

Vienna, November 7-10, 2018. A four-day journey into public commemorations of

November 1918 in the Austrian republic

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Introduction

The writing of this chapter generated great excitement for me because it allowed me to

approach questions related to collective memories for important public events like the

end of First World War in Europe in a totally different way. The methods I usually adopt in my research involve quantitative approaches, through surveys or experimental designs (e.g., Dumas & Luminet, 2015; Luminet & Curci, 2018; Stone, Luminet, & Takahashi, 2015; Stone, van der Haegen, Luminet, & Hirst, 2014), although recently I also worked with historians and relied on other sources like archives (Spijkerman, Luminet, & Vrints, 2019; Luminet & Spijkerman, 2017).

Similarly to Sumartojo (2015), I adopted in this chapter an auto-ethnographic approach, using my own 'body as an instrument of research' (Waterton and Dittmer, 2014). This approach involved attending closely to the inputs of the environment while visiting

different sites, mainly museums. These first-hands experiences helped to develop my understanding of how Austrians commemorate the end of the First World War in public exhibitions. One very interesting perspective that I gained from a this approach was to pull my attention to experiential and affective qualities of memories. My perspective also included a sensory approach, which was a way to;

- a) attend to the particular and individual encounters that people have in such places; and how they think through the site to make sense of the narratives presented;

b) make sense of how memory sites actually come to be meaningful in our lives, how

these meanings are understood, and what they are entangled with; and

c) illuminate the impact that such sites might have on us precisely because it does

not treat these places as somehow sitting outside our other experiences, feelings,

memories, or sensory perceptions (Sumartojo, 2018).

In this chapter, I will describe my experience as a tourist on a short journey in Vienna on

November 7-10, 2018. The fact that the Austro-Hungarian empire that included the

current Austrian republic lost the war was a key factor that I expected would be related

to a strong will to forget the event, as evidenced by studies comparing memories for

positive and negative public events (e.g., Breslin & Safer, 2011; Talarico & Moore, 2012).

Overall, psychological studies show that the winners of a conflict exhibit more detailed

memory elaborations, which is consistent with the so called 'pleasantness bias' (Bohn &

Berntsen, 2007). Thus, I expected that commemorations related to the end of First World

War would be very scarce or almost non-existent. I regarded this expected absence of

commemorations as a huge contrast with what was happening in Belgium, France or the

UK where numerous commemorations were taking place at the same time. I thus had a

strong a priori hypothesis based on few, but I thought strong, arguments. My goal while

visiting Vienna was to be as open as possible to all information I could gather that would

help me understand what type of collective memory of November 1918 was at work in

Austria today.

By including an auto-ethnographic approach, this chapter takes up the theme of the

experience of commemoration. I will show how through my unfolding experience I

gained a progressive and iterative understanding of the types of topics that were chosen

and the ones that were not chosen for commemorating the end of the First World War in

Austria. It is important to realize that I pursued two threads in this chapter that I then

attempted to bring together. On the one hand, there is the Austrian narrative about the

war and on the other hand there is my first-hand encounters with it. The linking device

is my own assumptions about the war that are based on a winning narrative of a Belgian citizen. For that reason, the Austrian approach of the end of the war's commemorations was unfamiliar to me during my first encounters. Throughout the chapter, I try to convey my uncertainties and doubts when my initial assumptions did not fit with what I found in the different exhibitions I visited. This approach will hopefully illustrate that commemoration is not self-contained, but varies to a large extent based on our pre-existing attitudes and knowledge.

Before starting my description of the journey, I will define communicative and cultural memories as two central ways of understanding how personally and nationally relevant

memories are transmitted and still being remembered today (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Assmann, 2011). Communicative memories are transmitted between people, often within a conversation, and tend to be personally relevant. The family memories a parent relates to a child are prototypical of communicative memories. Cultural memories arise when communicative memories are transformed into 'objectivized culture'. They are the culturally institutionalized heritage of a society and consist of 'cultural formations (texts, rites, monuments, exhibitions) and institutional communication (recitations, practice, observance)' (Nora, 1996: 129). As such, they tend not to be personally, but nationally relevant. Assmann and Czaplicka (1995; Assmann, 2011) claimed that communicative memories have a limited temporal horizon of around 100 years, that is, about three or

four generations. If a memory is to be preserved beyond this limited temporal frame, it

must become part of 'objectivized culture', that is, a cultural memory. We recently

showed that the temporal horizon of communicative memories might even be shorter

(Stone et al., 2014). For those reasons, I thought that investigating cultural memory

items such as exhibitions would offer an appropriate approach of collective memories of

November 1918 in Austria.

