

**REVIEW ARTICLE**  
**A Uniform-Mad Army:**  
**The Austro-Hungarian Officer Corps**

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*Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps 1848–1918.* By Istvan Deak. New York: Oxford University Press. 1990. 273 pages.

In his “collective portrait” of the Habsburg officer-corps Istvan Deak sets out to analyze “the social and ethnic origin of the officers, their reason for entering service, their education, training and ideology, their way of life and peculiar customs, their role in politics, culture and society, the evolution of the officer corps between 1848 and 1918, its relations with the civilian authority, its responsibility for the survival and for the ultimate breakup of the monarchy, and finally, its impact on the post-1918 history of east central Europe.” (p. 4) This is a very extensive promise, and one which the volume is not amiss in fulfilling. The value of Deak’s book derives not only from the richness of its theme but also from the fact that, apart from his use of a vast range of interpretative works and memoirs, Deak taps hitherto virtually unused sources in the Vienna and Budapest War Archives. His “Acknowledgements” include a long list of those who helped him in the daunting task of evaluating and computer-analysing large portions of the personnel files of a heavily bureaucratized army that compiled tons of written information on its officers. The cooperation of a great many people, and Deak’s willingness to spend several years on the project, resulted in a unique volume that adds a new dimension to our understanding of one of the most important institutions of the Habsburg domain. “*In deinem Lager ist Österreich*” is brought out in sharp relief in Deak’s tale, which shows the army as a sustaining and unifying force for the monarchy. Eventually,

when the Dual Monarchy disintegrated, the army's collapse became a key factor in the undoing of the Habsburg state.

Deak sets out the background of the monarchy's "enormous political, ethnic, and institutional complexity" (p. 9) in a long "Introduction" that is of use even to those who are not unfamiliar with the nature of the "polyglot empire." This is followed by two chapters on the historical development of the Habsburg armed forces, which began in the seventeenth century with a "group of disorderly nobleman and mercenaries" (p. 78). Deak's analysis of the officer corps is laid out at an unhurried pace in eight chapters, but always with an economy of words. To the social and political focus of the title, the author could have added cultural and psychological factors also, for his collective portrait is characterized by these dimensions as well. A chapter on the army's performance in the Great War, an "Epilogue" entitled "Habsburg Officers in the Successor States and in the Second World War," and a very informative "Appendix" "On Belles Lettres, Memoirs and Histories" complete the volume. Extremely clean formal aspects—there is but a single spelling error, on page 77—complement the content of this superb book.

Reigning monarch for sixty-eight years, Francis Joseph is the principal protagonist in Deak's cast of characters. Ascending to the throne in a time of civil war, he attempted to retain for himself the roles of ruler, prime minister, and commander in chief. In fact, in the 1859 war with France and Sardinia, he suddenly appeared on the scene, dismissed the general in charge, and assumed direct command. He suffered a disastrous defeat at Solferino and made no further attempts at generalship, but he never gave up the notion that the armed forces were a Habsburg family possession: "my army," just as the populations of the empire were "my peoples" and the leadership, generals and bureaucrats alike, his "servants."

The incredible bureaucratic layering and duplication within the army, which made administrative efficiency virtually impossible, originated at the centre. Assuming the role of supreme commander, Francis Joseph enlarged his personal military cabinet which was headed by another of his household "servants," Count Karl Ludwig Grünne, described by Deak as a "haughty aristocrat (among haughty aristocrats)." He was "an inexperienced soldier and a poor politician" (pp. 45–46), who ran up one conflict after another with the Ministry of War and the general staff. Duplications within the command structure, which came about as a direct result of the old Habsburg policy of "divide and rule" and were compounded by the divergent interests and aims of nationality groups, weakened the efficiency of the army. Compromises among the major groups, such as the 1867 *Ausgleich*, satisfied certain of the nationalities, but left others dissatisfied while leading to still greater duplications, such as the creation of four separate armed forces (p. 85).

