

Eötvös Loránd University  
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PHD DISSERTATION SUMMARY

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LIFESTYLE, LIVING CONDITIONS AND MENTALITY OF HUNGARIAN MILITARY-OFFICER  
FAMILIES IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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## **1. Aims and Sources of the Thesis**

The aim of the dissertation and of the research was the exploration and presentation of the social and financial background of a military officer's life, in a way as complex as possible. This goal targets officer families in the first place; the thesis deals with their lifestyle, living conditions, and their mentality.

Lifestyle means a system of certain activities and behaviour; it is organised, more or less consciously, by people to sustain their living, and to meet their different-level needs which alter in space and time. Living conditions and lifestyle are inevitably influenced by the economic situation of the given period, this directly affecting incomes, and thus financial circumstances, too. One aspect of lifestyle is the study of residence types and home conditions. This is the most important field of study in terms of living conditions, with its subjects including the adequacy, the comfort-level and the maintenance of the residence. The last aspect leads us to income conditions, which then defines the composition of those living in one household and family. The study of mentality searches answers about the characteristics of thinking. Mentality research puts emphasis on collective behaviour and collective thinking instead of individual features. When looking at the three notions (subjects of research), we find that all of them target the study and presentation of everyday-life.

The study of everyday-life can lead us to results if we put a smaller unit under analysis. The dissertation has two restrictions: first the analysed social stratum has to be defined, then a smaller group within the bigger one has to be set, too. In order to narrow the subject of my study down, I chose military-officers, but even so, a quite large and heterogeneous group is still left for study. When exploring living conditions at this social stratum, one has to bear in mind, for one thing, that the officer group was far from being uniform. When studying lifestyles, living conditions, and mentality, officers cannot be separated from their families. Every moment of an officer's life was regulated, and this fact raises one of the questions of the dissertation: to what extent did these regulations, which applied mainly to the head of the family, affect the life of the families?

The chosen period of time is very broad: the first half of the 20th century (from 1900 to 1945). It might be surprising that it does not end or does not begin at the end of World War I, an important closing point of political-history, or at the 1920s. This decision was based on the consideration that Hungarian society stepped into the new conditions of post-1918 without undergoing a radical change in its inherited inner structure. Later changes, on the other hand, did not affect the foundations. Higher social strata were still the ideal goals to be reached by

lower social groups. They kept on trying to adapt the formalities of higher strata, even if there was no content behind the outside.

Most of the sources of the dissertation come from the 1920s and 1930s, the emphasis is laid on this period of time. For the sake of continuity and interpretation, the analysis of the majority of the chapters' subjects start at the mid-19th century, and some go as far as the end of the 1940s.

The regulations, training, and even the uniforms of the Hungarian Royal Army show striking similarity with those of the Austrian-Hungarian army of pre-1918. István Deák described this phenomenon as 'Habsburg-past was haunting everywhere'. The dissertation is also looking for the answer to the question if this direct influence is tangible in the lifestyle of military officer families.

After the Compromise of 1867, officers' lifestyle gradually shifted from that of nobles towards that of the middle-class; while middle-class people adjusted their behaviour and lifestyle in many respect to that of officers. The army with its Weis-criteria demanded more or less the same lifestyle from officers. The study of the exact nature of these requirements, as well as the exploration how officers and their families could meet these requirements are both part of the dissertation.

Statements of the dissertation are based mainly on written sources. My primary sources were the documents contemporaneous with the events (letters, petitions, forms), newspaper articles, yearbooks, laws, certificates (identification documents, service pay books, diplomas), drawings (plans, other graphical instructions), and photographs. From the group of secondary sources, historical evidence generated after the events, I used reminiscences (oral history, memoirs, biographical books). Special literature books, touching at any level or from any direction my topic, were also inevitable to use.

## **2. Structure of the Dissertation**

### *1. Officer Marriages, Divorces, and their Regulations*

Before discussing the lifestyle of a family, first we have to talk about marriage, the institution creating a family. Marriage was in our period unquestionably the primary institution of society, determining the circle of inheritors, differentiating among the offsprings of a legitimate relationship, and regulating the transmittal of wealth. Inheritance was basically the foundation of social and economic status, and of individual success. The marriages of military

officers were special cases, if we consider that they needed strict authorisation; and in order to get this permission the deposit of a marriage bond had to be secured.