November 7. First observations and initial surprises

I left Brussels in the early afternoon of November 7. In order to get a good, and hopefully

valid, point of comparison between Belgium and Austria, I thought that at Brussels

airport I would find many items related to the 100th centenary commemorations, which

would be in sharp contrast with what I expect not to find in Vienna. But actually this was

not the case. I went to one of the largest bookshops in the airport where I expected to

find weekly magazines with their cover dedicated to the commemorations. But actually I

found ... nothing! Not a single weekly or monthly magazine on the topic, which I thought

would be a central topic due to the very high media coverage of the commemorations of

the beginning of the war in 2014. The only relevant items I found were two special issues

sold for a more extended period of time from the French Paris-Match and the Belgian

French-speaking *Le Vif* magazines. Regarding exhibitions, I couldn't find a single

announcement of the large one that was happening at that time at the War Heritage

Institute in Brussels ("Belgium 1918-1928. Beyond the Great War"). This observation

suggested that even in a winning country, the cultural memory of First World War

Armistice was not as present as expected.

When I arrived in Vienna, all my attention was dedicated to any sign I could find at the

airport, in the train going to the city center, in the subway or when making my first steps

in the city. This approach is very close to 'attunement', which involves engaging in a

process that includes sensing, noticing, and thinking about a topic of interest (Sumartojo,

2018). Attunement allows a greater flexibility with regard to findings that did not fit

with expectations, which will be particularly beneficial in the present context.

Although the end of First World War was never mentioned in these first hours in the

Austrian capital, I still found a few relevant items. I had the chance to stay in a hotel close

to the Museums Quartier, a wonderful site full of interesting museums and cultural

activities. I noticed that in the entrance of the Architekturzentrum Wien there was a

large poster presenting an exhibition on 'Vienna the Red' that was related to the

commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx. The exhibition itself

was in Karl Marx Hof in the suburb of Vienna but the museum for architecture wanted to

highlight this event. This exhibition gave me a first indication of the highlighting of political changes that occurred in the country at the end of First World War because strong communist and socialist movements were active in the years that immediately followed the end of the war. I also noticed that the MUMOK (Museum Moderner Kunst) had an exhibition called 'Photo/politics/Austria' that was taking the visitor to 'a photographic journey through Austrian history from 1918 to the present'. I immediately considered this exhibition as something I should visit during my stay.

In the evening, I checked Google to see what I could find using three obvious keywords: Vienna, November 11 and World War I. As expected, this did not bring many

relevant entries apart from two interesting ones. The first one came from an official channel, the city council of Vienna. It gave me indication of major events that happened around November 11, 1918. Three aspects that were cited related to the end of the war and the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian empire¹. The first one '3 November 1918: The Austro-Hungarian Army lays down its arms' revealed that the Austro-Hungarian army had already surrendered on November 3. The second one, '12 November 1918: Proclamation of the Republic of German Austria' describes first the abdication of Emperor Karl I on November 11, and then on November 12 the proclamation of a new state that was called Republic of German Austria. The third one, 'The young Republic - a

1 For full details see : <https://www.wien.gv.at/english/history/commemoration/republic.html>

"tough birth" described that as soon as the Republic was proclaimed demonstrations

and riots followed marking the beginning of intense violence for several years.

The first website made me realise that the reason why the First World War Armistice is

not mentioned was not necessarily related to a will to forget the defeat of the Austro-

Hungarian Empire. It could be instead related to a will to commemorate a happy

foundation that actually occurred also on November 11. Recent research showed that

beginnings loom larger than endings by attracting more attention, being judged as more

important and interesting, warranting more explanation, and having more causal power

(Teigen, Böhm, Bruckmüller, Hegart, & Luminet, 2017). For instance, people think it is

more important to know when wars and reigns started than when they ended, and are

more interested in reading about beginnings than endings of historical movements. An

important outcome is that beginnings are often identified in retrospect. The beginning

advantage may thus exaggerate the actual historical importance of public events.