The general staff, frustrated by interference from the emperor's personal staff and by the increasing ethnic pressures, began to assert itself during the latter half of the nineteenth century, eventually becoming a force unto itself and a political pressure-group. Ironically the general staff and with it the central command was created by the "female king," Maria Theresa. Being a woman, she let the generals run her wars. But her male successors, beginning with her son Joseph II, moved to establish themselves as commanders in chief, often with disastrous results. However, as Francis Joseph's case was to show, they were unwilling to give up. These imperial ambitions eventually led to a conflict between the emperor and the general staff. After the retirement of General Friedrich Beck—another of the emperor's trusted "servants"—and his replacement by Franz Conrad, the general staff became, according to Deak, an "ideological opposition" (p. 73) to the aging emperor, who eventually capitulated to it. Conrad, driven by Social Darwinist notions, became convinced of the "need" to go to war; a war which he saw as a struggle for survival among states and a means to save the unity of the monarchy. Other generals around him drifted into racist ideas, seeing the coming war as a struggle between the superior Germanic and the inferior Slavic races. Through its general staff the army became a pressure-group that was instrumental in pushing the monarchy into war after—and ironically because of—the death of Archduke Francis Ferdinand, who, as Deak puts it, "was a determined opponent of the war" (p. 75). The old emperor became a tool in the hands of "his" war-mongering generals, thinking that he was still completely in charge. He prefaced the declaration of war with "I decided," thereby sealing the fate of his House, which would not survive defeat in the war he had "decided" to wage.

The social composition of the officer corps that Francis Joseph ordered to go to war had undergone massive changes during the decades preceding World War I. Once a refuge for the sons of the old historical nobility, the army had, after reforms that picked up pace in 1867, become indifferent to the social origins of its officers. As a gradual "embourgeoisment" of the officer corps set in, the proportion of nobles in the armed forces, especially of those in command positions, decreased. By 1896 only a little over 20% of the career officers and in 1903 only a third of the generals were of noble origins. The aristocracy, the highest echelon of the nobility, tended to join the prestigious cavalry regiments. Deak reports that in 1905 "seventy-five great noble families were represented by only ninety-five career officers in the Joint Army and Navy, a much smaller number than a few decades earlier. Moreover, sixty-six of the ninety-five were in the cavalry, contrasting sharply with six in the infantry, ten in the artillery, and four in the general staff. Without any doubt, by the first decade of the twentieth century, the great Austro-Hungarian aristocratic families had

begun to abandon their emperor." In explaining the "growing indifference of the great nobility to the Habsburg cause," Deak mentions the increasing influence of "local nationalist ideologies" and "financially more rewarding careers" outside the military (p. 164). Both of these, it turns out, played a role in deterring enlistment from every social class, for "in the years immediately preceding World War I, an officer's career in the Joint Army was beginning to appeal to fewer and fewer young men" (p. 91).

In describing the economic conditions awaiting young subalterns on graduation from the military academy, Deak provides insight into why military careers became unappealing. When he reported to his regiment the young officer was "confronted with middle-aged lieutenants [. . .] many of them embittered alcoholics" (p. 97); embittered because of extremely slow promotion in the peacetime army, a force that had not experienced war for several decades. This helps to explain the initial enthusiasm among officers following the 1914 declaration of war. Aside from promising rapid promotion, the war also brought relief from a "poverty-stricken existence" (p. 121). The old system under which the "cost of living and the officer's pay had only the vaguest relationship to one another" (p. 114) continued into the twentieth century in the Habsburg military.

Military service as the life time obligation of the noble, which he provided at his own expense, was a concept that had become obsolete with the appearance of mercenary armies in early modern times. But together with other remnants of the feudal mentality, it survived in the Habsburg realms, where during the 1850s a lieutenant's income matched that of only the lowest categories of master artisans. Out of his miserly pay the officer had to pay for the upkeep of his equipment, including a white uniform. Deak reports one problem connected with this practice: "In the late 1850s General Count Franz Gyulai ordered every officer and man in his Army of Italy to sport a black mustache. This miraculous transformation could be achieved only with the help of generous doses of black shoe-polish, but when it rained, the polish ran, the white uniform was ruined, and with it, the officer's financial stability" (p. 117).

