

**THE AUSTRIAN MILITARY AND ITS ROLE AND IMPLICATION  
IN BUILDING STATE LOYALTY IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL  
AND NATIONAL MOVEMENTS – NEOABSOLUTISM  
AND LIBERALISM, 1849–1867**

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**Abstract**

In the cohesion of the society in the Austrian Empire, as well at the educational level, the Military played an important role in shaping identities. In the army, which promoted and cultivated the image of a unitary Austrian people, meanwhile paying respect to the different nationalities through shaping regiments with certain command and communication languages, an educational process (less educated recruits gaining skills and learning languages) as well as cultivation of the founding myths and images of the State (Austrian Laws, the Good Emperor) took also place. In the role of the Military in education and raising the social welfare status, the implementation of the Military Borders played an important role. Whereas these phenomena were specific in the buildup phase of the modern Habsburg Empire, on the bases which Enlightenment, Enlightened Absolutism and Mercantilism could offer, some of the characteristics changed along with the evolution of national movements, with a starker expression in the eastern crown lands. The most important turning point was the 1848 Revolution, characterized by the Hungarian struggle for gaining independence from Vienna and the subsequent conflicts which coalesced around this. After this caesura a long and stony path led through provisosities (Neoabsolutism and Dualism)—more or less successful reforms to the Dualism. The military borders were dissolved, unsuccessful military operations such the Crimea war increased state debt dramatically but the Empire gained a more consolidated administrative and judiciary shape, and the bases of Parliamentarism were laid.

This presentation aims to underscore these evolutions with brief considerations regarding developments and aspects in the crown land of Transylvania, from the murky afterward of the Revolution, through the experiments in Neoabsolutism and Liberalism until the first years of Dualism. The permanent need for an equal consideration of all Nationalities in administration and military was a commandment of these years and interacted with the conceptions and identities of all the involved, from the military commitment—for or against Vienna—in the revolutionary years to shaping a multinational, more professionalized military, which featured many interesting aspects.

**Keywords:** Habsburg Empire, Austrian Military, Liberalism, Neoabsolutism, Dynastic Loyalty.

The Military, as one of the basic institutions in every society, evolved from the first organizational forms to the modern times through many forms, from the

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ancient armies to the traditional medieval categorization of society in oratores, bellatores, laboratores, and to the modern army concept which reached its mature form in the 20th century.

This was too the situation in the Habsburg Monarchy, especially in the eastern part, where the Habsburg domination extended after defeating the Ottomans which invaded Hungary after Mohács. The Habsburg domination, which meant a series of modernizing reforms, dissolved gradually the older structures, and tried to replace them with new, modern ones, including the military organization. As many of the Habsburg reforms, these changes in the military structure were at the beginning not every time well accepted and became one of the causes of the Kurucz or Rákóczy's insurrection at the eve of Habsburg domination. The new, modern concept tried to move the social focus of the armies from the noblemen (the older bellatores) to the peasantry, which had to provide the new basis of the defense structures through draftings, in the direction of a more broad and egalitarian participation of the whole society.<sup>1</sup>

In the revolutionary or freedom war of the years 1848–1849, the Hungarian revolutionaries also had an organized army, which pursued national goals fighting against the Austrian regular army (the latter assisted by Croats, Romanians). This episode in the military history in this part of Europe molded or haunted the entire second half of 19th century and beyond that. The Hungarian national movement, knowing its chances to establish a national state through military means, pursued the idea of a national army continuously and obtained some of these rights under the Dualist establishment.<sup>2</sup> We can say that building a national military fits in the paradigm of building or pursuing a nation state and is a basic component of this, as we can say later in the “warring” phase in the evolution of nation states.

There arise many working questions, mainly centered around the interaction between the military and the national (or other collective) identities. In the nation building process of the 19th century, all concepts around the military played an important role—before and after the establishing of respective national states and

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<sup>1</sup> László Benczédi, “Parasztok és katonák XVII–XVIII. századi Habsburg-ellenes mozgalmainkban (hozzászólás Molnár Erik cikkéhez)”, *Új Írás*, no. 1 (1963): 741; Ifj. János Barta, “A felvilágosult abszolutizmus és a jobbágyság a Habsburg Monarchiában”, *Egyetemes Történelmi Tanulmányok*, (1987): 14.