### *2. The foundations of Living: Salary, Fees, Monetary Allowances*

The determining base of the lifestyle of an officer's family, as in every other case, was the financial situation; which is not equivalent with the salary of the family's head. The regular allowances of professional officers had a number of components. The biggest part was provided by the monthly pay, a sum adjusted to the rank and growing with the time passed in service. Family officers were also entitled to family allowance which depended on the size of the family, and to rent allowance which was set centrally and varied from location to location.

### *3. Preferences Guaranteed to Officers and their Family Members*

Officers were provided preferences in everyday-life, and family members were also entitled to the majority of these benefits. Some of the preferences were set centrally, and they were given not only to officers but to all state officials. The greatest part of the allowances, however, were available only to soldiers and their family members; for example the different attendances at army institutions. They could draw on different preferences in connection with travelling, culture, recreation, and health care. They could apply for preferential bank loans.

### *4. Society's View and Esteem of Officer Families*

The main reason of the complaints about the financial circumstances of officers lied in the fact that society and the army expected from an officer and his family a lifestyle and appearance which was not commesurate with the salary of young officers with a family. The state could (or wanted to) pay for the service of its officers partly in money, the other half was recompensed by ideological appreciations, by titles, ranks, and medals. Officers enjoyed a particular social status, they existed basically above society.

### *5. The Situation and Life of Children in Officers Families*

We do not have many sources on the life of children, especially of young children, growing up in officer families. Reminiscences have only a few pages about childhood memories. Officers had relatively few children, probably because they got married at a later age. One of the preferences of officer families was that after their children finished elementary school they could carry on learning at military schools. If we want to learn about the everyday life,

lifestyle of the children of soldier-families, between the ages of ten and eighteen, we have to explore the history and everyday-life of the so-called military schools.

#### *6. The Hungarian Royal Honvéd Officer Institution 'Zrínyi Ilona' for Young Ladies, Sopron*

In addition to the schools for officer training and preliminary officer training, there were two other institutions which served social purposes. One of them was the Hungarian Royal Honvéd Officer Institution 'Zrínyi Ilona' for Young Ladies, Sopron. The history and the life of the military educational institution for boys is discussed in many reminiscences and scholarly works. There was no larger-scale and comprehensive scholarly work published in the last decades about the only military-officer institution for girls; this is the reason why the dissertation devotes a separate chapter for the topic.

#### *7. Housing Conditions of Officer Families*

Families of military officers were also hard hit by housing shortage, a phenomenon nationwide characteristic in the period. The state tried to deal with this problem centrally by constructions and by the extension of existing barracks. Officer families lived in service flats, in rented flats, or in their own property. We have very few direct sources on the furnishing of the flats; one can get a general picture from counsel books reflecting middle-class models, and also from the special literature books which use estate inventories to describe the interior decoration of the period.

### **3. Results, Conclusions**

The first measures to improve and stabilize the situation of military officers in the Habsburg Empire were taken by Maria Theresia. She increased officers' social care and the security of their living. She granted the rank of a noble to every officer who served thirty years in honour. She made army uniforms fit for the royal court, meaning that officers, regardless of their descent, were allowed to be present at the gala ceremonies and balls organized by the court.

Between the two world wars, the ideal officer owed unconditional allegiance and loyalty to the Commander-in-Chief the Governor; was a devotee of his profession, and a man of strong character. He was observant of his duties, knightly, had a healthy ambition and a good physique. The ideal officer was free of bad habits, had no connections; he was not boastful nor haughty. The officer staff of the Hungarian National Army got its base from military secondary schools and cadet schools. Pupils of these schools came mostly from the middle class and from the strata right under this class.

The dissertation's main goal is to find answers to the question what kind of rules controlled the life of officer families, and how these rules went about. The first such regulation we encounter at the foundation of the family, namely that officers were allowed to get married only with authorization. The chosen bride had to meet some social requirements, and had to make a financial effort, too, to become an officer's wife. In most of the cases there was no problem with getting the permission, but providing the deposit of the marriage bond was difficult. Generally, the deposit exceeded severalfold the officer's annual salary. No wonder the majority of the permission requests had an attached document, too, asking to reduce or cancel the deposit. The bride's father was in most of the cases a soldier, too, or a state- or county-official; therefore the reduction was granted. Another conclusion as well can be drawn from the documents of marriage permits. Generally the authority gave the permission to the marriage in those cases, too, when a 'minor' objection rose against the bride, but otherwise was in a satisfactory financial situation.