By 1907 the officer's pay was above that of the average industrial worker, but still compared unfavorably with the pay of his counterparts in the French and German armies. The Habsburg officer, who had to pay for his home, horse, and uniforms, for setting up a household, and if married, for the support of his family, often had to borrow at usurious rates from types like local innkeepers, landlords, NCOs, even from enlisted men. Honor demanded that his regimental commander act as enforcer for the money-lenders. Sinking into debt was connected not only with low pay, but with the "psychological pressure to 'enjoy life', in other words, to overspend (p. 120-121)." The "lovely, wild lieutenant's existence": fancy dress uniforms, partying with champagne-corks popping and gambling at

high stakes was part of a lifestyle in a “happy-go-lucky,” “uniform-mad” army that pretended that its officer corps was the cream of society, while in fact it was just like the army itself: kept alive on inadequate budgets, financially bankrupt.

After the general staff became a political pressure-group under Conrad’s leadership, defence appropriations were increased, but these improvements, coming in the years immediately preceding the war, were a case of “too little too late.” In any case, they went into the purchase of armaments, such as the warships which the Monarchy’s pretensions of naval strength demanded. As far as the officer corps was concerned, the army looked upon it as a burden, continuing policies aimed at minimizing this burden at the officers’ own expense. The result was that the norms of bourgeois life in a bourgeois age eluded Habsburg officers even after the “embourgeoisment” of the army.

Probably the most important of the bourgeois amenities that the officers had to forego was marriage. The Habsburg officer married, on the average, ten years later than the rest of the monarchy’s male population, but the majority of officers did not marry at all, not because this would have interfered with the “loosely wild lieutenant’s existence,” but because they were not allowed to contract marriages. It is not entirely accidental that Deak discusses this topic in a chapter which also deals with crime. Regulations going back as far as 1812 restricted the number of married officers to one-sixth of a regiment’s total cadre and demanded a large bond to be deposited at the time of the marriage. Typically, the cost of the bond was greatest in the combat branches, the army’s intention being to relieve itself and the state of any responsibility for the officer’s widow and children if he died in combat. If he survived his twenty years of service, the officer would be left with a “nest of eggs” to supplement his miserly pension. Continued “improvements” came with the modernization of the army. By 1907 half of the regimental officer corps was permitted to marry, but the cost of the bonds had increased to nearly thirty times a lieutenant’s average annual pay. The solution was to find a wealthy bride, but families were usually reluctant to put down such a large amount of money and to place their daughter’s future in the hands of a constantly-moving, financially insolvent groom who ran the risk of an early death. Officers often found themselves resorting to the newspapers’ personals columns, a practice standing in violation of the army’s code of honor.

If his salary put him on a level with the lowly industrial worker, the officer’s code of honor, or, more precisely, his duty to defend his honor at all costs, “raised him,” as Deak states, “above ordinary mortals [. . .] it made him a special person, who, like his supreme commander, the emperor, was above the law in many respects” (p. 128). If an officer, the officer corps, the armed forces, or the emperor was insulted in his presence, the

officer had immediately to silence the offender with his sword unless he happened to be a gentleman and accepted a challenge to a duel. Dueling was condemned by the Catholic Church, forbidden by the army's criminal code, but it continued nonetheless, encouraged by the army leadership. Staring at an officer, giving him an involuntary push on a crowded tram, or calling him a "liar" or even an "ordinary person" called for a challenge to a duel. This obsession with honor—and we have to remember that the emperor's declaration of war used the defence of honor as a justification—elevated the Habsburg officer above the "ordinary person" and made him a member of a distinct elite that was out of touch with contemporary social and intellectual reality.

