the German *Jäger* having more time to assert control over the more tangible fruits of victory, the abandoned Italian military equipment that littered the army's rear areas. Jansa further claimed that the eventual deployment of the *Jäger-Division* to the front was motivated at least in part by this dispute over plunder.⁵⁰³ Both ÖULK and *Der Weltkrieg* attribute Arz's refusal to transfer Austro-Hungarian divisions to the East to Charles' further concerns over prestige and its effect on morale. Charles and Arz believed that transferring Habsburg troops away from "their" war while German forces continued to operate there would severely damage the pride of Habsburg officers and enlisted alike, who would perceive it as an expression of doubt towards their

⁵⁰¹ Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917.1.*, 148.

⁵⁰² Schöckl, *Österreich-Ungarns Isonzofront im Jahre 1917.1.*, 147, 194; Jansa and Broucek, *Feldmarschalleutnant Alfred Jansa: ein österreichischer General gegen Hitler*, 372.

⁵⁰³ Jansa and Broucek, *Feldmarschalleutnant Alfred Jansa: ein österreichischer General gegen Hitler*, 374.

combat capabilities. Notably, Arz does not elaborate on this in his work, merely stating that he denied the German request.⁵⁰⁴

These battles to assert national and institutional prestige were also waged in far more public forms, the result of which lends the notion of the Habsburg-German “*Waffenbrüderschaft*” an especially hollow ring for the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, despite – or, as far as prestige conflicts are concerned, perhaps exactly because of – the magnitude of the shared victory. Glaise, who as AOK *Pressereferent* was heavily involved with the official Habsburg publicity surrounding the offensive, recalled how Charles army order of 2 November deliberately omitted the Germans, an expression of pettiness and ingratitude that Glaise found especially galling in retrospect, considering Charles’ previous, at the time secret efforts to abandon the German alliance with a separate peace.⁵⁰⁵ The actual army order itself, published in *Danzer’s Armee-Zeitung*, did in fact briefly mention “the armed forces of our loyal allies,” but the overwhelming emphasis was placed on the achievement of the Habsburg troops. Notably, the “Isonzo fighters” (*Isonzokämpfer*) and their success in eleven defensive battles was particularly underscored, which can be seen as an assertion of previous Austro-Hungarian military successes in the theater and their continuing significance, even though the *Isonzokämpfer* of HG Boroević were playing a decidedly secondary role in the then offensive.⁵⁰⁶

Possibly the most spiteful manifestation of Habsburg-German rivalry is the reciprocal snubbing of allied officers by both the Habsburg and German armies in the awarding of decorations after the victorious breakthrough. Both Glaise and Jansa recounted these incidents, with both – despite their previously expressed anti-Prussian sentiments – expressing a fair degree of embarrassment and regret at the interference of political interests in the inter-military relationship. According to Glaise, Charles refused to award any of the German officers involved in the offensive with the Maria Theresa Order (MTO), the highest Habsburg military decoration, because the monarch wanted to avoid presenting Ludendorff with the medal, which would have been customary in such a case. This slight was not lost upon the Germans, who for their part largely reciprocated; Glaise claimed that he personally intervened

⁵⁰⁴ Reichsarchiv and Staatsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*. 13., 278; Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6. 602. Compare with Arz von Straussenburg, *Zur Geschichte des grossen Krieges*, 184.

⁵⁰⁵ Glaise von Horstenau and Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielflicht*, 436-437.

⁵⁰⁶ “Armeebefehl,” *Danzer’s Armee-Zeitung* Nr. 44 and 45 (Wien, 1. and 8.11.1917), X.
<https://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=daz&datum=19171101&seite=1&zoom=33>

to convince Cramon to award Waldstätten – who was also part of the pro-German “Young Turks” faction in the AOK – with the *Pour le Mérite*, the Prussian equivalent of the MTO.⁵⁰⁷

Jansa chronicled the unfortunate impact of this reciprocal passive aggression on his relationship with the German staff of 14. *Armee*. According to Jansa, the monarch had declared that he “would not decorate the German gentlemen higher than our generals” (*die deutschen Herren dekoriere ich nicht höher als unsere Generäle*) and as a consequence, Below and Krafft both received lower decorations than they were expecting for such a remarkable victory.⁵⁰⁸ Interestingly, Jansa also recorded that Krauss did not receive his expected MTO – which greatly angered him – presumably because of his “particularly warm heart for Reich Germans” (*besonders warmes Herz für Reichsdeutsche*) and corresponding lack of popularity among Habsburg generals.⁵⁰⁹ In response to Charles’ restrictions on decorating German officers, the application submitted by Below for Jansa to receive Hohenzollern house medals was rejected, which angered the German general; in the end, Krafft was able to use his influence to secure for Jansa the Bavarian equivalent of the award.⁵¹⁰ Jansa noted the significant deterioration in his relationship with the German army staff after the outbreak of these controversies, recalling how much of the warmth disappeared from his relations with Below and how his German colleagues now often and explicitly underscored the fact that the German army was the primary driving force behind this success.⁵¹¹

The public attempts to assert national, institutional, and individual claims to decisive significance in the great offensive victory of the Dual Alliance in Italy not only persisted well beyond 1917 and, indeed, beyond the end of the war, but in fact assumed an even greater justificatory and often tendentious quality in the aftermath of the ultimate defeat of Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany. These debates largely focused on the distinct, but related issues of responsibility for the Central Powers’ operational and tactical successes as well as culpability for the failure of Habsburg and German forces to achieve an even greater, more decisive, potentially war-winning victory. For the latter aspect, the debates in question centered around responsibility and support for ambitious operational goals prior to and during the initial stage of the offensive, the reasons for the troubled, delayed advance to the

⁵⁰⁷ Glaise von Horstenau and Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielicht*, 438-439

⁵⁰⁸ Jansa and Broucek, *Feldmarschalleutnant Alfred Jansa: ein österreichischer General gegen Hitler*, 379-380.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid. 252, 260.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid. 387-389.