The quality of a family's lifestyle was determined by the financial situation in the first place. An officer's salary was not equivalent with his monthly pay; he received some supplements, and some payment in kind. Officer salaries changed together with the changes in the country's economic situation. As they got their salaries from the state, they were affected by the salary-cuts and -revisions of the 1930s. According to the different calculations and comparisons, professional officers were well-paid among state employees, but, compared to the workers of free intellectual fields their salary was worse. When examining financial situation, one has to bear in mind the rank of the family head. An officer's position provided a number of social benefits, on which, for example a private official could not count. The military profession of the family head could add allowances to the incomes of the family in addition to the salary and the supplements. Welfare allowances included housing supplement in the form of rent allowance, the system of social allowances (subsidies), cheap catering (officer canteens), and health care at army hospitals. In addition, officers and their families were granted preferences in many other areas, some of which were provided either because the grantee was member of the body or because he worked in public service; some other preferences were granted as a result of economic consent or will.

Military schools laid equal emphasis on teaching and education, but the sources prove that children also had time and space for the games and plays of their age. Only few of the pupils could not abide the atmosphere of military schools and chose to leave the places. Many remember the years, may they be only one or two schoolyears, passed at these institutions as one of the best periods of their lives; and think to have acquired the perseverance and moral

code necessary for life there. Putting the nostalgia for the early years aside, we have no reason to question this evidently general sentiment.

Social life had special importance for officers. The image of officers was much influenced by their behaviour and appearance. The etiquette books which were written for them were based on the rules of bourgeois life, but the pieces of advice only recommended for civilians were obligatory for soldiers.

The written or unwritten rules for soldiers applied to their family members, too; moreover, the family head was responsible for his relatives in this respect even more. For example, family members were not allowed to enter politics either, or they could not accept a job which was against the prestige of an officer's rank. How is a family with a military officer head different? Just as almost every part of an officer's life was regulated, these rules affected family members, too, directly or indirectly. The family head's profession laid duties on relatives, but at the same time they could enjoy most of the benefits which came together with an officer career. It might be stated that the most characteristic feature of family life was that the family head, the father, was generally far from his loved ones; the son, however, or at least one of the sons, chose military career in most of the cases.

Officers took good care to maintain the prestige of their profession, and put more emphasis on this task than any other social group. Their efforts were even the more necessary as officers were the models of society's middle and upper layers. This statement is the most evident when looking at residences. Our data on officer homes speak mainly about interior arrangement and details of building technologies.

We had one more question in the introduction. To what extent did the traditions of the Monarchy lived on later? It is a well-known fact that the officer staff of the Hungarian Army between the two world wars had tight personal and institutional ties to the Monarchy. Military regulations followed the antecedents, no doubt the same was true for lifestyle and mentality. In fact, the statement that the first versions of the orders and regulations had been written during the existence of the Austro-Hungarian Army is true for the subjects of every chapter in the dissertation. The marriage regulation or the allowance regulations can be mentioned here. Naturally, the actual sums (deposit, monthly pay, etc.) changed during the half century discussed in the dissertation, but the basic categories, characteristics and chapters did not. Most of the preferences are part of the Monarchy's legacy, too. The photo identification document for railway can be mentioned here, a paper which was the basis of many preferences; or the discounts at spas, baths and holiday resorts. The first editions of etiquette books were published in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, too, and they were republished

without any change, or, in the case of german-language books, they were published with a shortened translation later. The same stands for counsel books. The constancy of lifestyle-regulation proves that the rules, though more or less altered, served their purpose for decades. The army was the most important pillar of the state both in the Habsburg Monarchy and in Hungary between the two world wars. Its prestige was held high not only by military leaders but by every social and political elite.

#### **4. Publications dealing with the topic of the thesis**

- A soproni Magyar Királyi „Zrínyi Ilona” Honvédtiszti Leánynevelő Intézet. [The Hungarian Royal Honvéd Officer Institution 'Zrínyi Ilona' for Young Ladies, Sopron] *A Hadtörténeti Múzeum Értesítője* 8. Budapest, 2005. 53–73. pp.
- A katonatiszti házasságkötések szabályozása a 20. század első felében. [Regulations of Officer Marriages in the first half of the 20th century] *Folia Historica* XXIV. A Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Évkönyve 2005–2006. Budapest, 2006. 115–130. pp.
- Élet a Magyar Királyi Zrínyi Ilona Honvédtiszti Leánynevelő Intézetben. [Life at the Hungarian Royal Honvéd Officer Institution 'Zrínyi Ilona' for Young Ladies] In: *A múlt feltárása – előítéletek nélkül*. Főszerk.: *Gergely Jenő*. Budapest, 2006. 139–156. pp.