



Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866

Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen: Observations on the State of the Austrian Army in 1854 (Retrospective Account)

In his observations on the state of the Austrian army in 1854, Prussian general Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen (1827-1892) looks at military tactics since the Napoleonic Era and discusses the army's technical backwardness, lack of training, and inability to respond to new ideas. His devastating judgment about the strategic and tactical incompetence of most Austrian aristocratic officers seems to have been confirmed later on by the Austrian defeat against Prussia in 1866.

I became acquainted with the famous Clam Gallas during the parade on July 12. In my notes from the time, I now see that I wrote to Berlin about him, suggesting that he was not up to his job as commanding general, that he was just a show-off warhorse, neither a tactician nor a strategist, and [that he was] incapable of having a comprehensive overview of things. The activity of this once so celebrated Austrian general in the years 1859 and 1866 splendidly confirmed my verdict, one that was quite bold for such a young officer to have made about such an old leader. At the parade, and later in the officers' mess hall, I had frequent opportunity to converse with him, and I encountered such an acutely meager knowledge – such an immature tactical and strategic judgment, leaving him not even the faintest idea about the military events in which he had played a role – that I realized he was only a puppet who might have lent his name to the activity of any old general staff officer. At the same time, he was a distinguished grand seigneur through and through, loved society, hunting, dinners, was generous, rode horseback elegantly, and treated military activity like any another sport, not in earnest, but for fun. It was said of him that, whenever a battle report was given to him to sign, upon seeing the appended drawings of the terrain, he would ask what the horrid cobwebs drawn by the general staff officer signified, and that he was quite surprised to hear that they represented mountains.

The general of the cavalry, Prince Franz Liechtenstein, was then, as I already mentioned, the Seydlitz of the nineteenth century in the opinion of authoritative personalities. When I made his acquaintance, it occurred to me that he carefully evaded expressing a view about historical or tactical questions, and I arrived at the suspicion that he had none. I am confirmed in this by the remarks of many a general staff officer, as cautious as they were, and the Windischgrätz family noisily said about him that he was the most incapable of all Austrian generals, yes, and that after the battle of Schwechat, Prince Alfred Windischgrätz demanded a court-martial against

Prince Franz Liechtenstein. But when Prince Windischgrätz fell into disfavor, his opponents branded Prince Franz Liechtenstein a hero.

The old Prince Alfred Windischgrätz, who with iron energy had restored order in Prague and Vienna in 1848, had fallen into disfavor because he had never wanted to become a chamberlain or a privy councilor and, contrary to the Spanish custom of the Austrian court, had claimed the rank of a prince and field marshal. The iron man bore this disfavor with the dignity of an iron hero from the sixteenth century, at least in the way that heroes like this have been portrayed by history, although maybe not as they ever really lived. He was a noble man of character and had a stubbornness that triumphed over all insight. He was a friend of Prussia, i.e. to the extent that an Austrian at that time could be a friend of Prussia. That is to say, he regarded solidarity between Prussia and Austria as the only advantageous path for Austria, from which he drew the conclusion that Prussia was duty-bound to sacrifice its last drops of blood for Austria's welfare. His insight was slow and therefore steady. After all, he was an aristocrat and a man of honor through and through. His word was like an Amen in church. He was the only Austrian whom I got to know back then who believed that Austria also had to keep its commitments, even if they had been made toward Prussia. This sensibility, in the personal as well as the political, was passed on to his sons. That he was wounded for this sensibility is something that later brought about his death from a broken heart. But this belongs to a later historical epoch.

Phenomena like Lieutenant Field Marshal Count Paur were not uncommon in the higher ranks of the Austrian aristocracy, who in his ignorance went so far as to put an artillery captain under arrest because the two howitzers in his battery had shorter barrels than the six canons. He believed that the captain had cut off and stolen a piece of bronze.

Actually, the ignorance of the higher aristocracy in the Austrian army occasionally made me lose my composure altogether. One of these gentlemen once asked me about the war game that was practiced in the Prussian army. I explained it to him. In a two-hour conversation he asked me about all the details. I explained everything with the greatest patience. When I let myself believe that I had been completely understood, Prince L. T. said to me: "All right, now, how do you play this?" – "Why?" – "Well now, I mean, how do you determine what you're playing for?" – "But it can't be played for money!" – "Not for money? Well, then, it's of no interest whatsoever!"

In addition to such a horribly ignorant aristocracy, which set the tone in the Austrian army and whose members attained most of the highest ranks, there also had to be an intellectual element doing the [actual] work. This was absolutely right, for otherwise the army could not have existed. But this intellectual element consisted for the most part of upstarts or adventurers, partly from abroad, who wanted to get rich and abuse the ignorance of the noble lords to this end. They had to reckon with this factor at that time in Austria. The artillery commander Count Wimpffen once told me that nine pounds of oats daily were far too little for a horse, for one needed to consider that if one allotted nine pounds of oats for each horse in the army, the horse would be carrying at most five pounds of oats in his stomach, and no horse could hold out under this kind of strain. That the director of the Second Army, Lieutenant Field Marshall Baron v. Eynatten, practiced

embezzlement was a story the entire Austrian army bandied about back then. Therefore, several years later, when he was convicted of embezzlement and killed himself, I was not surprised. My official reports from back then contain the relevant information.

