

Slovenes in the Habsburg Armed Forces

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Slovene lands started coming in Habsburg hands in the late 13th century. The long process began after the battle of Dürnkrut (1278). In this last traditional battle of knights in the region, the army of the emperor Rudolf of Habsburg defeated the army of the Czech king Otakar Přemysl. Afterwards the Emperor invested his two sons, Albert and Rudolf II, with Austria, Styria, and Carniola, which were previously in the hands of Otakar. In the next couple of centuries Carinthia, Istria, Triest and finally in 1500 the County of Görz (Gorica, Gorizia) were one by one incorporated into Habsburg Hereditary Lands as well. This and other Habsburg domains evolved slowly in the Austrian Empire. Of course the process was not straightforward. For the Habsburg rule to become uncontested, it took a lot of skilful political manoeuvring, some luck and several wars.

One of the great obstacles to an unimpeded Habsburg rule was the Counts of Cilli (Celje). The rise of this noble family from central Slovenia began in the second third of the 14th century. As they acquired large estates in central Styria, Carniola, Carinthia and Croatia, their prominence rose and soon they were one of the most powerful families in southeastern Europe. They were related by marriage with rulers of Bosnia as well as Polish and Hungarian kings.

In 1396 count Hermann II of Cilli was in command of Styrian troops that took part in the Battle of Nicopolis. The Ottoman army won the battle decisively, but the count saved the life of the Hungarian king Sigismund of Luxemburg (from 1433 Holy Roman emperor). A strong bond between the two men, which was even strengthened when Sigismund married Hermann's daughter Barbara, was created.

In 1436 the Emperor elevated the counts to the rank of dukes. This triggered a feud with the Habsburg duke Frederick V (Frederick III as Holy Roman emperor from 1452), who was their formal liege lord. The feud lasted until 1443, and the fighting in which local nobles, their entourages and foreign mercenaries took part spread over much of Styria and Carniola. Many castles and towns were besieged and destroyed. The troops of the Counts of Cilli even unsuccessfully laid siege to the Carniolan capital Ljubljana. The conflict was solved in 1443 with the signing of several documents; one of them foresaw a mutual inheritance in case one of the families became extinct. But after the last Count of Cilli, Ulrich, was killed in Belgrade (1456), Frederick had to fight Ulrich's widow, Hungarian king Ladislas Postumus, the count of Görz and the Croatian counts of Frankopani for the promised inheritance. He personally led his troops in capturing Celje, the seat of the Counts of Cilli, and was almost captured there by his opponents. After Ladislas died in 1457 and Frederick managed to strike a deal with the widow, the conflict was practically

settled. The war of succession ended in 1460, Frederick gaining all the former possessions of the Counts of Cilli.

The rule of Frederick III was marked by other conflicts, too. He clashed with his brother Albert VI and the Hungarian king Mathias Corvinus (1461-1463), with Venetians (1463) and mutinous nobility from Styria (1469-1471). His reign was also marked by a highpoint of Ottoman activity on the southeastern borders of the Empire.

Turkish incursions were without a doubt the longest and the most destructive armed conflict of the period. Turks started raiding Slovene lands in the beginning of the 15th century, and their attacks continued (with varying strength) for the next three centuries. Although the Slovene lands were not on the main route of Ottoman penetration into the southeastern part of the Empire and were therefore raided almost exclusively by Turkish irregular troops (mostly Christians from Bosnia and Serbia), they nevertheless suffered great devastation. Large tracts of land were transformed in barrenness, many inhabitants killed or abducted.

Soon after the raids started, it was obvious that the old military organisation cannot cope with the new threat. A reorganisation was also needed because of the development of firearms, which had a profound effect on the way of fighting. That is why Styria, Carinthia and Carniola joined forces and reorganised their defences. As the traditional feudal levy (*Lehensaufgebot*) of local nobleman and the peasant militia (*Landesaufgebot*) proved unsuitable for the task, they were supplemented with mercenaries (*Landsknecht*) levied by the king or provincial estates. At first they were mostly foreigners, later they were substituted with more reliable locals, who were not so prone to looting of civilians. Also new fortifications were built and existing renovated. A typical feature of Slovene landscape – the fortified churches erected to protect the peasants – dates from the period of Turkish incursions.