⁵¹¹ Ibid. 390.

Tagliamento and the inability to break the Piave line, as well as who constituted the ultimate impetus for the decision to end the offensive in December.

The Austrian military historiography generated by staff officers in the 1920s and 1930s adopted a fairly balanced tone in its portrayal of the Habsburg-German offensive – in a way, this emphasis on the joint, shared nature of the success can perhaps be seen as assertion of the Austrian viewpoint in the face of the marginalization of Austrian contributions in wider German public discourse. At the same time, these works repeatedly underline the contribution of Habsburg commanders and formations to the combined offensive. The chapter by Glaise and Konopicky in *Der große Krieg*, the earliest large-scale publication of former Habsburg staff officers' viewpoints, maintained a largely alliance-friendly tone, while more pointedly asserting the equality of achievement between Habsburg and German division. Not coincidentally, given the authorship, the AOK and KdoSWF were given much more explicit credit for making correct judgements – especially regarding the continuation of the offensive to, and then beyond the Tagliamento – even when they were unable to communicate these plans effectively. The decision to suspend the offensive in December was presented as a unanimous and patently reasonable decision by all of the command authorities involved.⁵¹²

ÖULK lionizes the offensive as one of the most impressive victories in the history of the war and while the Austrian official history admits that the 14. *Armee* staff supported a more ambitious offensive plan from the beginning – a comprehensive rout of Italian forces rather than a mere improvement of position – ÖULK minimizes the importance of this distinction by underscoring the contribution of Gruppe Krauss to the initial breakthrough. Notably, ÖULK incorporates the findings of the Italian governmental committee formed to investigate the causes of the disaster in order to substantiate its emphasis on the joint, collaborative nature of the Central Powers' success.⁵¹³ The work does not minimize or denigrate German achievements, but rather depicts Habsburg command authorities at AOK and KdoSWF as largely supporting in their intentions and actions the ambitious operational goals of 14. *Armee*; notably, while the Austrian official work largely attributes the suspension of the offensive to intrinsic, unavoidable factors, ultimate responsibility to suspend the offensive is assigned to the OHL.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹² Konopicky and Glaise-Horstenau, "Vom Isonzo zur Piave," 432, 436, 440, 449-450.

⁵¹³ Czegka and Glaise von Horstenau, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914 - 1918*. 6., 499, 557-559, 568.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid. 704-705, 676-677.

In the debate surrounding the suspension of the offensive, however several former Habsburg officers expressed more concrete recriminations in their individual accounts. Glaise argued in his memoirs that Ludendorff did not want to destroy the Italian army, as an Italian defeat could have facilitated an Austro-Hungarian separate peace; his decision, which ultimately determined the course of events, amounted to an express German intention to limit the success of the offensive.⁵¹⁵ Schneider, grounding his views in rumors he heard at army group headquarters, similarly blamed the OHL for deliberately concluding the offensive prematurely, an explicit OHL order to halt on the Piave supposedly stemming from German fears of a large-scale Anglo-French and American intervention in Italy.⁵¹⁶ Responding to accusations – especially from German circles – that Charles, moved by his opposition to the German alliance, was the driving force behind the suspension of the offensive, Karl von Werkmann similarly laid the responsibility solely at the feet of the OHL, conversely emphasizing the German reluctance to continue an operation that would so significantly benefit Austria-Hungary. Contrary to prevailing views of Charles' reluctance and ambivalence towards the joint offensive, Werkmann maintained that the monarch was in fact the last to give up on the idea of continuing the offensive and only yielded in the face of German pressure.⁵¹⁷

After the war, many of the Habsburg formation and unit commanders undertook active measures to assert and defend the contributions of themselves and their troops, publishing articles in the commemorative issues of the *Österreichische Wehrzeitung* that explicitly targeted the supposed trivialization of the achievements of Habsburg troops. For the 1917 decennial issue dedicated to the campaign, leading officers of the 1. ID, the 3. Tiroler Kaiserjäger Regiment, and the IV/Bosnian-Herzegovinian IR 4 all extolled their units' tactical achievements, with each of them notably comparing their performance to that of the Germans. Adolf Zimmer asserted that despite their material inferiority, the achievements of the Croats, Hungarians, Slovaks, Czechs, and Romanians of the 1. ID were equal to those of the German 12. ID, described as one of the best formations in the German army.⁵¹⁸ Friedrich Nürnberge not only highlighted the heroism and skill of arms of the Tiroler *Kaiserjäger* in seizing the *Montemaggiore* after the initial breakthrough, but underscored the broader operational significance of this feat for the outcome of the offensive, an achievement overshadowed by

⁵¹⁵ Glaise von Horstenau and Broucek, *Ein General im Zwielficht*, 434.

⁵¹⁶ Dohle (ed.), Constantin Schneider. *Die Kriegserinnerungen 1914-1919*, 508-509.

⁵¹⁷ Werkmann, *Deutschland als Verbündeter*, 131-132, 134-136.