The officers' education, the raising of this elite social caste, was in part responsible for this lack of perspective. In detailing the educational process Deak suggests that the young subalterns "commissioned after seven or eight years of virtual imprisonment [at the military academy] often felt utterly lost in the great world" (p. 81). The regiment became their "home," their "fatherland." His exploration of the officers' lack of social or ethnic sensitivity, their obsession with dueling and medieval notions of honor, carries Deak into—one cannot resist the pun—a Freudian slip. He argues that "sociocultural considerations were not part of any nineteenth century academic curriculum" at military schools (p. 92). But his tale ends not in the nineteenth, but well into the twentieth century, when social segments and institutions that isolate themselves from reality as the Habsburg army did, are asking for trouble and usually get it.

This failure to make the officers aware of ethnic and national sensitivities was probably the most important shortcoming of their education. At first, the army's "ethnic blindness," its attempt to cool national fervor in the officer corps, seemed to have been a success. Already, however, before the war it began to produce diminishing returns as the enrollment at the military academy of the Joint Army began to decline. The Hungarians may have been the loudest in asserting their aspirations to national independence but they were not alone in the polyglot empire in making these demands. In accounting for the population of the Dual Monarchy—and the ethnic composition of the army's cadre—Deak lists eleven major nationalities with "others" representing 4.5% of the total. The compromise of 1867 accommodated one of the eleven, the Hungarians, but left, as compromises usually do, so much dissatisfaction even in Hungary that an open break with Austria remained in the realm of possibility, prompting General Beck to develop plans for the invasion of Hungary only a decade or so before the outbreak of the Great War. Francis Ferdinand, whose dislike of the Hungarians was well-known, apparently leaned toward a new compromise that would have given the Czechs relative autonomy. But even a triple monarchy would have left eight major nationalities and a host of "others"

demanding recognition as “distinct societies,” to use the modern Canadian euphemism. That these aspirations were thwarted became an important factor in the performance of the Habsburg armies during the war.

The 1914 mobilization gave the monarchy 3,260,000 soldiers, led by 60,000 officers, a very low ratio of 54,3 enlisted men to each officer. This is interesting information to those of us who have collected oral history from enlisted men in the infantry. Their perennial complaint was that “you could never see an officer in the trenches.” Obviously there were not enough officers to go around. But further questioning of the Hungarian peasant soldiers also brought out angry comments about the backbreaking job of building fancy bunkers for their officers while they were shivering in the trenches, and about the high-flying officers’ lifestyle that continued during the war, with champagne flowing at banquets in the bunkers.

The fact that one rarely sees a war-time photo of officers dining without an array of bottles in front of them shows that there was some truth to these comments, as there probably was in the allegations that infantry officers sent enlisted men out on dangerous patrols, watching their progress with binoculars from behind cover. This writer is probably not alone in wondering if the wartime performance of an officer corps can be properly described without a detailed analysis of the officers’ interaction with the men they led, something that Deak does not attempt. Given the focus of his volume, Deak has very little to say about the enlisted man. This becomes especially marked in the chapter on the Great War, which is in a way the conclusion to the study, since it deals with the wartime performance—the great test—of the Habsburg army and its officer corps.

Deak states that the armed forces “served a dual purpose: to preserve the empire by preventing domestic revolts and to enhance the glory of the ruling house in foreign wars.” He argues that “between 1848 and 1914, the army of the Habsburg dynasty accomplished the first task admirably, maintaining the empire merely by its presence,” but failed in external wars (p. 7). As for the Great War, he talks of “victories despite weaknesses” at the beginning and seems to ascribe something of a final victory to the Habsburg army by saying that when the end came “not a single enemy soldier stood on Habsburg territory” (p. 192). This suggestion may trouble some readers who recall that the Habsburg army had to be bailed out again and again by its German ally, just as it was helped to “victory” in 1848 by the armies of the Tsar.

