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The Austrian Army

1765-1815

*The history of organisation and
strength*

THESIS

Subject and its importance

In the long, united history of the Habsburg Empire and Hungary, there was only one common organisation with authority over every part of the Habsburg lands, the Austrian Army¹ and its leading institution, the Military Court Council (*Hofkriegsrat*). This army was composed of units from all parts of the Empire. The starting point of my research is 1765, because it was clear for the military leaders that the army needed reorganisation after the Seven Years War, and the same year Joseph II accessed as Holy Roman Emperor and became the man in power of the military matters of the Habsburg Empire, as well, since his mother, Maria Theresia appointed him to deal with the army.

My original goal was to analyse the Austrian Army of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, but this army was a product the military reform period after the Seven Years War. In 1765, the newly accessed Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II became the man in power of the military matters of the Habsburg Empire because his mother Maria Theresia appointed him to deal with the army. The reforms of 1765-1781 were realised by Joseph II and General Lacy. Thus, I had

¹ The Hungarian phrase is „imperial-royal” (*császári-királyi*), however in English the Austrian Army expression is in use.

to shift the starting point to 1765. The ending year is a political and military turning point, which ended an era of the military history and of the Austrian Army.

The series of defeats in the first two coalition wars showed that the French tactics and power was superior to that of the Austrian Army. Archduke Charles earned appointment to President of the *Hofkriegsrat*, so became the minister of military affairs, and started to issue further reforms, but the lack of money hindered any effective change. Just before the Third Coalition War, General Mack reorganised the infantry, but this sudden change, only several weeks before the new war caused chaos in the army and lowered the effectiveness of the troops. After the tremendous losses and shameful defeats, Archduke Charles took over the command again, and introduced serious reforms and completely reorganised every element of the army. The war of 1809 was lost, but the scale of the defeat was minor, because for first time, Napoleon was personally beaten in the battle of Aspern. Archduke Charles resigned and retired from the military activity. The strength of the army had to be reduced to 150 000 soldiers. After taking part in the Russian Campaign on the side of Napoleon with a 30 000 men corps, the Austrian Army joined the fight against the French in August 1813.

The military administration ordered the enhancement of the troops with recruits, thus the strength of the army rose quickly as a result of the reforms of both, Joseph II and Archduke Charles. The overall success of the Austrian troops against Napoleon in 1813 and 1814 was due to the better command and better organised units, but the leaders made fewer mistakes, too.

The Austrian Army took part in almost every great battle of the period including Jemappes, Neerwinden, Fleurus, Würzburg, Stockach, Novi, Marengo, Hohenlinden, Caldiero, Austerlitz, Aspern, Wagram, Dresden and Leipzig as an adversary of the French army. The organisation of the Austrian Army was rather different from the French army, so we can call it the „Austrian way of organisation”. The main characteristics of the Austrian Army was the use of relative large units with relative few officers and NCOs and only one level of elite troops. By contrast, the French army had three or four levels of selected elite troops and units.

The organisation of the Austrian operational level units had been changed basicly. In the beginning, the army was using the linear tactics, and the operational organisation acted upon this tactics and the methodic strategic policy. The French operations based on individual multiarms divisions in the early

period of the war, forced the Austrians to reflect to this. The early Austrian corps were temporary organisational units. The regular corps system was introduced by Archduke Charles, who adopted the 1805 French model corps organisation, but transformed it to the Austrian circumstances and traditions. This system worked well in 1809 allowing the Archduke to concentrate his force quickly to oppose the French crossing at Aspern. Schwarzenberg used an improved version of this system in 1813.

Sources and research

There are a lot of data about the organisation and the set-up of the army in the literature, however, there is only one book dealing with this special area. The well known work of Wrede (Wrede, Alphons Freiherr von: *Geschichte der k. und k. Wehrmacht*. Wien, 1898-1905) covers the organisation of the Austrian Army from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. This great work is very useful, but parts of it are not detailed enough (e. g. the scheme about the strength of the infantry regiments, numbering of the cavalry, etc.) and sometimes it contains errors (e. g. the *Grenzers* in the second coalition war, the third bataillons of the infantry regiments). I used this book as a basis for my research,

and my aim is to correct and supplement its incorrect and missing data.

Books covering a campaign or a battle often include chapters on the organisation of the army, but these are sometimes not detailed enough or they contain incorrect data. I used a large number of regimental histories to fill the gaps of the primary sources. These regimental histories are of different quality, but many of them were based on primary sources, which had been lost by now. Luckily some parts of organisational decrees are cited in these books, because the original decrees had been sorted out by now.

The inspiration for my research came from the book „Habsburg Regime, Standing Army, Hungarians” from József Zachar. The author analysed the whole Habsburg Army, and showed the real importance of the Hungarians and Hungarian units in the system of the whole army. The work can be considered as a turning point in Hungarian military history, since it ended the conventional method of analysing only the Hungarian elements of the Austrian Army without studying all parts of it. I adopted this new method, and examined the whole Austrian Army.

The research of the organisation and the strength of the army is based on large amount of primary sources of the

Military Archives in Vienna, which handles the files from the central military institutions of the Habsburg Empire.

In respect of the research on the history of military organisation, two important holdings have to be mentioned, the *Musterlisten und Standestabellen* and the *Stand- und Dienstabellen*. The files of the *Alte Feldakten* could be used very well to collect data about the operational level organisation, and the strength and power of the fighting armies and their branches on fields. The archive of the *Wiener Hofkriegsrat* is a very large part of the *Military Archives*, and contains huge amount of files on every aspect of the army, but the in the sortings of the early nineteenth century, several important files were thrown out. The reforms of the infantry introduced by General Mack could be reconstructed upon the materials of the *Wiener Hofkriegsrat*.