⁵¹⁸ Zimmer, "Die k.u.k. 1. Inf.-Div. in der Durchbruchsschlacht bei Flitsch-Tolmein im Oktober 1917."

the German breakthrough at Karfreit.⁵¹⁹ Eugen Redl similarly held up the seizure of the bridgehead across the Tagliamento by Bosnian troops on 2 November as an action of both martial bravery and greater significance, underscoring that the Habsburg Bosnian troops were indeed the first to cross the river by noting that General Stein, the overall German commander, did not even know that Austro-Hungarian forces had achieved a crossing at all.⁵²⁰ In his editorial published ten years later, Oskar Regele summarized that view of many former Habsburg officers towards the contrast between the significance of their achievements and the lack of (German) recognition for them by asserting that there was no “miracle at Karfreit,” only the achievements of Habsburg soldiers.⁵²¹

Pitreich likewise expounded upon this feeling of resentment towards the unfair marginalization of Habsburg achievements in his book, in which he claimed that of all the former belligerents, only the Germans failed to recognize the achievements of the k.u.k. Armee, substantiating this claim by citing the aforementioned Italian analyses of the 1917 campaign.⁵²² Another prominent topos in interwar publications of former Habsburg officers on the Isonzo campaign, as best exemplified by Bardolff and Krauss, was the framing of Habsburg achievements in the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo through a pan-German lens, with the aim of asserting the equality and worth of German Austrians within the broader German “*Volk*.” Bardolff held up the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo as a battle in which “all of the German tribes” (*alle deutsche Stämme*), in which the German-speaking Habsburg troops proved their equal worth to their Reich German “brothers.”⁵²³ Likewise, in his introduction to *Das Wunder von Karfreit*, Krauss denied any motivations for self-aggrandizement by claiming to only be interested in underscoring the achievements of “German leadership” (*deutsche Führung*) and the supposed desire of German Austrians to be recognized as “full Germans” for their heroism in the battle, which was supposedly best exemplified by his corps.⁵²⁴

Unsurprisingly, the German sources tend to emphasize the primary role of German officers and German troops in reaching the correct operational decisions and achieving the most significant tactical successes. In his 1932 work, Cramon expressly denied any conspiratorial motivations for the suspension of the offensive on either side, though his subsequent reflections on Charles’ anti-German policies in 1916-1917 and the monarch’s belief that a

⁵¹⁹ Nürnberger, “Ehrentage des 3. Regiments der Tiroler Kaiserjäger;”

⁵²⁰ Redl, “Die Tagliamentoforcierung und das Baon IV/bh. 4.”

⁵²¹ Regele, “Vor zwanzig Jahren – zwölfte Isonzoschlacht.”

⁵²² Pitreich, *Der österreichisch-ungarische Bundesgenosse im Sperrfeuer*, 9, 339, 398.

⁵²³ Bardolff, *Deutsch-österreichisches Soldatentum im Weltkrieg*, 33-36.

⁵²⁴ Krauss, *Das „Wunder von Karfreit*, “5-7.

German victory would mean the ruin of Austria-Hungary do undermine his previous argument.⁵²⁵ In his previous work, Cramon largely emphasized the role of German troops in the battle of “Tolmein,” his choice of topographical reference – the location of the breakthrough of the Prussian 12 ID. – reflecting his fundamental assignation of credit for the offensive’s success. Indeed, after chronicling the actions of the Prussian troops, Cramon summarized the result of the offensive as a German relief of the beleaguered Habsburg Italian Front. “German military assistance relieved our ally of a great concern” (*deutsche Waffenhilfe hat dem Verbündeten eine schwere Sorge abgenommen*).⁵²⁶ Similarly, he excoriated Charles’ efforts to suppress publicity of the achievements of German troops and emphasize those of Habsburg formations by claiming that all of the difficult fighting was left to the Germans.⁵²⁷ Krafft, while ostensibly crediting both armies for the victory in their last great common offensive, belied this conclusion of equitable credit with his fundamental attribution of success to the plans and actions of 14. Armee as well his repeated criticism of the key Habsburg forces, especially Gruppe Krauss, for their tactical mistakes and failures of leadership, which Krafft strongly implied to have robbed the Central Powers of the chances for a more decisive victory.⁵²⁸

5. Conclusions

Within the broader context of the Habsburg-German military alliance during the First World War, the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo constitutes both a unique, singular instance of joint operations as well as the continuation, or even culmination of the longer-term evolution of the relationship between the two armed forces. This observation is not as paradoxical as it may initially seem. In several respects, the Habsburg-German offensive in Italy in autumn 1917 was indeed fairly exceptional. The most obvious element here was the scale and intensity of German intervention in Italy; with the sole exception of the brief and uneventful, if ultimately consequential deployment of the *Alpenkorps* in Tirol in 1915, the German military had virtually ignored the Italian Front until 1917. Despite the declaration of war on its Austro-Hungarian ally – and contrary to the spirit, if not the letter of the Dual Alliance as a defensive pact – Germany never even deigned to declare war on Italy. Only the belated Italian declaration of war on Germany in August 1916 brought the *Reich* directly into the Habsburg-Savoy conflict, and even then, the OHL resolutely refused to provide concrete military

⁵²⁵ Cramon and Fleck, *Deutschlands Schicksalsbund mit Österreich-Ungarn*, 205, 218-221.

⁵²⁶ Cramon, *Unser österreich-ungarischer Bundesgenosse im Weltkrieg*, 126-129.

⁵²⁷ Ibid. 130-131, 132.

⁵²⁸ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo I*, 180-181; *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II*, 270; 98, 132, 160-163.

assistance until the Austro-Hungarian *Südwestfront* was at the literal breaking point. The Italian Front had thus remained a Habsburg “private war” until the arrival of 14. *Armee*, whereupon the direction of operations – and thus, leadership of the front – de facto passed into German hands.