Another explanation is that this happy start of a new political system was immediately

associated with troubles within the Austrian population, resulting in episodes of physical

violence. This made these events highly salient and highly intense, two central variables

to make events memorable (e.g., Kensinger, 2009)

There are Vienna remembers the Great War

The second relevant entry looked even more promising with this title: 'Vienna

remembers the Great War'.² Here the source was a well-known tourist guide, which

might give a more personal perspective on the events than the rather dry style found for

an official site like the city of Vienna. An update the month before gave me some hope to

find interesting events likely to be happening now. This was confirmed by the promising

introduction:

If there is one European city that seems particularly focused on the World

War I centenary then it is the Austrian capital Vienna, where a host of war-

² See : <https://www.roughguides.com/article/vienna-remembers-the-great-war/>

themed exhibitions will be opening over the course of the year. Such attention

may come as something as a surprise when one considers that the Austro-

Hungarian Empire was one of the powers brought crashing to its knees by the

conflict. Few other European nations would find their own decline and fall

quite so engrossing.

This very interesting introduction suggested a point opposite to the one I had in mind, by

suggesting that being a defeated country is not a reason to avoid commemorating an

event through numerous exhibitions. The next part of the introduction situated the

exhibitions that were going on in a larger perspective than First World War:

Austria was at the center of a huge multi-national empire in 1914, and the Viennese archives are full of photographs and documents recalling the wartime service and home front lives of the Habsburg Monarchy's many subjects. Implicitly recognized by this year's events is the feeling that Vienna still bears a burden of responsibility towards all those who fought under an Austrian flag. And it's by no means just the war that the Viennese are commemorating.

The journalist then mentions the central influence of artists such as Gustav Klimt and

Arnold Schönberg and scientists such as Sigmund Freud to make Vienna an 'unofficial

capital of European modernism'. The next subtitle was 'six ways to remember the Great

War in Vienna'. At that moment, I wondered how I could manage to visit so many

exhibitions in only a few days!

The first one, called 'The Car, the Pistol and the Ostrich-Feather Hat' was centered on the

assassination of Austrian heir to the throne Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in

1914 as being a major trigger of the outbreak of World War I. The exhibition took place

at the Austrian Military Museum, where I planned to visit anyway because it should

bring central information on the way Austrians want to commemorate and remember

the end of First World War. But I had doubts when the description reported 'June 28,

exactly one hundred years after the event itself', which was actually related to 2014 and

not to 2018. But let's continue my reading, there are still five other exhibitions going on!

The second one called 'The Glory and the Gloom' focuses on personal stories of both

soldiers and civilians describing how they were impacted by the consequences of the

conflict. The dates for the exhibition are March 28 – Nov 9. Does it mean that this

exhibition is almost over? Doubts are growing ... and are confirmed when I read the

description of the last exhibition called 'World War I in Vienna: City Life in Photography

and Graphic Art', which is taking place ... until January 2015!

This information is quite revealing. It highlights a huge contrast between the commemorations that happened in Vienna museums for the beginning of First World War, which what seems to happen or rather not happen in 2018. How to explain such a contrast? One easy answer is that the beginning of the war was probably more glorious than the end, thus obtaining more attention from the political and cultural authorities. It is therefore not surprising that cultural memories for First World War in Austria were mainly related to the beginning of the conflict as local authorities favored remembering past events that strengthened national identity.

November 8. THE decisive day!

My plan for the morning of November 8 was to start my day by going to the

‘Heeresgeschichtliches Museum’ or Museum of Military History, which is a huge war

museum illustrating all conflicts in which Austria was involved during the Empire period

and until 1945. To go there I needed to take the underground. Underground stations are

always good places to spot current events going on in a city. At the Karlplatz station, I

found the announcement for an exhibition at the Wien museum, where I had previously

visited an excellent exhibition on the great architect Otto Wagner for the 100th

anniversary of his death. The current one was called ‘Die erkaämpfte Republik.

1918/19 in Fotografien’ (‘The fighting republic. 1918/19 in photographs’). With such a

title, I thought that it would be a perfect location to find relevant information about how

the events that happened in Vienna in November 1918 were commemorated in public exhibitions.