In the beginning of the 16th century the three Inner-Austrian lands started to finance and man a line of defence in neighbouring Croatia. It evolved in the sophisticated defence system known as the Military Border. A lot of peasants from Slovene lands served there as mercenaries and several nobles rose to fame as great commanders in the Military Border.

The Military Border and the institutions that were founded to administer it were also the foundation of the permanent Habsburg military system. When the regiments raised by Wallenstein at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) were retained in Emperor's service after it ended, this signalled the creation of a permanent Habsburg army. It numbered about twenty-five thousand men and by the end of the century its strength rose to almost a hundred thousand. During the Thirty Years' War the Emperor Ferdinand II also managed to wrestle the prerogative to raise troops from provincial estates; they managed only to retain the right to vote military funds.

In the second half of the 17th century and in the beginning of the 18th century the Habsburg army under the leadership of Eugene of Savoy fought several successful campaigns against the Turks in the Balkans, driving them out of Hungary. It also fought with great success in the War of Spanish Succession.

It is hard to say how many soldiers from Slovene lands took part in those operations, as regiments were made up of mercenaries from all over the Empire. But the famous polymath J. W. Valvasor, for example, claimed that an extraordinary large number of mercenaries from Carniola served not only in the Habsburg army but also in the Venetian and Spanish armies. Several Slovene folk songs from that period speak of agents recruiting people to serve in their regiment. The song *Sacrist's boy from Moravče – a volunteer* says:

Around the soldiers pranced,

Beating a gaily coloured drum,

Making me of good cheer,

Trying on a soldiers gear,

So I joined the army ...

The rule of Maria Theresa and her wars with the Prussian king Frederic the Great brought a major change. Her introduction of selective life-long military service was an important turning point in the military history of the Habsburg lands. Instead of regiments of professional soldiers the army now consisted of recruits. They were conscripted in accordance with the needs and means of the state. Slovene lands were organised in several military districts (*Werbebezirk*). Each district provided an infantry regiment of the standing army. Thus regiments No. 16 in Maribor, No. 45 in Leoben, No. 26 in Celovec (Klagenfurt), No. 13 in Gorica (Görz, Gorizia) and No. 43 in Ljubljana were recruited in Slovene lands. Cavalry and train received recruits from Slovene lands, too.

But military service was still not a universal experience. It was limited above all to single, young sons of peasants and "unreliable elements". It must also be noted that, due to financial reasons, the majority of the soldiers was furloughed after a few years, and they returned to their units only in wartime. Nevertheless the introduction of conscription resounded among the population; a large number of folk songs reflected the change.

The reading of the new letters patent hears he,

A soldier everyone will have to be,

Carnithians and Styrians,

And all the Carniolans ...,

the first strophe of a number of them reads. Other phenomena connected with conscription were absconders and deserters. This reflected in many songs, too.

During French wars the standing army was greatly enlarged, and the life long service was shortened to ten years in 1802, but was again prolonged to fourteen in 1811. Home-guard (*Landwehr*) units were also organised for the first time. The *Landwehr* was essentially a militia force called-up only when war was imminent and used in secondary operations. To enthuse the *Landwehr* with patriotism to fight the French, propaganda in national languages was also used. An oath of a militiaman in Slovene language from that time is known.

During the French occupation (1809-1813) of a large part of Slovene lands and the establishment of Illyrian provinces (1809-1813), a regiment of light infantry (*Regiment d'Illyrie*) and some minor artillery units were recruited by the French. Most of their soldiers shared the fate of Napoleon's *Grand Armée* and perished in Russia. The lands that remained under Austrian rule (Styria) of course still contributed soldiers to the Habsburg armies and, being an ally of Napoleon at the time, Austria also sent a fifth of its army to Russia.

After the French were forced to retreat (1813), and the Provinces were again incorporated in the Austrian empire, the old military organisation was re-established, and many military reforms were abolished (the *Landwehr* for instance). Under the conservative rule of emperor Francis I, emphasis was put on the political reliability of the army. It was also used to quell the revolutions in the smaller states on the Italian peninsula (1821, 1830). Units from Slovene lands habitually took part in such expeditions and the Slovene stereotype about *cowardly Italians* owes a lot to those and later Italian wars.