The other exceptional aspect of the Habsburg-German Isonzo Offensive was the scale of its success. In the context of the Italian Front, Habsburg-German joint operations, as well as offensive operations of the First World War in general, the Central Powers’ autumn offensive of 1917 yielded territorial and material gains of a magnitude – by Great War standards – completely out of proportion with the relative balance of the opposing forces and shockingly brief duration of operations. Only the great spring/summer offensive of the Central Powers in 1915 in the East is comparable in terms of its salutary strategic impact, and even that was achieved by a much greater concentration of forces over a much longer period of time. The strikingly unfavorable logistical, geographical, and weather conditions in the mountains and plains of Friuli and Venetia in autumn 1917 only further accentuate the remarkable achievements of Austro-Hungarian and German troops.

And yet, even these ostensibly unique aspects ultimately fit into the macroscopic picture of Habsburg-German military relations. While the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo was indeed the first and last large-scale Habsburg-German joint operation on the Italian Front, it was the culmination of three years of increasingly close cooperation between the two armies in the East. The fact that the Germans could, on relatively short notice, transfer an entire army to a comparatively unknown front and integrate it within the pre-existing Habsburg command structures – as well as incorporate Austro-Hungarian and mixed Habsburg-German formations within this new army command – was a testament to the degree of experience both military institutions had accumulated in conducting combined operations. Even the abrupt, if when also short-lived German assumption of leadership on the Italian Front is ultimately indicative of the general trends of the Dual Alliance military relationship. By 1917, combined offensive efforts by the Central Powers were not merely possible, but essential. The underlying force behind Habsburg-German military integration was not simply the extensive experience in fighting together, but the progressive, multifaceted reliance of the Austro-Hungarian army on its German ally. In this way, the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo can be viewed as the climax of the Dual Alliance as a military alliance. On the one hand, this is clear in a literal, temporal sense; this was, after all, the last significant combined operation of the Central Powers of the war. On the other hand, this was also the end point of Habsburg-German coalition warfare in a

structural, developmental sense. By late 1917, the Austro-Hungarian army could not even sustain a solo effort in its own “private war” with Italy. The German intervention and concomitant usurpation of operational control in Italy thus represented the definitive integration – that is, subordination – of the *k.u.k. Armee* into the German military system. Austria-Hungary was no longer capable of waging war independently of its German ally.

Both the broader history of the German Empire’s engagement – or lack thereof – on the Italian Front as well as the specific episode of the 1917 offensive, with all of its resultant friction and complications, are similarly exemplary of the profound, multifaceted ambiguity of the Habsburg-German military relationship. The entire history of the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, from its conception, planning, and preparation all the way through the course of operations to its ultimate conclusion, typifies the paradoxes that characterized the Dual Alliance at every level throughout the entirety of the war. In this way, just as the Central Powers’ Isonzo offensive can be considered as the culmination of Habsburg-German military integration, it can also be viewed as the ultimate expression of the close and, often enough, militarily effective yet simultaneously immensely strained, chronically dysfunctional relationship between the two armies.

The alliance-political and strategic context of the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo is a stark illustration of both Austro-Hungarian military dependence on Germany as well as the fundamental failure of the Dual Alliance to implement a common, coordinated grand strategy during the First World War. The splendid operational success of the joint offensive on the Isonzo belies the fact that such a belated and ephemeral concentration of German and Austro-Hungarian forces on a single front was symptomatic of this failure. The German military leadership only agreed to a significant joint operation in Italy when Ludendorff became convinced that the *k.u.k. Armee* would otherwise collapse; for their part, Austria-Hungary’s political and military leadership were by no means unanimous in their desire for German assistance. The conflicting demands of the Western Front and the OHL’s obvious preoccupation with minimizing both the extent and duration of the German presence in Italy influenced the course of events from beginning to end. Likewise, the inability of the two allies to overcome conflicts of prestige resulted in yet another instance of improvised, ponderous joint command arrangements whose polycratic nature was only exacerbated by inadequate communications. Once the Italian army had been pushed back to the Piave and the Austro-Hungarian front had stabilized, the two allies immediately went their separate ways. It is telling that despite the proven potential for successful combined operations – and despite the

support of several officers in both militaries for Austro-Hungarian participation in the German 1918 Spring Offensive – the Habsburg and German militaries each faced their common fate alone in the final year of the war.

This fundamental discord in strategic coordination stood in glaring contrast to the significant, multifaceted degree of integration that characterized the armies of the Dual Alliance by 1917, as well as their clear ability to effectively cooperate in the field. Over the course of the conflict, the Austro-Hungarian army had adopted much from its German ally; by 1917, German influence in the *k.u.k. Armee* manifested itself in weaponry, equipment, organization, training, and tactical doctrine. Likewise, to a far greater extent than the forces of the Entente/Allies, the Austro-Hungarian and German command hierarchies were closely intermeshed. Even more significant than Germany's nominal overall military leadership of the Central Powers in the form of the OKL was the progressive integration of Austro-Hungarian and German formations on the Eastern Front. Army group and army commands oversaw both Habsburg and German formations; correspondingly, Austro-Hungarian and German corps not infrequently contained divisions from both armies. Austro-Hungarian higher-echelon staffs likewise contained large numbers of German officers.

This level of integration – as well as the underlying dynamic of German formations both providing material support as well as “stiffening” the lines by their presence – was exemplified by the Isonzo operations in 1917. Below's 14. *Armee* was a combined force of formations from both armies, including a Habsburg corps command with subordinate German units. The German intervention in Italy was significant not just in numerical terms, but in technical and material aspects as well. The German formations brought with them the essential materiel of modern warfare – heavy artillery, mortars, light machine guns, poison gas, modern aircraft – as well as the organization and doctrine to effectively use them. At the same time, this was indeed a joint operation; Austro-Hungarian organizational and logistical support for the arriving Germans was not insignificant. Most of all, despite all of the disparities and frictions, the two armies cooperated closely and effectively, often enough down to the lowest tactical level.

