

LAST CHIEF OF STAFF OF THE MONARCHY. THE LIFE AND CAREER OF ARTHUR ARZ VON STRAUSSENBURG

Colonel-general Arthur Arz von Straussenburg (1857–1935) was the last chief of staff of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during 1917-1918. Descending from a Saxon Transylvanian family, he was man of trust of Emperor Charles I. and followed Field Marshal Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf in this office.

My dissertation was written with the aim of introducing the General's career in the framework of a biographical monograph. There has always been a high demand to summarize the life and career of generals of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Biographical summaries of Conrad, Potiorek, Boroević, Sarkotić as well as their role in the Great War had already been displayed by Austrian authors. In addition to this, on the Hungarian side no biographical summaries have been made about Szurmay, Tamássy and Rohr up to now. One short biography has been written about Arthur Arz von Straussenburg in relation with his duties as chief of staff. It was written by Oskar Regele in 1968.

Arz was one of the most successful members of the Monarchy's military elit. He started his career as a civilian and volunteer for one year in the army before getting promoted to a general in 1908. Arz was not only handsome but a talented, diplomatic officer as well who – as a result – was charged with a lot of important tasks. He had been member of staff since 1888, and then became the head of human department in 1903, before getting promoted to a leader of department at the Ministry of War.

In my dissertation I put special emphasis on the role of the general in the First World War (hereinafter: WWI.) I tried to pay special attention to his role as a front-commanding general between 1914–17. In this 22 months long period he served as commanding officer of the Corps VI (Kassa) from September 1914 to July 1916 then he became commander of the 1st Army. As commanding officer of the Corps VI he could take part in one of the most glorious victories of the Monarchy in WWI, namely at the breakthrough at Gorlice.

Beside the victory that had induced the collapse of the tsarism in Russia, there are numerous success stories linked with his name, among these the

battle at Limanowa and Brest-Litowsk are of special importance. The general appeared as one of the most talented strategists which also applies to the hinterland. Arz won the highest honour in Hungary among the German minority. Moreover, his popularity has increased in the summer of 1916 when he was responsible for the defence of Transylvania. When Arz was ranked as a chief of staff, he was responsible for the operative leading of the military forces of the Monarchy. During the period when he was the chief of staff, the k. u. k. forces pushed out their enemies from the territory of the dualist state, defending successfully two Italian and the Kerenskij offensives. One of the biggest victories in the WWI can be associated with the name of Arz, namely the breakthrough at Caporetto. This success can only be compared to the triumph at Gorlice, with respect to the booty and the tactics, though little strategic importance had been attached to this victory because Italy continued the war. Furthermore, the victories meant the promotion for Arz, he became a colonel-general, but in spite of his high position, a field marshal's baton was not granted to him, so in respect of ranking, he reached the peak of his career.

The fortune of Arz began to decline in June 1918, when the last big offensive of the Monarchy collapsed along the river of Piave. This misfortune is regarded as the forerunner of the final defeat for the dualist state and for the general as well. In October 1918 the coup de grace occurred for the military force that was about to dissolve. The closing accord of the war is inseparably intertwined with the character of Arz, so consequently, the failure and destruction is related to his name, and the memories of the previous successful battles were cast into shade. The irony of this situation was intensified by the fact that the position of the commander-in-chief was granted to Arz by the Emperor Charles I.

My research is mainly based on the documents of the military archives in Vienna, but I used records from archives in Budapest and Sibiu. Beside the use of primer resources, I summarized the secondary literature regarding Arz.

The conclusion of my dissertation can be summarized in the following points:

1. I specified the literature on Arz and the statements of the public opinion in many points in my dissertation. I presented in details that the

hagiographic standpoint of Regele is untenable. Further, I made an attempt to ease the formerly negative criticism of his career.

2. In my dissertation, I would like to emphasize, that despite the victorious battles, Arz had a not so favourable reputation especially among the Hungarians which can be contributed to the losses of the Corps VI, thus the image of Arz is entwined with the depiction of a negligent, untalented and dilettante Austrian general in a great extent. In contrast, Arz was one of the most successful generals in WWI who had an outstanding reputation among the German allies. Significant number of his awards can be contributed to his behaviour in battles and his success. Out of these special importance has to be attached to the *Pour le Mérite* and the Commander's Cross of Military Order of Maria Theresa. Due to his supreme position he was responsible for 75 million people including the territory occupied by the Monarchy.