During the research, a very interesting source was discovered among the files of the Nostitz-Rieneck military court commission (*Militärhofkommission Nostitz-Rieneck*). This commission was raised in 1791 to examine the state and every aspect of the army, and it had to make proposals concerning its improvement. The members examined the history of the army, and collected important files from the past to analyse them and to help improving the organisation. They edited some very

useful and detailed schemes about the organisation of the infantry and cavalry units.

The most complicated methodical problem of the research was to define strength of army and the number of troops. The army used several different methods to report the strength of the units, and more versions of these reports existed: *Frührapports*, *Standestabellen*, *Musterlisten*, *Standesausweisen*, *Standes-Extracten*, etc. As a result of a long examination of these sources, the “*Haupt Stand- und Dienstabelle*” series of the *Alte Feldakten* proved to be the most usable and comparable form. To determine the strength of field formations (armies, corpses, etc.), I used those reports, which provided the number of soldiers present for duty at the given location.

Structure and main results of the dissertation

The first chapter of the dissertation gives a short introduction into the historical background and the military system of the Habsburg Empire. Further, it designates the topic of the dissertation.

The second chapter starts with the more detailed explanation of the subject to define the parts of the Austrian Army and the levels of the organisation. The presentation of

the primary and secondary sources of the research are embedded into a short historiography of the subject. Finally, the most important methodical questions are summarized.

The third chapter is the very detailed presentation of the tactical units of the army. The basis of the explanation are the administrative units, in the case of the line infantry and the cavalry, the regiments, but other arms had bataillons and divisions, or squadrons as their highest tactical unit. The organisation of the line infantry underwent deep transformation, but it was not so spectacular. The organization in 1765 and in 1815 seemed quite the same, but on the deeper level and in details, the composition changed frequently, and a much more effective system had developed over the time. According to the overall trend, the strength of the individual units rose significantly, while the number of officers and NCOs remained relative low.

The history of the cavalry was very complicated. After the Seven Years War, the cavalry was searching for its new role in the military system. Two new cavalry arms (*Ulans* and *Chevauxlegers*) appeared and remained in the army. The importance of the heavy cavalry was dropping, and the „cavalry product” of the eighteenth century, the regularised light cavalry appeared as the main cavalry arm. The number of

the regiments of the army decreased, but the strength of the regiments grew strongly. At the beginning of the period, the cavalry regiments were reorganised and the strength of the lower level tactical units, the squadrons rose. The number of officers and NCOs were much higher in the cavalry than in the infantry.

The deepest transformation of the period can be detected at the artillery. Its early organisation was close to the medieval irregular system, but the reforms of General Liechtenstein and Kinsky were successful, and the effectiveness of the artillery began to grow. The introduction of the cavalry guns was a great success. The concentrated deployment of the French artillery during the Revolutionary Wars motivated the Austrians to concentrate their own artillery into batteries. The new artillery system was developed and introduced by Archduke Charles in 1808. The effect was immediate. The Austrians defeated Napoleon at Aspern, and avoided total defeat at Wagram due to the help of the concentrated fire of the artillery batteries.

In the engineer units of the army, rather a technical than an organizational improvement can be observed.

The operational level organisation had changed most spectacularly over this time, as it is explained in the fourth

chapter. The linear tactics of the eighteenth century dismembered the army into divisions and brigades only on an administrative level, and these remained only separate parts of the line. The commanders of these larger units were not autonomous leaders, their task was restricted to holding the line in tact. The system of the divisions and brigades changed frequently, but their organisation was far from permanent. The linear tactics limited the efficiency of the troops, however, it helped the generals and officers to maintain the order of the soldiers.

The French army of the early period of the First Revolutionary War changed the obsolete linear tactics and the methodical strategic system to a very mobile operational and tactical appearance, which changed the organisation. The French organised their units into multiarms divisions that could operate and fight individually. The Austrian Army had to react. In 1793, the first operational multiarm corps appeared, but the development was very slow and not free from mistakes. This spontaneous reaction changed in 1809, when Archduke Charles organised planned corps to conduct individual operations. His new system was a great success and served as a basis for the further regular development. The best organised

Austrian army fought against Napoleon in the campaign of Leipzig.

The fifth chapter deals with the numerical strength of the army in war and peace. In the first war of the era, the War of the Bavarian Succession, the Austrian Army was able to field an army of 165 000 men. This number reached its peak with 235 000 in 1809 and early 1814. The rate of the growth shows significant rise in power, which shows the remarkable development of the conscription system, the administration and the staff efficiency and planning. An interesting shift can be observed between the military theatres, too. While the importance of the Italian theatre was minimal in the first four years of the war compared to the theatres at the Rhine and in the Netherlands, balance was established in 1799, and in 1805, Italy became superior. The insecurity of the political leaders can be observed by the fact that they could not decide, where the main theatre should be, and they could not respond in time to the changes of the theatres (in 1797, the French attacked Inner Austria, while the Austrian Army had been being in offensive at the line of the Rhine).

Archduke Charles was able to find the balance between military power and political objectives. His defeat in 1809 was the result more of the tactical and operational mistakes than

that of the improper balance. The most numerous and powerful Austrian Army fought Against Napoleon in the German territories in 1813, but powerful armies fought in Italy and along the Danube, too. The reason for this was that on the German, later French theatre, the Austrian Army has been fighting together with the strong allied armies, while on the other theatres it had had to fight alone against the French and their allied forces.

The division of forces in peace time matched the number of inhabitants and the economic power of the parts of the Empire, and it was not influenced by political issues opposed to the era after 1815.

The text of the dissertation is followed by illustrations and schemes, finally the list of sources and the bibliography is presented. A CD is attached to the dissertation, which contains several databases as supplements to the text.