This constant, close military collaboration, for all its operational success, laid bare the same fundamental tensions between Habsburg and German officers that distinguished inter-army relations for the entirety of the war. To be sure, one must not unduly overemphasize the conflicts nor ignore the more positive reciprocal sentiments. Indeed, as underlined above, the postwar officer literature emphatically, and not seldom sentimentally praises the unity, loyalty,

mutual respect, and shared achievements of the allied Habsburg and German armies, not least of all through the prism of the offensive as common “German” victory. Even when one compensates for postwar biases, it is clear from the sources that many Austro-Hungarian officers genuinely admired the German army and its achievements, and a number were expressly in favor of a closer relationship between the militaries. Likewise, German officers – even Prussians – were not uniformly dismissive of their Habsburg allies. Beyond questions of political and institutional perspectives, Habsburg and German staff officers could also similarly develop good professional and personal relationships.

Nevertheless, despite such mutual recognition and alliance camaraderie, and contrary to the Central Powers’ shared achievement, the combined operations in Italy generated considerable frictions. Mutual suspicion of each other’s motivations and commitment to the alliance colored the negotiations and planning preceding the offensive, and a keen awareness of the limits of Habsburg and German shared interests continued unabated on both sides for the duration of operations. Despite their overtly positive, ostensibly neutral tone, even the official histories and historical monographs cannot fully obfuscate the ever-present, reciprocal resentments of both officer corps: the Habsburg aversion to perceived German imperiousness, arrogance, selfishness, and ignorance of the Habsburg Monarchy, as well as the German exasperation towards supposed Austro-Hungarian inefficiency, unreliability, sloppiness, and ingratitude. These sentiments were not at all trivial and exercised an important influence on the conduct of joint operations at virtually every level. Above all, friction between Habsburg and German command authorities not insignificantly shaped questions of command and control as well as operational planning. Dividing the spoils of victory – both the physical, material loot as well as the credit and prestige for the victory – similarly precipitated bitter conflicts.

Thus, the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo as a case study of Habsburg-German military relations largely confirms and substantiates the modern historiographical consensus on the Dual Alliance. The Habsburg-German coalition was riven by conflicting interests and reciprocal resentment although, paradoxically, this increasingly unequal and disharmonious association was simultaneously characterized by growing dependence and an inescapable common fate. Nevertheless, an important qualification of this assessment must be emphasized, exemplified by the experience of combined operations on the Italian Front: the complex constellation of individuals and sub-groups within each military and their influence on the alliance dynamic. Neither the Austro-Hungarian nor German military was a monolith; in fact, both institutions

were characterized by a significant degree of internal division. The interpersonal and intergroup rivalries within the two militaries – and the interplay of individuals and factions between the armies – absolutely played a significant role in the inter-military relationship and the conduct of coalition warfare. This factor could and did cut both ways. A good personal understanding between Habsburg and German officers – like that between Jansa and Below, for example – could substantially ameliorate inter-army conflicts. Conversely, internal disputes within one army could easily entangle individuals and groups from the other, leading to cross-institutional alignments of interest. The pre-offensive debate over operational goals and the resultant OHL/*k.u.k.* I. *Korps* versus 14. *Armee*/KdoSWF camps is but one example of how the conflicts between different echelons of one army were easily enmeshed with questions of inter-allied relations. A more in-depth understanding of the Habsburg-German inter-military dynamic thus requires more nuanced perspective than the simplistic dichotomy of “Austro-Hungarians versus Germans.”

The reality that a significant proportion of Austro-Hungarian and German sources for the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo – and, in any case, the most influential sources for subsequent historiography – were written by staff officers during the interwar period is naturally problematic for an evaluation of the Habsburg-German military relationship. As illustrated above, the political, cultural, and ideological environment of the 1920s and 1930s heavily colored retrospective accounts of the wartime Dual Alliance, and the 1917 Isonzo Campaign was clearly one of the focal points for contemporary officer literature. While all historiography is a product of specific authors living in a specific environment with particular views, the Austrian and German officer literature of the period was very clearly preoccupied with certain issues. The long shadows cast by military defeat, political revolution, and institutional disintegration – and all of the concomitant questions of culpability and lost opportunities – ensured that any evaluation of recent history by the individuals significantly involved in said events would not be neutral or impartial.

Indeed, aside from the official histories, none of the above cited interwar publications even claim to be neutral; all explicitly aim to impart some sort of message, whether it be an assertion of one’s own significance, an analysis of the causes of defeat, or a military-technical evaluation of tactical evolution. At the same time, in most of these sources, the future loomed almost as large as the past in the text. In particular, the political future of the German-speaking people appeared as a framing issue for the historical analysis. With such a source basis, characterized by clear biases and agendas, one could understandably despair as to the

possibility of gaining any semblance of non-partisan, “objective” insight into the Habsburg-German military relationship. And yet, if anything, the particular preoccupations of the sources, especially when contextualized via the memoir literature, are in themselves illuminating as to the relationship between the two armies. While one must naturally take the biases of hindsight and contemporary concerns into account, the officer literature surrounding the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo – and the wider discourse it was part of – reflects how, to a great extent, the ambivalent dynamic of the “brotherhood of arms” lived on long after the actual military alliance became defunct.