In 1848 revolutions swept across Europe, and in March the people of Vienna took to the streets demanding a constitution. The revolution rapidly spread from the capital to the provinces. The army was involved in the events of 1848 in a number of ways. Firstly it was used against the radicals in Vienna and Prague, secondly the Austrian Army of Italy under Radetzky fought against invading Sardinians and Italian insurrectionists, thirdly in 1848/49 the army was fighting the secessionist Hungarian army under Lajos Kossuth. Therefore the situation was very complicated; as some Hungarian regiments were fighting for the emperor in Italy, their co-nationals were fighting against imperial troops and for independence.

The Slovenes proclaimed their demands for a United Slovenia in 1848, but remained loyal to the emperor and Austria. Slovene conscripts joined their regiments and marched off to northern Italy, the middle class and students organised National Guard units. As the National Guard from

Ljubljana started flying a white-blue-red standard based on the colours of the Carniolan coat of arms, the Slovene flag was created. There were also aspirations for a Slovene language of command in the National Guard.

When the revolution was stifled and Italians and Hungarians defeated, the new emperor Francis Joseph started to rule as a sole ruler. The army was one of the mainstays of his power.

The French victory over the Austrian army in the battles of Magenta and Solferino in 1859 meant that Lombardy had to be handed over to the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia (in 1860 the enlarged kingdom was renamed Italy). The military catastrophe also ended the absolutist rule of emperor Franz Joseph, and constitutional democracy was slowly taking hold. In the army precious little changed after 1859. There were some minor reforms, but a much-needed radical change had to wait for a few years more.

A major reform came only after the shocking victory of the Prussian army in the battle of Königgrätz (1866). Although Austria defeated the Prussian ally Italy at Custozza and in the naval battle of Vis (Issa), its Northern army was humiliated by the army of Helmut von Moltke on the other front. Several regiments with Slovene soldiers fought against Italians and Prussians as well. As a patriotic writer wrote in 1899:

Slovenes – known far and wide as rowdies – have proven again that they do not fight only at home and full of wine, but also in a war when the honour and glory of our army are at stake.

One of the soldiers was the later prominent politician Fran Šuklje, who as a 16-year-old boy left school to join the 47th regiment in Maribor as a volunteer. He took part in the Battle of Königgrätz and was wounded heavily. Later he depicted the ineffective and obsolete tactics of the imperial-royal army in his memoirs. He wrote:

We attacked in a dense formation, not a shot was fired from our side. Our charge started 1100-1600 paces away [from the enemy], ... we moved forward with much difficulty ... Our losses were becoming terrible. ... The Austrian command 'Sturm' was sounded ever sharper and faster. We are by the forest; our boys from Lower Styria are looking forward ... to settling accounts with the enemy – but what a deception! Only a few dead and wounded but no real resistance! And as soon as we make a few more steps the Prussian line is again in position and on the slightly undulating terrain the fatal game starts anew!

The Prussian chief of general staff Helmut von Moltke showed on the Czech plains how rapid development of technology changed the nature of warfare. It became apparent that short but universal national service (as practised in Prussia) has no alternatives, for it is the only way to raise an army big enough to fight in a modern war. Therefore in 1868 several army laws were passed by the Austrian and Hungarian parliaments. Military service was shortened to three years, and almost all previously existing exceptions were abolished. One of the remaining facilities was granted to

high school graduates, who could serve for only a year as the so-called one-year volunteers and receive a reserve commission. Many Slovenes made good use of this opportunity, and several of them served as reserve officers in World War I.

Because of the dualist structure of Austria-Hungary, the armed forces comprised three distinctive elements. The joint common army (*Heer*) was supplemented by the Austrian *Landwehr* and Hungarian *Honved*. The latter were envisioned as a home guard, serving in the rear of the common army. Therefore *Landwehr* and *Honved* units were made up of older reservists at first but in time evolved into active frontline units and served side by side with the common army in World War I. Finally in 1886 a third echelon (*Landsturm*) was added. The relatively small but effective navy (*Marine*) was unified. Such structure persisted until the disintegration of the monarchy in 1918.