3. Despite his victories, Arz did not become a general who played a decisive role in the outcome of the war. Although he proved to be an outstanding general at the level of the army corps, his strategic comprehension is considered to be average and especially in the political life he was considered to be inexperienced and controllable personality. The real tragedy of Arz can be compared to the fate of Emperor Charles I.: the monarch got into a situation, where for a talented and crafty character would be a great challenge to rescue the empire from collapse. In the beginning of 1917, Arz should have been a crafty politician, inspired military genius, ingenious diplomat, outstanding economic expert and an advisor for the ruler who can weigh the situation faultlessly; with these qualities he may have prevented the emerging catastrophe. In the chapter where I introduced his activity as a chief of staff, I would like to shed light on Arz's efforts to meet the requirements of the above mentioned qualities, but the burden of this duty exercise proved to be stronger than his ambitions. In the spring of 1917 the war began to emerge in such a way that opened up new horizons in respect of the outcome of the fights and Arz – just like the elite leaders of the Central Powers – was unprepared. The only way for the general to finish his career successfully, if he could have been to rescue the empire just like the reborn figure of Radeczky in the hopeless situation in the autumn of 1918. In my dissertation I introduced that Arz was not only a reliable and a devoted

soldier but he had outstanding achievements in the field of organization that made him suitable for this task as a chief of staff.

4. The general's devotion to the imperial Germany proved to be fatal in the autumn of 1918, since the destiny of the Monarchy became inseparable from the fate of the Second Empire. For this reason the general played an important role in the last outcome of the world war, because he stabilized the cohesion of the Monarchy, which was essential that the Central Powers could counterbalance the increasing pressure from the Entente. Arz interpreted the fight as a tragedy of destiny or the question of "to be or not to be", he had full confidence in the victory of Central Powers till the summer of 1918. At the same time he paid attention to Charles's steps suspiciously, the aim of which was to make peace. At the period when he was chief of staff, the revolutionary Russia and the previously pacified Romania had to sign a separate peace treaty. Meanwhile Emperor Charles could not come to an agreement with the western powers to resolve the conflict, because Germany wanted a total victory and did not support the signing of the peace treaty. Nevertheless the defeat became unavoidable for Germany by the merciless logic of the war of attrition. The reason why Arz showed resistance to signing a separate treaty of peace can be attributed to his stubborn nature. Similar to his former mentality he considered himself as committed German at the time of the world war. In spite of these facts, his loyalty to the Monarchy remained unquestioned.

5. Arz – similarly to the military leaders of the Central Powers – regarded the war as a "total war", the result of which could only be victory or death. This behaviour can be considered one of the greatest faults of the general. Thus at the time of the war and when he was a chief of staff it became clear that the existence of the Monarchy was at stake and this prophecy was fulfilled. Although the totality of the war extended in many respects, when Arz was ranked as a chief of staff the Monarchy lost only 100 thousand soldiers, on the other hand when Conrad was in this position the number of soldiers killed in action had come up to 1 million people.

6. As a result of the outcome of the war, the achievements of Arz fell into oblivion. The examination of his biography sheds light on the fact that the efforts of the Central Powers were depreciated in WWI and were

considered as pointless endeavour, while at the same time in the winning Entente countries the bloody events of the conflict became elemental part of the national identity.

7. In spite of the defeat in the war and the undeserved remembrance, the role of Arz can be considered unique in the last two years of the Monarchy. He remained member of the elite in the Empire, counting from his appointment as a chief of staff till the collapse of the dualist state, whereas at the same time in other positions at least one change took place, e. g. in case of the minister of financial affairs, the minister of military affairs, the minister of foreign affairs, the Austrian and Hungarian Minister of Military Affairs, the commander in chief of the Fleet. The colonel-general has reorganized the army of the country in an unperceived way, and thus laid the foundations of a real modern army in comparison to the year of 1914. The reason why the troops of the Monarchy had endured to the end of the war can be ascribed to his efforts as a chief of staff.

8. In my dissertation, I have corrected many false statements of former biographies about the colonel-general. In addition I could present some new data as well, because I could use Hungarian sources, which were not available for the Austrian authors. Beyond the importance of the role of Arz, my dissertation gives an account of the history of the k. u. k. Army and the situation of Austria and Hungary at the interwar period.