The official histories, with their anodyne chronicling of military operations and conspicuous omission of any controversial assertions, much less criticism of military leadership, can be viewed as a continuation of the public face of the Dual Alliance during the war. Indeed, if anything, the official histories – especially ÖULK – are just as notable for their emphatic assertion of the camaraderie and solidarity between the Austro-Hungarian and German militaries. Likewise, Krafft’s volume for the *Reichsarchiv* reads in many sections like a paean to the Dual Alliance; the list of alterations and retractions in the second part lays bare the concern of the editor and publishers to respond to Austrian criticism and smooth over any points of contention. None of the works fail to underline the character of the campaign as a joint endeavor and a common victory. To be sure, both points of criticism as well as subtle assertions of greater significance are clear upon a careful reading of the texts. But the necessity for the former Central Powers of presenting a united front to the world obviously did not cease with the conclusion of the conflict and thus the themes of unity and harmony took precedence.

The influence of pan-German nationalist sentiments in the officer literature surrounding the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo is another aspect where, while the altered political and ideological circumstances of the interwar period must be considered, ultimately constitutes a continuation of the wartime dynamic. The fact that many of the former Habsburg staff officers who wrote on the campaign also espoused pan-German sentiments was not a coincidence, nor was the relevance of the ethnic composition of the Austro-Hungarian formations of 14. *Armee* for the significance of the campaign in subsequent memory. The Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo was not just merely a spectacular achievement of the Central Powers’ militaries; it was a victory of the united German peoples. Thus, the growing German nationalist sentiment among certain segments of the Habsburg officer corps during the war reached its full expression after the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy, and the great “German” victory in Italy in 1917

naturally achieved an even greater significance. The rise of National Socialism in Germany during this time, the support for the incorporation of Austria within a Greater Germany by most of these officers, and thus the emphasis on the supposed racial/cultural basis of the wartime Dual Alliance must therefore remain a conscious consideration when evaluating an event with such contemporary ideological significance.

Both of these aspects of the campaign – its nature as a shared victory and the ease with which it could be held up as a great victory of the German *Volk* – thus contributed both to the popularity of the campaign as the subject of historical writing as well as the decidedly positive tone in which Habsburg-German military relations are portrayed in these works. And yet, for all of the impetus for emphasizing these positive aspects, the wartime tensions and conflicts did not disappear either. The outcome of the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo as a resounding yet limited operational victory only exacerbated these tensions. Especially after the war, looking back through the prism of ultimate defeat, the question of awarding credit for the extent of the operation's success and assigning blame for the Central Powers' inability to achieve a greater victory generated clear fault lines that are likewise obvious despite the conciliatory tone of the literature. Above all, former Habsburg officers were greatly concerned with securing the credit they felt they and the *k.u.k. Armee* deserved for the successful Isonzo offensive.

These assertions of Austro-Hungarian achievement and criticism of supposed German usurpation of credit for the victory are most explicit in the published monographs and memoirs of former Habsburg staff officers, but the fact that such debates continued long after the war can even be seen in the more ostensibly neutral works. ÖULK not only devotes far more pages to the Isonzo campaign than *Der Weltkrieg*, but – unsurprisingly – goes into far more detail on the actions of Austro-Hungarian troops. As noted above, the depiction of the prehistory of the offensive, namely the emphasis on who exactly deserved more credit for devising the operational plan, also differs between accounts. In a similar vein, the attribution of ultimate responsibility for the decision to suspend the offensive – not to mention the question of potential greater success and the reasons for the lack thereof – also differ between sources. Even the nomenclature utilized for the campaign can be seen as an implicit assertion of either Austro-Hungarian or German preeminence in the battle. The use of Flitsch in a source – i.e. the attack sector of the Austro-Hungarian I. *Korps* – as the predominant topographical reference for the battle contrasts with the use of Karfreit or Tolmein, which would imply the greater significance of these, predominantly German sectors. Even beyond the specific debates around the 1917 Isonzo Campaign, the preoccupation of former officers

like Cramon, Krauss, and Bardolff with the reasons for the defeat of the Central Powers, as described above, obviously invited recrimination between the former allies. In the introduction to the second edition of *Die Ursachen unserer Niederlage*, Krauss bemoaned the negative public reception of his work in both Austria and Germany. According to Krauss, Austrians felt that the work was too pro-German and even defamed the Habsburg Monarchy and the *k.u.k. Armee*, whereas in Germany the book was perceived as too narrowly Austrian.⁵²⁹

To be sure, these postwar debates around credit and blame were not solely limited to those between Austrian and German officers; fierce internal feuds between former officers similarly raged within both camps. Alfred Krauss' criticism of his subordinate division commanders as well as the leadership of *Heeresgruppe Conrad* in *Das Wunder von Karfreit* elicited a blistering response from the aforementioned officers in the form of a highly polemical pamphlet, in which they systematically rejected each and every one of Krauss' criticisms.⁵³⁰ Within German officer circles, the question of credit in the capture of Mt. Kolowrat ignited a vicious, highly public dispute between the former commander of the *Württemberg Gebirgs-Bataillon* and advocates for the Bavarian *Leib-Regiment*.⁵³¹ And yet, the Austrian-German fault lines in these issues were nevertheless clear. For all the assertions of alliance loyalty and pan-German solidarity, the legacy of the joint Habsburg-German offensive in Italy remained tainted by the persistent rivalries and resentments between former officers of the two armies.

As enlightening as the analysis of the above utilized sources is for understanding the nuances and complexities of the relationship between the *k.u.k. Armee* and its German counterpart, there remain a number of potential avenues for further research on the subject. As illustrated above, this thesis rests on a comparatively narrow foundation of military-historical literature and published memoirs, the limitations of which are as glaring as the insights that they do provide. Several alternative approaches could conceivably offer an even more extensive, detailed analysis of the Habsburg-German military alliance, both in terms of source basis as well as methodology.

The wartime operations documents of the two armies, above all the *Neue Feldakten* in the Vienna *Kriegsarchiv*, constitute a potential primary source basis of immense, indeed overwhelming quantity. These file collections from multiple higher echelons – army, corps,

⁵²⁹ Krauss, *Die Ursachen unserer Niederlage*, V-XII.