The Slovene lands were a part of the 3rd Army Corps; several infantry, artillery and cavalry units were recruited here. To name but a few: 17th infantry regiment, 7th *Jäger* battalion, 7th artillery battalion and 27th *Landwehr* regiment (Ljubljana), 97th infantry regiment (Triest), 87th infantry regiment (Celje), 47th infantry regiment (Maribor), 7th infantry regiment (Celovec/Klagenfurt), 5th dragoon regiment (Maribor), ...

These units were often seen as Slovene (or partly Slovene) regiments. All mentioned units had a significant share of Slovene recruits, and therefore their regimental language was also Slovene although the command language of the common army and the *Landwehr* was German. Regimental languages were a particularity of the Austrian army. It was stipulated that all the languages spoken by more than a fifth of recruits in a particular unit are to be used for the instruction of recruits as regimental languages.

During the long peaceful period, which lasted from 1866 to 1914, the army saw action several times. Its most important mission was the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1878. The Great Powers concluded at the Congress of Berlin that Austria-Hungary should occupy the two restless Ottoman provinces and the Sanjak of Novi Bazar. Austrian civilian and military authorities did not expect any resistance to the occupation, but were soon proven wrong. The Muslim irregulars resisted the two advancing columns, and heavy reinforcements were needed. At the end more than 150,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers had to be sent to Bosnia and Herzegovina; more than 10,000 Slovenes from most Slovene regiments took part in the expedition. As Slovene soldiers were convinced that they are liberating the Christian population of the provinces from the Turks, they were quite eager to fight the *pagans*. Later they were surprised to find out that *Turkish pagans* (=Bosnian Muslims) spoke a very similar language they could easily understand.

In the next decades the army slowly evolved, but political will and therefore necessary funds for a much-needed modernisation were lacking. The navy, which was the darling of the heir to the throne archduke Francis Ferdinand, had a short period of flourish at the beginning of the 20th century, but was still lagging behind its rivals. Consequently, it was no wonder that the armed forces were ill prepared for their last war – World War I. They suffered enormous losses in the first months of fighting, but eventually managed to adapt and continue fighting until the end. Surprisingly all the peoples of this multinational army stayed loyal to their state, their ruler, and their oath, thus proving that pre-war fears of a wide spread disloyalty were unfounded. Slovene soldiers were but a small part of this great battle; for the most part they fought quite well, and they excelled on the Italian front. In the last years several memoirs and diaries of Slovene soldiers and officers were published, giving us a great insight in their war experience. Reserve lieutenant Franc Zupančič, for example, described in his diary not only the fighting, but also the social life on the front. The entrance for May 5, 1916 reads:

Cloudy and sultry. After lunch a notice that our battalion must be ready at 3 pm for a marching drill came. Towards evening we march off to **Aldein**, a mountain village (1220 m), where we have a brigade exercise. We spend the whole evening in an inn and begin the war at 4 am with a terrible hangover.

At the very end, as a result of political and national turmoil in the monarchy, the army started to disintegrate, too. On October 28, 1918 the Austro-Hungarian government accepted the peace terms of the US president Woodrow Wilson, and on the next day the independence of the new State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs was proclaimed. During a great manifestation in Ljubljana a reserve first lieutenant dr. Mihajlo Rostohar took an oath of allegiance to the new state in the name of all present officers and soldiers. This symbolic act marked the end of a long chapter in the military history of Slovenia, and a new one started.

Sources and literature

Slovene military history up to the year 1918 is practically identical with the Austrian military history. Because of that same or similar sources and literature are useful in its research.

Most of the sources are to be found in the Austrian archives, especially in the Family, Court and State Archives (*Haus- Hof-, and Staatsarchiv*) for the Middle Ages and the War Archives (*Kriegsarchiv*) from the 16th century onwards. For family research the personal records of the War Archives are invaluable. Of course most of the material is in German and written in gothic script. As far as I know, very little has been microfilmed. Both archives are situated in Vienna and their holdings available for research. More detailed information about access, opening hours and holdings can be found on the Internet

(<http://www.oesta.gv.at/ebestand/ehh/efr1hh.htm> and http://www.oesta.gv.at/ebestand/ekv/efr1_kv.htm). There are also several useful unofficial sites dealing with family research in the War Archives.