But the first goal was to visit the war museum, a huge building in a Mauresque style. The section on First World War is on the ground floor and the visit started with a very old fashioned gallery full of the multiple uniforms of the Austro-Hungarian empire, old guns and old 'chandeliers' hung from the ceiling. These rooms awakened some worries for me regarding the level of interest this museum could bring for what I was looking for! It did not improve when I moved to the next room, which showed the original car in which the Archiduke Franz Ferdinand rode in Sarajevo when he was assassinated. It got even gloomier when I saw the uniform he wore that day, on which there are still spots of his

blood. Fortunately, the next room addressed other issues beyond a purely military narrative. On a large wall there was an impressive painting that displayed soldiers walking in an empty field, some injured, others with their uniforms damaged. Most of them wore helmets which did not reveal their faces, but the one in the center of the painting was without a helmet. His face expressed pain, hardship, hopelessness and exhaustion. There were also traces of blood leaking from his uniform. Emotional feeling states and art representations of war were finally present, offering a more interesting perspective on the First World War.

I understood that the display was chronological, which means that I hoped to find in the last room dedicated to the year 1918 some interesting facts and pictures about the

month of November. I found a slideshow starting from January 1918 and had my camera

ready for taking the pictures related to the decisive month. But after many pictures

depicting scenes taken during the summer, and also the months of September-October,

the display goes back to ... January 1918! This meant that there was nothing about

November 1918, and at that moment, I even had the impression of censorship regarding

that specific month that I was looking for. Then, I realized that there were still a few

displays before the end of the exhibition. And, indeed, I saw the word 'Armistice' a bit

further away, and thought that finally I would find something about the moment I am

looking for! I started to read. But I soon realised that what I thought was the 'universal'

Armistice of November 11 was actually describing the Armistice signed by the Russian

new communist state! Finally, in one of the last displays, the Armistice signed between

the Italians and the Austrians in Villa Gusti near Padova on November 3 was explained.

There was even the text of the peace agreement, which is written in French. This made

me realise that the relevant day for Armistice for Austrians corresponds to more than a

week before the one considered in winning countries. I was by now becoming aware that

while for us the main event of November 1918 is the 11th, for Austrians, there are other

major events that happened during that month, the first one happening on the third. A

timeline indicated another crucial event for them that happened on November 12, the

proclamation of the Republic of German Austria.

On the other side of the ground floor, I also visited rooms dedicated to the Austrian republic from 1918 until Second World War. There, I saw the Act of Resignation signed by the emperor Charles I on November 11. This document helped me realise an additional aspect to consider regarding the selection of events that are commemorated in Vienna's museums. It seems that for Austrians the end of the war is not such a central event to commemorate because it collides with another major event, the end of centuries of the Habsburg monarchy and the start of a new political regime. These are major changes that we did not face in Belgium, France, or the UK where the same political system continued after the war.

Now it was time for a lunch in a nice restaurant in the park near the museum on the way to the Belvedere. The light was perfect, reflecting a pale sun on a pleasant and still warm November day. I allowed myself a short break in my investigations by visiting the Upper Belvedere where there is a remarkable collection of Klimt paintings. The walk that I made afterwards, down the park to the Unter Belvedere building was delightful, with the perfect geometric shape of the park, the water, the fountains, the white sculptures and the small plants reflecting green, red, and brown colors, the sign that we are in the autumn that followed a very hot and dry summer. This break into my journey of investigation was highly beneficial, beside the sensory pleasure of an enjoyable walk on a sunny day. It allowed me to take some distance from my investigations, which helped to

approach the topic with fresh eyes when I visited the next exhibition related to

November 1918 later on.

The Karlplatz was now close by, where the Vienna museum is located, the next target for

my investigation. The exhibition was called 'The fighting republic. 1918/19 in

photographs'. It was to be a crucial place for my exploration into the critical moments of

November 1918 for Austrian collective memory. On arrival, I was happy to see that many

rooms were entirely dedicated to November 1918, and I thought that this exhibition was

exactly what I am looking for! The first rooms were dedicated to what was called 'Twelve

dramatic months'. They highlighted that beside hardship like hunger, those years were

also new moments of freedom, including the right for women to vote, the eight hours a day working schedule, or the end of censorship.