⁵³⁰ *Bei Flitsch und am Grappa: die Möglichkeiten größerer Erfolge da und dort; notwendige Klarstellungen der beteiligten Divisionäre und des Generalstabschefs der Heeresgruppe FM v. Conrad*, 1927.

⁵³¹ Krafft von Dellmensingen, *Der Durchbruch am Isonzo II*, 291-292.

and divisional levels can provide a wealth of information about a wide range of issues in the day-to-day functioning of the Austro-Hungarian army, and unlike officer memoirs or military-historical literature, are primary sources that were created during the war itself, usually in much greater temporal and physical proximity to the events and phenomena they report. Like officer historiography and memoir literature, operational files must be analyzed with consideration of the specific perspectives, concerns, prejudices, and interests of the officers who created and preserved them. Nevertheless, a more systematic analysis of Austro-Hungarian operations documents could, in theory, further reduce the lingering reliance on the *Offiziershistoriographie* that has thus far largely monopolized the utilization of these sources.

Another category of primary sources that could be more thoroughly and systematically analyzed through the prism of Habsburg-German military relations would be the collections of unpublished war diaries, correspondence, and memoirs of Austro-Hungarian officers found in the *Kriegsarchiv* “estates” (*Nachlässe*). Many of these collections have already been investigated by historians – including in several of the above cited works – but as yet, they have not yet been utilized in a study specifically focused on inter-military relations. A similarly prodigious, yet in the context of this subject, under-utilized resource are the numerous regimental histories composed in the interwar period, both in Austria and in Germany. Indeed, while the archival sources in Germany are comparatively sparse, German perspectives in the form of memoirs, autobiographies, war diaries, and other primary should obviously also be integrated into the study of the military dimension of the Dual Alliance. Despite their relative scarcity, non-officer perspectives – that is, of ordinary enlisted men – would also be of immense value in further completing and contextualizing our understanding of the relationship between the Habsburg and German militaries. It is also important to note the diversity of ethnic/national and institutional perspectives represented in Austro-Hungarian sources, and that the utilization of sources from non-German ethnicities/other Habsburg military institutions like the Hungarian *Honvéd* – and thus the use of archival collections outside of Germany and Austria – offers another potentially fruitful approach.

In addition to an expansion and diversification of the primary source basis, the application of alternative methodological approaches could also be enlightening. For one, a number of other campaigns would lend themselves well to a case study of Habsburg-German inter-military relations. The Eastern Front – in quantitative, temporal, and spatial terms, the most significant theater of Habsburg-German joint operations – greatly deserves a more detailed and focused analysis of the phenomenon. Secondly, while this work, in order to address thematic gaps in

the historiography, has focused on more narrowly military aspects of the *k.u.k.*

Armee/Deutsches Heer relationship, one could also potentially analyze this inter-institutional relationship through social- or cultural-historical lenses. For example, the issues of language, ethnicity, and national identity in the alliance could be a potentially fruitful line of inquiry.

In a similar vein, the sheer extent of interwar officer publications – monographs, periodical and newspaper articles, pamphlets and print ephemera – would lend itself well to a more specifically discourse-analytical approach. Another potential alternative methodology, in line with the growing popularity of comparative and trans-national historical approaches, would be a comparative study of First World War coalition warfare. The specific prism of international coalitions and their concrete, practical military implementation lends itself perfectly to the trans-national approach. On the one hand, the international nature of a coalition necessitates a comparative, transnational analysis to effectively investigate its functionality as a whole; on the other hand, the nature of the First World War as a conflict of large, global military alliances similarly invites a comparative analysis of how the opposing coalition mechanisms both resembled and differed from each other. Such a comparative study would, in particular, necessitate a greater engagement with the comparatively neglected Eastern, Balkan, and Middle Eastern fronts of the conflict, where both alliances were most directly and extensively confronted with these challenges.

However, in the end, one point of comparison between the Allied and Central Powers as military coalitions is already clear: the Central Powers were defeated. The military alliance of the Austro-Hungarian and German empires was a failed coalition, despite its historical-cultural roots, relative longevity, and not insignificant degree of integration in certain regards. And yet, despite the ultimate inability of the “*Waffenbrüder*” to achieve victory – not least of all on account of their irreconcilable difference in interest – one should not dismiss the study of their military relationship as a trivial, insignificant aim. While it may lack the excitement of traditional drum-and-bugle military history or the clear-cut socio-cultural credentials of more fashionable New Military History, such a military-institutional analysis could not be of greater relevance. The sources of friction in coalition warfare – especially between states of different language, culture, and military strength – are no less significant today than in 1917.

No less enduring is the complicated relationship between military institutions and military history. Despite being the “natural” progenitors and custodians of military history – for all their technical knowledge and expertise – and despite their apparent interest in “objective” analysis of the successes and failures of past wars, military authors of history are by no means

free from political, cultural, and personal influences. If the case of the interwar history of the Habsburg-German alliance is any indication, military authors of history are, if anything, even more susceptible to such pressures from their institutional affiliation and professional identity. While originally written in regard to the tactical lessons (not) recognized by European militaries during the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, a quote from a contemporary British military observer could just as well apply to the distortive effect of postwar military interests on the historical evaluation of Habsburg-German coalition warfare:

On the actual day of battle naked truths may be picked up for the asking;
by the following morning, they have already begun to get into their uniforms.⁵³²

⁵³² Cited in Buttar, *Collision of Empires*, 24.