For Prekmurje, which was a part of the Hungarian half of the Monarchy, the archives of the Honved in Budapest are of some value. Slovene archives, on the other hand, have an almost negligible quantity of military records in their holdings.

Several interesting sources – mostly war diaries and memoirs – have been published. A few deal with the military experience in peacetime (for example the memoirs of officer and author Jernej Andrejka; *Mladostni spomini: (1850-1878)*, ed. Rudolf Andrejka (Ljubljana, 1934)), but most of them describe the Great War. Let me mention the diaries of cadet Franc Rueh (*Moj dnevnik: 1915-1918*, ed. Igor Vilfan (Ljubljana, 1999), lieutenant Franc Zupančič (*Dnevnik: 1914-1918*, ed. Jasmina Pogačnik (Ljubljana, 1998)), private Jože Hameršak (*Skoz prvo svetovno vojno*, ed. Milan Dolgan (Ljubljana, 1994)) and the judge and writer Fran Milčinski (*Dnevnik 1914-1920*, ed. Goran Schmidt (Ljubljana, 2000)).

Official publications of the Austrian imperial and royal War Ministry are also a very valuable aid. Let me mention the registers of officers that were published yearly for the common army, navy, *Landwehr* and *Honved* (*Schematismus für das k.u.k. Heer und die k.u.k. Kriegsmarine*, *Schematismus der k.k. Landwehr und der k.k. Gendarmerie der im Reichsrat vertretenen Königreiche und Länder*). The statistical survey *Militär-Statistisches Jahrbuch* (Military statistical Yearbook) is also worth mentioning.

There is a great deal of literature on the Austrian military history. The basic survey in English is still Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Army of Francis Joseph* (West Lafayette, In., 1976), which was reprinted several times. In German a monumental volume *Die bewaffnete Macht (Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848-1918*, ed. Adam Wandruszka in Peter Urbanitsch, vol. 5, *Die bewaffnete Macht* (Vienna, 1987)) is the standard work. The military history of Slovenes by Janez J. Švajncer (*Vojna in vojaška zgodovina Slovencev* (Ljubljana, 1992)) is useful but not very comprehensive.

The Habsburg Empire and the Sea: Austrian Naval Policy, 1797-1866 (West Lafayette, In., 1989) and *The Naval Policy of Austria-Hungary, 1867-1918: Navalism, Industrial Development and the Politics of Dualism* (West Lafayette, In., 1994) by Lawrence Sondhaus are the newest and very comprehensive books about the navy. The standard work on the officers is István Deák's *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918* (New York, 1990). It has a very good chapter on the sources available in the Vienna War Archives.

There are many good general survey of World War I in English and German. The multivolume *The Last War of Austria-Hungary (Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg, 1914-1918)*, ed. Edmund Glaise-Horstenau, 7 vol. (Vienna, 1930-38) published after the war under the auspices of the War Archives deserves a special mention. It is very comprehensive and rich in detail but a bit one-sided.

Regimental histories are usually a very good source of data. Most of them were published before World War I and were written in German. Some regimental histories of the Slovene regiments were written in Slovene. A comprehensive history of the 17th Carniolan regiment, for example, was written by Ferdinand Strobl von Ravelsberg (*Geschichte des k.u.k. Infanterie-Regiments Ritter von Milde Nr. 17: 1674-1910*, 2 vol (Ljubljana, 1911)) and a shorter Slovene version was published by Karl Capuder a few years later (Karol Capuder, *Zgodovina c. in kr. pešpolka št. 17* (Celovec, 1915)). Recently a rather disappointing history of the 5th dragoon regiment was published by Sergej Vrišer ("*Finfarji*": *Štajersko-koroško-kranjski dragonski polk št. 5* (Ljubljana, 2000)). But it has to be said that on the other hand his two volumes on military and civilian uniforms are excellent (Sergej Vrišer, *Uniforme v zgodovini*, 2 vol. (Ljubljana, 1987-1991)).

Of course there is a lot more literature on particular issues, but it would take another half an hour to list only the monographs. The interested listeners can consult the bibliographic essays of the standard works.

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