<sup>2</sup> Johann Christoph Allmayer-Beck, “Forța Armată”, in *Monarhia Habsburgică 1848–1918*, vol. 1, *Dezvoltarea economică, administrația și sistemul juridic, forța armată*, ed. Rudolf Gräf (Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română/Centrul de Studii Transilvane; Iași: Polirom, 2020), 192. See also Tibor Papp, “Armata (miliția) teritorială regală ungară (Honvéd) 1868–1914”, in *Monarhia Habsburgică 1848–1918*, vol. 1, *Dezvoltarea economică, administrația și sistemul juridic, forța armată*, ed. Rudolf Gräf (Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română/Centrul de Studii Transilvane; Iași: Polirom, 2020), 334.

elicited many responses in the many fields of loyalty, which became one of the most important pillars in the Habsburg statehood or even the *most important* of its institutions, with a high role in maintaining the Empire.<sup>3</sup> Based—more than other modern states with evolved institutions as Germany—on the *Dei Gratia* rights of the Habsburg ruling house, the loyalty toward the ruling dynasty became not only a grounding element but also a bounding factor between the many nationalities the state comprised. In the evolution of Europe, Austria or Russia became “dynastic empires”, with a very important role of maintaining a dynastic loyalty, as the imperial House was the essential political factor. This process led to the development of a “dynastic nationalism”, centered around a multinational state in which all the component nationalities had to evolve, and in this process the Military became an important role in a certain education and maintaining of these feelings.<sup>4</sup> Germany, to which Austrians constantly looked as a comparison, evolved in the direction of a more institutionalized national state, centered around political institutions rather than a unifying dynasty.

For many nationalities in the eastern Habsburg provinces, the military was one of the instruments used by Vienna in empowering and sustaining these nationalities as loyal allies. The military service was a way through which recruits, often from poor villages, could travel and gather knowledge about the Habsburg realms, learn to read and write as well as other provincial languages and in every case German and earn military degrees—becoming a respected member of their home community (in historical documents we can approximate this degree of respect); many elites of the respective nationalities had this military background (officers). One of the important episodes was the role and performances of Romanian-Transylvanian soldiers in the Italian war of 1859. Although there was a relatively large phenomenon of fleeing the drafting, in Transylvania mainly by Romanians and Szeklers beyond the Carpathians. There were issued many laws to regulate this aspect which had an ethnic basis too, since the authorities tried to replenish the missing recruits at a territorial level and not from the respective nationality. In this regard the Transylvanian Saxons petitioned for considering always the same national or ethnic bloc.<sup>5</sup> The drafting system of completing the army effectives evolved in the long period between the 18th century and the demise of Dualism from a somehow bearable obligation of sending one equipped

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<sup>3</sup> István Deák, *Mai presus de naționalism. O istorie politică și socială a corpului de ofițeri habsburgici, 1848–1918* (Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română/Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2009), 18, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Zoltán József Fazakas, *Nemzet, Nemzetiség, Kisebbség. A magyar és román nacionalizmus asszimetriái 1784–1940 között* (Budapest: Mádl Ferenc összehasonlítható jogi intézet, 2021), 289.

<sup>5</sup> See, as an example, this aspect in the complex report of the Saxon Comes about the whereabouts in his jurisdiction, Sibiu, March 31., 1851, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, AVA, MI, Präsidiale, Ktn. 67, Konvolut 2714/1851 MI.

soldier from twenty households or the general military obligation of noblemen to an obligatory military service, which was not always very popular due to its length or the decaying, nationality-driven loyalty towards the Habsburg state. For the Hungarian half, the new system, which established through the military law of 1868 and its later adaptations a rather complicated structure of the military service, although a socially egalitarian one, was dubbed critically even as a *military slavery*.<sup>6</sup>

One of the main institutions, and actually a specific Habsburg institution with a role also in the mentioned empowering of the eastern nationalities was the military border, based on freedoms, land attribution, building roads and schools in exchange for military service in the border protection. This specific and the first Habsburg permanent military corps was designated as a solution for protecting the southern part of the Empire against the Ottomans and as a means to ensure the cordon sanitaire against diseases.<sup>7</sup> The schools in the military border had an important role in raising the alphabetization levels and building elites. It was a broad initiative, which comprised not only a small category of population: the first Hungarian census showed a population (Hungary proper, Croatia, Transylvania) of 8.5 million, whereas the militarized border population comprised around 600.000 people.<sup>8</sup> Beyond the many improvements for the local people brought by the militarized border, it was a complicated system. Many of the clashes and uprisings which took part in these territories pushed to a rethinking of this whole system, resulted in its gradual abolishing, mainly beginning with the aftermath of the 1848 revolution and until 1881.<sup>9</sup>