Even the old artillery commander Augustin was one the greats admired from a distance, a celebrity in the artillery. Seen up close, the meteor shrank to a star of the third or fourth magnitude. He was an ossified bureaucrat and prejudice-filled bombardier from the previous century, an enemy of every new invention and improvement, which he simply regarded as democratic sins. He invented the Austrian rocket, and after that there could not be anything better. The Hungarian rebels had feared those rockets, and this gave the old weapons, surrounded by the highest scientific mystery, a new luster. When the old Augustin died a few years later, even Austria discovered that the rockets had never actually hit anything, and they got rid of them in order to introduce rifled artillery.

Unfortunately, I never got to know the famous Schönhals. He had fallen into disfavor and secluded himself in Gratz, where he died shortly afterward.

All that remained for me was the famous lion, Lieutenant Field Marshall Baron Reischach, who is supposed to have performed so many miracles in the war. When I saw him later and found nothing more than an alcoholic who drank pure cognac from cups filled to the brim and even called for me to join him in getting drunk as I listened to the stories about everything he had done, then even this illusion faded away. At least he was brave; even his enemies conceded this.

I also had a different picture of the Austrian army in its entirety before I saw it with my own eyes. In 1848 and 1849 Austria waged many wars, and it emerged from them victorious, even if with the assistance of Russia. The history that was written about these wars offered only the views of the victor, and the Austrian general staff understood how to portray every battle as a great victory. The Austrian army had the glimmer of the foremost in the world. But it had to be recast in 1849. Entire regiments, especially the Hungarian ones, had disappeared, and this led to lots of promotions. Along with the army's reputation, this drew in many foreigners, who were also readily accepted, for lots of officers were needed. Now, it is not always the best elements who seek military service abroad. With the exception of a few dreamers, these foreigners were often quite dubious characters. Anybody in Germany who was compromised by debts or other pranks was accepted into the Austrian army. I also found a lot of Englishmen there. So it came to pass that many regiment members in their officer corps had not the slightest trace of pure, unvarnished Austrian character, but were instead more cosmopolitan, adventurous. There was a corresponding tone within the officer corps, camaraderie was restricted to everybody calling everyone else "Du,"* but otherwise there was no cohesion, there was no common table, and after service everyone went his own way.

* The familiar form of "you," which is reserved, among equals, for close relatives, intimate friends or comrades – trans.

[. . .]

I found the infantry to be at a very low level of training. Even during maneuvers, it never got beyond poorly executed school exercises. There was no utilization of the terrain. No value was placed on the conduct of the marksmen. Things were way behind when it came to weapons. A rifled weapon introduced for the entire infantry was still being tried out in the arsenal (Lorenz system).

The cavalry, this famous cavalry which had learned to surround itself with such magnificent luster, I found, to my dismay, so inadequate that for a long time I hesitated before expressing my convictions in my reports, for I believed I must be mistaken. I saw Hessen-Cassel Hussars Nr. 8, Tuscany Dragoons Nr. 8, and Sicilian Lancers Nr. 12. Even if one completely disregards the latter regiment, for it was newly formed and could not match the worst Prussian army cavalry regiment, one could still not find much that was good about the other two regiments. As Hungarians, the hussars were born horsemen, therefore not too much effort was given to their training; they remained natural horsemen. As a whole, all of the cavalry was slow, laborious, restless, with little stamina, lacking coherent attacks. I looked for, and found, the causes. The regulations were, although simplified, quite laborious, full of useless commands, so that, before an Austrian regiment goes into forward motion, a Prussian one can fall into its flank. The horses were so badly fed because too many oats were embezzled. A petty-minded daily routine had the troops saddling up too early and holding for hours to be inspected, so that horse and rider were completely exhausted before the start of an exercise, and then the exercise lasted for hours and hours. One should not, by the way, apply the measure of Prussian laws to embezzlement in the Austrian army. The Austrian army was then in a transitional stage with respect to its internal administration. Only a few years earlier, a cavalry captain had received a lump sum with which he was to dress man and horse and feed the horses. How he went about this was his own business, and what he was able to spare flowed legally into his pockets, whereby one portion was left over for the sergeant. All that, to be sure, had become different according to the rules, but the occasional hard-working old sergeant etc. could not yet find his place in [this new order] and continued to live according to the old rules.

The artillery, whose shooting practice I attended, was still entirely the old constable sentry from the previous century, with lots of crammed learning, manuals for geography and history in the front wagon for the guns, but without hitting much. One innovation, for which there was pride, consisted of uniting the harnessed teams with the artillery, since up until three years ago they were still pulling cannons by a special train into battle. The artillery equitation school under Nadaszy was the beginning of this, and the aforementioned director engaged in a lot of nonsense with this pet idea of the Kaiser.

The exercises with mixed weapons showed that both the management and the leadership were in an infantile state, which I found surprising. Everything was prescribed by the upper management of both parties, and the victory was determined in advance, rather than being

made dependent on the leaders' rules and on penalties using an umpire. This resulted in some delightful maneuver ideas. E.g., the general idea implied: the northern corps defends the position N.N. and occupies it with the reinforced right wing. The southern corps attacks this position.

1st moment: unlucky attack on the part of the southern corps against the enemy right wing.

2nd moment: Successful attack against the enemy left wing etc.

The result was that the attacker used very few troops during the first attack because it was supposed to be unlucky, and this [using few troops] required fewer battalions to take the same path twice, and another result was that, at the start of the second attack, the defender would immediately evacuate its excellent artillery position, because then the attack would succeed and the artillery could be put on the spot.

[. . .]

Source: Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, *Aus meinem Leben: Aufzeichnungen des Prinzen Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen* [*From My Life: Chronicles of Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen*], ed., Arved von Teichman und Logischen. Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1897-1907, vol. 1, pp. 257-59, 280-82.

Translation: Jeremiah Riemer