So was it a victory? Did the Habsburg army succeed? How does one measure the success of an army? Is it the number of dead and wounded it left on the field, showing its members’ willingness to fight, that marks the success of armies? Is the number of soldiers lost to captivity a sign of failure? The Habsburg army’s wartime record can be made to support both readings.

Deak's volume invites arguments about these troubling questions of military history because it touches on them but does not attempt to resolve them. The untraditional nature of the study—it does not have formal conclusions—contributes to the reader's sense of unsettledness. Would not the stated focus on the officer corps require an appraisal of the collective performance of the members of this body, once a chapter on the great trial of World War I is added? Deak talks of the army as "poorly led from the very beginning" (p. 191), but in his next sentence he inculpates General Conrad and does not really discuss what role, if any, the officer corps might have played in the disaster that the war turned out to be for the army and the monarchy. If he considered these issues in formal conclusions he probably would have revised the earlier statement he makes: that the army was still at the "dynasty's side" "at the beginning of November 1918, even after the breakup of the monarchy itself" (p. 4). Unless one reduces the notion of an army to its generals the idea that the Austro-Hungarian army remained loyal to the emperor through the war and disintegration simply does not correspond to historical reality.

Deak himself provides the evidence for this argument. Describing the post-1914 phase of the conflict, he talks of the "war of the reserve officers," who joined the corps in overwhelming numbers. This created enormous problems for the army. In the linguistic Babel that was the Joint Army, even the career officers had serious trouble functioning. Although at the academy they received training in languages, "instructing the recruits in their mother tongue" was a "terror" for them (p. 239). It must have been far worse for the reserve officers who had to hurry through training and then lead hastily assembled units made up largely of overage or underage men with no previous military experience into battle. One is tempted to establish a correlation between this lack of training and the enormous losses suffered by the Habsburg army, and Deak refers, somewhat disapprovingly, to a historian who has suggested that "problems in communication were the main reason for the failure of the Habsburg army" (p. 194). But the lack of linguistic preparation of the reserve officers was not the only way these men might have contributed to the defeat that the ill-equipped and unprepared Habsburg army experienced. The reservists brought with them and propagated nationalist ideologies among their compatriots in the ranks. In Deak's words, "They were chiefly reserve officers who participated in, or often led, the national revolutions" (p. 203), that completed the disintegration of the monarchy and forced the end of the Habsburgs' multinational empire.

From this angle, the army was a miserable failure, as was Habsburg policy. The horrifying denouement of the principle of "divide and rule" comes from the tales of this writer's father who was a corporal in the Sixth Hussar regiment—a Joint Army formation—much decorated for bravery.

One act he did not get a medal for was to serve in the firing squad that decimated a Czech regiment suspected of planning to desert to the Russians. Despite the death of every tenth man in the unit, the Czechs went over a few days later, opening up the front for the Russians, who encircled the Sixth Hussars. Corporal Agocs, so his tale went, was one of the thirty-some men of the Sixth who got away.

The end of Deak's story, the disintegration of a state amidst an explosion, an orgy of nationalism, makes his introductory remarks appear ironic. For he talks of reexamining "the Habsburg experiment" and expresses hope of finding a "positive lesson" in it (p. 9). Since he completed the book in December 1989, we have witnessed the end of two other multinational "experiments": Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. The similarities to the monarchy, pace Istvan Deak, are rather striking. The recent cases reaffirm the ultimate futility of "keeping the lid on," frustrating ethnic and national ambitions through "ethnic blindness" or worse, through repression. One might go so far as to say in disagreement with Deak that the worst damage caused by the Habsburg—and Communist—"experiments" was that they prevented the normal development of nationalism, thus allowing extremely explosive forces to accumulate and burst to the surface with volcanolike destructiveness.

Because it is thought-provoking to the point of inviting arguments such as these, and also because it is original in methodology and content—covering a wide range of topics—Deak's volume offers much to students of the history of Central Europe.