The multifaceted “dynastic loyalty” was also a kind of social contract: in the peripheral provinces Vienna sustained and helped the nationalities to modernize and to be part of the political life (military border, ecclesiastic subsidies, schools etc.), and these acted as agents of Vienna on political level, most evidently in 1848–1849, and nurtured a pro-governmental attitude throughout the period, with very few exceptions. We can see this also in the traditional pro-dynastic attitude of the Romanian national movement in Transylvania and Hungary, which maintained its importance in the later decades too, as the loyalty feeling itself began to wither. The dynastic loyalty was not only a political attitude or strategy, but it was also a broader phenomenon. In the flurry of memoirs and petitions to the throne and

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<sup>6</sup> The Military was regulated through the Law XL. from 1868. See Szabolcs Bodó, “A hadkötelezettség történeti áttekintése Magyarországon”, *Hadtudományi Szemle* 15, no. 1 (2022): 9. See also Pieter M. Judson, “*Ahol a közösség az egyes államoknak életszükséglete... Gondoljuk újra a Habsburg Monarchia végét!*”, *Sic itur ad astra* 76 (2022): 6; and Deák, *Mai presus de naționalism*, 74.

<sup>7</sup> Deák, *Mai presus de naționalism*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> Fazakas, *Nemzet, Nemzetiség, Kisebbség*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Deák, *Mai presus de naționalism*, 43.

higher authorities, a clear language, terminology, ideas of this loyalism emerged—this can be observed along the evolving strategy of writing petitions to the Throne, from 1848 actually until the Memorandum 1892.

There were many correlations between the Romanian officers and the national movement, but these remained somehow limited. As an example, only a few officers contributed to the Astra cultural association, some of these as retired officers.<sup>10</sup> Romanian soldiers and officers usually made a career in the common k.u.k. army and not in the Hungarian Honvéd.

During Neoabsolutism and Dualism, the national movements paved the path of political decisions and were an important aspect of public life. The active phase following 1848–1849 continued the next years until approximately 1852 when the Government made political manifestations impossible (e.g., through banning the sending of delegations and petitions to the Throne). Loyalism towards state and its military was an important aspect e.g., of the Romanian national movement in which the two main church leaders (Orthodox and Greek-Catholic) exerted an influence on the population and especially on the youth to obey the military legislation. The religious education was, on the other hand, one of the few alternatives to the long military service which became, at least theoretically, a universal one.<sup>11</sup>

The whole period between 1849–1867 was marked by the legacy of the 1848–1849 revolutionary movement. The Hungarian political opposition, through its many forms of manifestation, developed a complicated relation to the Austrian military, actually until the creation of an own Honvéd formation, but beyond this too. In the creation of its own “national” corps, the language question was of paramount importance, even it was rather a national-symbolic one, since in a Monarchy with two main languages and a common military portfolio it was impossible to have a military corps, even an own Honvéd one, with only Hungarian language of command and communication. This kind of “militarization” of the national movement stretched beyond the symbolical and meant also a certain regaining of “national” features: the “defeated” Hungarian provinces or those in which the revolutionary movement was directed against Vienna stood under a military regime at the beginning and were even divided in military or military and civil districts, led by a military commandant assisted by a civil governor, with a strong position of the military in maintaining the public order, now assisted by the newly established and more feared Gensdarmerie. A siege regime was imposed, in Transylvania for the longest period until 1854, the year in which the Definitivum, a definitive and uniformized civil administrative organization was introduced.

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<sup>10</sup> Vlad Popovici, “Astra și ofițerii români din Transilvania”, in *Între război și pace. Românii și Europa Central-Răsăriteană la finalul Primei Conflagrații Mondiale*, ed. Oana Mihaela Tămaș and Ioan Bolovan (Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română/Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2020), 28.

<sup>11</sup> Deák, *Mai presus de naționalism*, 65.

Many participants in the liberty (liberation) wars—officers, soldiers etc. were punished, inclusively by being forcibly drafted in the Austrian military, which contributed to an even worse perception in those years. In this period there were relatively few actual officers of Hungarian origin, in the first phase of the political opposition movement, this was an aspect of the passive resistance. Therefore, the military aspect became an essential component in the building of a Hungarian national state, in a first phase by the Dualist establishment. Although, for reasons of building a competitive army which became obvious after 1866, the military aspect became one of the common agendas of Austria-Hungary, the Hungarian part always made efforts to gain for itself an own army, materialized in the Honvéd corps, but the discussion remained around the armament—especially if “Hungarian” corps would have artillery or not.