I noticed that some of the pictures I had seen earlier in the War museum were also exhibited here, including the one that I found the most emblematic. It displays a crowd in front of the Parliament, with a central banner that reads 'Hoch die Sozialistische republik' (Cheers to the socialist republic). The following text explained the picture:

Vienna, 12 November 1918. Hundreds of thousands flocked to Vienna's Ringstrasse to celebrate the end of the Habsburg Monarchy and a new democratic beginning. On this cold and rainy day, the Republic of German Austria was proclaimed.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

By now, I thought I could fully grip what aspects of Austrian cultural memory are associated with November 1918. In the museum bookshop, this new assumption was confirmed when I saw a DVD summarizing what is at the center of commemorations in November 2018 for Austrians, 'Der erste weltkrieg und die folgen für die erste republic' (The First World War and the consequences for the first republic). I understood that the end of First World War cannot be viewed as a single salient event for Austrian cultural collective memory. It is strongly and intrinsically connected to other events that I did not know about before and that by now make sense to me. The whole month of November

was actually crucial, involving tremendous changes for the way the country was ruled

from an old gigantic empire to a small republic, new ideas emerging towards more

democracy and freedom, oppositions and sometimes violent confrontations between

(far-)right and (far-)left wing parties. The visit of that exhibition was thus the moment I

could fully realize that my initial hypotheses were entirely guided by the perspective of

someone coming from a country that won the war, which led to a complete

misrepresentation of the central cultural artifacts that would be displayed in Vienna in

November 2018.

My investigation activities were now finished for the day! However, I still have on my list

the exhibition at the museum for contemporary art (MUMOK) called

'Photo/Politics/Austria' with a retrospective that starts in 1918. Some new findings to

expect?

November 10: Some last support

On November 10, I still had time to attend the exhibition at the MUMOK before catching

my plane. The exhibition was organized following the same principles as the small one

also on display at the Wien Museum where selected artists were asked to represent

iconic objects representing each decade of the Austrian republic. At the MUMOK, it was a

finer-grained approach, with one hundred panels, each containing a selection of a few

pictures for each year from 1918 until 2018. The first year of the exhibition was thus the

most important one for my investigation. This panel had two pictures selected. One was

a train of soldiers coming back from the front, giving the idea of desolation and suffering.

The image was contrasted with the picture already described of Parliament Square on

November 12 when the new republic was proclaimed. This was the third time I had seen

this picture as representative of a crucial moment of the year 1918 in Austria.

On the 1918 panel the references to First World War were minimal with only a single

picture related to this major event. I was surprised to find that no further mention of the

war was reported in any of the 99 further panels. In contrast, the Nazi period was widely

covered, starting with their rise to power in the early 1930s until the departure of the

Allied forces from Vienna in 1955. This other major historical moment was thus

represented for more than 20 years of Austrian history. The importance of First World

War in the cultural collective memory of the Austrian republic seemed extremely small

in comparison with the major turmoil experienced later in its young history.

A last opportunity to look at cultural memory items related to the end of First World War

in Austria appeared at the airport where I browsed the bookshops. I found an extended

collection of Geo epoche, a German magazine presenting historical events in a similar

way to National Geographic magazine. I found many issues related to Second World War,

together with more recent historical events (the Red Army invasion for instance) or older

ones, like the Secession war, but I could not find a single volume on First World War. One

reason could be that issues covering the event were missing because of very high sales,

but I think this is unlikely given the high number of available copies for the other volumes. It seems more probable that the bookshop did not consider the topic of a central interest to be on sale in November 2018, while Geo epoche had published different volumes covering First World War earlier. The airport bookshop made an end to these three days of observations regarding cultural memory for the end of First World War in Vienna.

Conclusions

These three days in Vienna offered me a welcome opportunity to test some initial basic assumptions I had regarding the cultural memory representation of the end of First World War in Austria. Taking an auto-ethnographic approach based on the availability of

museums and exhibitions covering the year 1918, and more particularly the month of

November, I had the opportunity to visit three relevant sites. Each exhibition, together

with observations made on the streets and online, gave me the opportunity to modify

progressively my expectations about the importance that would be given to the

Armistice of November 1918 in Austria. For example, I realised first that the date of

November 11 was not very relevant, as the Armistice for the end of the war had been

signed eight days earlier. I also learned that a major event took place on November 11,

which was the resignation of the Emperor. But that day, which was related to the end of a

political system that existed for centuries, was almost completely absent in those

exhibitions, while the event that happened the day after, the proclamation of the

Austrian republic, was the central feature of November 1918 cultural memory of Austria.

It was largely displayed in the three exhibitions, with each time the selection of the same

iconic picture that represented the event.

It was thus a rewarding approach to capture important traces of the cultural memories

of a country in relation to an important moment of historical transition. This new way

for me of examining collective memory from the bottom-up was very interesting and

revealing. In particular, it allowed me to better grasp the distortions that can occur when

elaborating hypotheses about the way public events are commemorated without being

fully immersed in the context.

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