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the relationship between the Austro-Hungarian and German armies during the First World War, specifically during the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo in 1917, as depicted in the postwar works of former Habsburg and German staff officers. Whereas previous scholarship on the wartime Dual Alliance has focused primarily on high-level diplomacy and alliance politics between the Austro-Hungarian and Imperial German governments and high commands, this work aims to explore the lower level working relationship between the two armies “in the field,” namely how these two institutions cooperated to wage joint military operations. The Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo in autumn 1917 was both the first large-scale German intervention on the Italian Front and the last major joint offensive of the Central Powers, as well as the last successful offensive operation of either power, and was consequently a subject of major significance in interwar Austrian and German historiography. This campaign therefore serves as an excellent case study of the wartime evolution of the Habsburg-German military relationship, its essential characteristics, and how former officers in so-called “brotherhood of arms” characterized these phenomena in their retrospective works. Both the interwar “officer history” of official histories and monographs as well as memoir literature exhibit very clear limitations of perspective as well as obvious political and personal agendas and must be analyzed carefully in this context. Likewise, the complex internal politics of both institutions – the interplay of interests between sub-groups and individuals within and between both armies – militates against an overly simplistic dichotomy of “Austro-Hungarians versus Germans.” Nevertheless, an analysis of these sources illuminates how the highly ambivalent nature of the Dual Alliance in general – both close and dysfunctional – was replicated in the working relationship between the two armies. Significant integration in organizational and material affairs, as well as close operational and tactical coordination, demonstrated the capability of the allied armies for effective joint operations. However, glaring disparities in military capability between the Austro-Hungarian and German armies and significant friction in command and control between their command authorities consistently undermined this efficacy. By the same token, professed appreciation, goodwill, and solidarity between Habsburg and German officers contrasted with mutual lack of understanding, resentment, and recrimination, especially with regards to claiming credit for successes and apportioning blame for failures. Thus, the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo can be seen as both the climax of the Dual Alliance as a military alliance as well as a central topos in its “afterlife” in interwar Austrian and German military-historical discourse.

Abstrakt

Diese Arbeit analysiert die Beziehungen zwischen den österreichisch-ungarischen und kaiserlich-deutschen Armeen im Ersten Weltkrieg, insbesondere während der Zwölften Isonzoschlacht 1917, sowie wie dieses Verhältnis in der Nachkriegszeit in den Werken ehemaliger habsburgischer und deutscher Stabsoffiziere dargestellt wurde. Die bisherige Geschichtsschreibung zum Zweibund im Weltkrieg hat sich vor allem auf die Diplomatie und Bündnispolitik zwischen den Regierungen und Oberkommandos Österreich-Ungarns und des Deutschen Reiches konzentriert und diese Arbeit zielt hingegen darauf ab, die „Arbeitsbeziehungen“ zwischen den beiden Armeen „im Feld“ auf unterer Ebene zu untersuchen, nämlich wie diese beiden Militärinstitutionen bei der Durchführung gemeinsamer Operationen zusammenarbeiteten. Die Zwölfte Isonzoschlacht im Herbst 1917, der erste, groß angelegte Eingriff des deutschen Reichsheeres an der Italienfront als auch die letzte gemeinsame Angriffsoperation der Mittelmächte im Krieg, war ebenso die letzte erfolgreiche Offensive beider Armeen und stellte daher einen bedeutsamen Topos der österreichischen und deutschen Historiographie der Zwischenkriegszeit. Dieser Feldzug dient also als hervorragende Fallstudie für die Entwicklung habsburgischer-reichsdeutscher Militärbeziehungen im Krieg, ihre wesentlichen Merkmale sowie wie ehemalige Offiziere der sogenannten „Waffenbrüderschaft“ diese Phänomene in ihren retrospektiven Werken charakterisierten. Sowohl die „Offiziersgeschichte“ der amtlichen Militärgeschichtsschreibung und Monografien aus der Zwischenkriegszeit als auch die Memoirenliteratur weisen sehr deutliche perspektivische Einschränkungen sowie offensichtliche politische und persönliche Absichten auf und müssen in diesem Zusammenhang sorgfältig analysiert werden. Ebenso spricht die komplexe interne Politik beider Institutionen, nämlich das Zusammenspiel der Interessen zwischen Untergruppen und Einzelpersonen innerhalb und zwischen beiden Armeen, gegen eine allzu vereinfachende Dichotomie von „Österreichern gegen Deutschen.“ Eine Analyse dieser Quellen verdeutlicht jedoch, wie sich die insgesamt sehr ambivalente Natur des Zweibundes – sowohl eng verbunden als auch dysfunktional – in der Arbeitsbeziehung zwischen den beiden Armeen widerspiegelte. Eine bedeutende Integration in organisatorischen und materiellen Angelegenheiten sowie eine enge operative und taktische Koordination zeigten die Fähigkeit der verbündeten Armeen, gemeinsame Operationen erfolgreich durchzuführen. Allerdings untergruben eklatante Unterschiede in der militärischen Leistungsfähigkeit zwischen der österreichisch-ungarischen und der deutschen Armee sowie erhebliche Reibungen in der Befehls- und Kontrollstruktur zwischen ihren Kommandobehörden diese Effizienz immer

wieder. Ebenso standen die bekundete Wertschätzung, der gute Wille und die Solidarität zwischen den habsburgischen und deutschen Offizieren im Gegensatz zu gegenseitigem Unverständnis, Ressentiments und Schuldzuweisungen, insbesondere im Hinblick auf die Zuschreibung von Erfolgen und Anschuldigungen für Misserfolge. Somit kann die Zwölfte Isonzoschlacht sowohl als Höhepunkt des Zweibundes als Militärbündnis als auch als zentraler Topos in ihrem „Nachleben“ im militärhistorischen Diskurs Österreichs und Deutschlands in der Zwischenkriegszeit angesehen werden.