In the Hungarian part of the Habsburg Monarchy, many of the independence tendencies from the year 1848, pursued as a political orientation, gained an expression through the dualist establishment, which at the military level materialized in the Honvéd army. This was actually a national corps, and its effectiveness and role were a matter of political discussions as the whole political establishment had to be renegotiated periodically. Even in the building of this military branch, the devotion to Hungarian national ideas was a founding principle and many of the first generation were veterans of the 1848–1849 Revolution, the adherents of the governmental Deák party gained an advantage in this process.<sup>12</sup> As the national tendencies striving for independence revived after the fall of Neoabsolutism, the voices demanding a separate, specific Hungarian army with national language and artillery became louder.<sup>13</sup> After complex political discussions and negotiations in the Hungarian movement and with Vienna, the Honvéd system was established beginning with 1868.<sup>14</sup>

During the Dualism, the state sought to achieve a functional and efficient army, which was a difficult task in a realm with a dozen of spoken languages. One of the accepted means was to recognize all languages in military service beyond the official German, as part of a “language system” of the Habsburg military,<sup>15</sup> allowing thus a certain manifestation of national movements. It was not only by chance that many officers (but not exclusively) became after 1918 leading personalities in the successor states, and many of them were and became symbols and activists of their respective national movements. In this order, the multinational

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<sup>12</sup> Nicoleta Hegedűs, Csaba Horváth, and Vlad Popovici, eds., *Portrete de ofițeri de origine română din Armata de Honvezi (1868–1918)* (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2020), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Papp, “Armata (miliția) teritorială regală ungară”, 1:339.

<sup>14</sup> Liviu Maior, *Doi ani mai devreme. Ardeleni, bucovineni și basarabeni în război, 1914–1916* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Școala Ardeleană, 2016), 186.

<sup>15</sup> Tamara Scheer, *Language Diversity and Loyalty in the Habsburg Army, 1868–1918* (Vienna: Habilitation paper, 2020), 268.

military, in the spirit of article 19, was both a specific supra-state institution and a ground of development for national movements, although there were many mechanisms in place, which limited the propagation of such political tendencies. In this context, the national loyalties versus supra-state Habsburg loyalty, or towards the army, became an important issue. The trend towards territorial armies, alongside a common, k.u.k. army, was not only a Hungarian issue, it was rather a new multinational concept including also other territorial armies, with some realistic basis.<sup>16</sup> One of the aspects was the cultivation of traditions, in this period many regiment and regional military history works were written. The Hungarian issue remained thus at least complicated, and the numerous negotiations culminated sometimes in political disputes alongside the usual conflict lines between Cisleithania and Transleithania.<sup>17</sup> These discussions were also unproductive in a European context in which the armies played such an important role and every division or dispute could lead to a weaker military strength in case of a war.<sup>18</sup> One of the aspects in this regard was the impossibility to send troops of a certain nationality or belonging to a certain territorial formation into conflicts which could imply loyalty issues. Above these, a kind of non-responsibility, an impunity of the Military before the Judiciary or the Legislative—analogue to the *Unverantwortlichkeit* of the Emperor—existed too and was in the late phase of the Habsburg state consecrated by law at least in the Austrian half. This can also illustrate the huge importance of the military as a whole, both factually and symbolically, for the state and society.<sup>19</sup>

The Austrian state system and the society as well was strongly intertwined with the military. Many of the high civil servants had high military degrees: the Transylvanian governors after 1848 until 1867—Feldmarschall or Feldmarschallleutnant, also as a policy towards the peripheral provinces, which often had strategic borders to other empires or were places of possible insurrections, and were led by high aristocrats and reliable confidants or even relatives of the ruling House, such as princes from the families Schwarzenberg or Liechtenstein, this aspect was visible on other levels too. It was as a common aspect, along with the appartenance to high noble families—and it was too a tradition of aristocracy to have a (preferably high) military education (bellatores). More than that, the military education played an essential role for the heirs on the Habsburg throne—and here the military-oriented personality of Francis Joseph, which was evident already in his childhood, was a good example, and maybe this

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<sup>16</sup> Papp, “Armata (miliția) teritorială regală ungară”, 1:276; see also Judson, “Ahol a közösség”, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Scheer, *Language Diversity*, 278.

<sup>18</sup> Scheer, *Language Diversity*, 280.

<sup>19</sup> Judson, “Ahol a közösség”, 19.

psychological feature of him contributed too to the heightened importance of the army and its officers at least in the first phase of his reign.<sup>20</sup> In the second phase, the militarization process of the entire Europe, as Bertha von Suttner described it, gave a huge impetus to this image or role of the military in the society and the state itself.<sup>21</sup> The military was in other regards too an intrinsic component of the society in this times and a separate consideration is merely possible. The military also played a role in the daily life of the citizens, there were many interferences, some of them controversial e.g., the housing rights (Einquartierung), care of the horses, providing transportation (Vorspann), firewood and of course the requisitions in the years 1848–1849 or during the Crimean war. The Aerarium promised replacement, but petitions of villages, townships, and private persons to this topic were common until many years later. There is also a historical correlation between the military and epidemics. Although during the history of epidemics and of fighting their effects, the armies played an important role in assuring quarantines and maintaining biologically secure borders (cordon sanitaire, also one of the goals of the militarized Habsburg borders), the armies contributed also to spreading many illnesses and epidemics throughout history, one of the most massive of them was the Spanish flu. On the other hand, the military was one of the launching platforms for sanitation measures and vaccines as well (e.g., the anti-tetanic vaccination in the German army before World War I).<sup>22</sup>

But already before The First World War, the Habsburg Monarchy suffered military defeats, which triggered not only changes in the military leadership and command order, but also more broader reforms. These actually periodically occurring defeats dented the might and social position of the Military itself and also played a role in weakening the dynastic loyalties not only for the nationalities. This transformational process—a special kind of interaction between defeat and necessary reforms, that we can see clearly after 1866—is considered even to be a “culture of defeat”,<sup>23</sup> and a characteristic feature of Habsburg realms in the second part of 19th century, also a loss of prestige after the dissolution of the Holy Roman

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<sup>20</sup> See, as an example, one of the latest biographies, Michaela Vocelka and Karl Vocelka, *Franz Joseph I., Kaiser von Österreich und König von Ungarn. 1830–1916. Eine Biographie*. (Vienna: C.H. Beck, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Bertha von Suttner, *Die Waffen nieder! Vollständige Neuauflage* (Göttingen: LIWI Literatur- und Wissenschaftsverlag, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Katalin Mária Kincses and Sándor Szakály, “A leprától a spanyolnátháig. Szemelvények a medicina egyetemes és magyar vonatkozásából, kitekintéssel annak hadtörténeti vonatkozásaira az első világháborúig”, *Scientia et Securitas* 2, no. 3 (2021): 332–341.

<sup>23</sup> Term coined by W. Schivelbusch quoted in Günther Kronebitter, “Expansion – Zwangsvorstellung oder Kalkül?”, in *Österreich-Ungarns Imperiale Herausforderungen. Nationalismen und Rivalitäten im Habsburgerreich um 1900*, ed. Bernhard Bachinger, Wolfram Dornik and Stephan Lehnstaedt (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2020), 89.

Empire and the constantly diminishing role in the German Bund,<sup>24</sup> but which did not hamper its expansionist plans. These defeats contributed, on the other hand, through the international pressure by states and creditors, to the reformist initiatives in Habsburg realms, since new credits for the debt-stricken state in need of investments mainly in railways and industry were conditioned by a parliamentary control over the budget, a condition which increased the importance of the Reichsrat, completed by the entrance of nearly two dozen Transylvanian members in the autumn of 1863. In building of the railways, the military considerations always played an important role in the complex plans of establishing them—the routes had to aid the Habsburg armies in transporting personnel and equipment and not the presumable enemies in the eventuality of a war.

In conclusion, we can state that the military played a complex and fundamental role within the Austrian and later the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Beginning with the first phase of Austrian rule in Hungary and Transylvania, the military was also used as an instrument of imposing equal rights and the weakening of feudal subordination relationships, and here the example of the military frontier could best be mentioned. Otherwise, military service was considered an important experience of getting to know other areas of the monarchy and was seen as a way to build a pan-Austrian identity, similar to the case of civil servants who were active in several crown lands of the monarchy and learned several languages before being promoted to higher posts. The overvaluing of the importance of the military also led to the late militarism that led to the outbreak of World War I, with all its consequences for all of Central Europe.

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<sup>24</sup> Hannes Leidinger, “War die Habsburgermonarchie ein Imperium? Aktuelle wissenschaftliche Betrachtungen und zeitgenössische Debatten von 1900 bis 1918”, in *Österreich-Ungarns Imperiale Herausforderungen. Nationalismen und Rivalitäten im Habsburgerreich um 1900*, ed. Bernhard Bachinger, Wolfram Dornik, and Stephan Lehnstaedt (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2020), 30.