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Transformations of the Officer Corps in Hungary (1900-1940)

*Tibor Hajdu**

Abstract: After the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (*Ausgleich*) a new national – *Honved* – army was set up, but four fifth of the conscripts from Hungary as well as half of the Hungarian officers were actually drafted in the k.u. k (royal and imperial) ‘common Army’ of the Habsburg Monarchy. There remained only 6 % – later 8 % – Hungarians in the ‘common’ k. u. k. officer corps. In the 1870 half of these Hungarian officers and even in the 1900s some 40 % were still noblemen. The *Honved* officer corps of the 1870s was a strange mixture. The elderly veterans of the 1848 revolution and war of independence were mostly noblemen. On the contrary, there was a number of peasant boys and others of humble social background among the younger subalterns, since the *Honved* army did not appear as distinguished enough socially for the ‘better families’. Later these differences tended to disappear and by the early 20th century the *Honved* officer corps was considered of quite similar social and military standing as its k.u.k equivalent.– Following the collapse of the Monarchy in 1918, the earlier members of the *Honved* prevailed in the new army of the rump state, because the royalist officers of the Habsburg Empire refused to serve under admiral Horthy considered as a ‘traitor’. The new officer corps had thus much less noblemen and only a few real aristocrats, but – besides officers’ sons – there were more and more sons of civil servants, railway and post officials as well as other members of the ‘non economic’ lower middle classes.

Up to the *Ausgleich* in 1867 a Hungarian Army or a Hungarian Officer Corps did not exist. Hungarian officers could serve as members of the Habsburg Army, Hungarian regiments were integrated in the same Army. The *Ausgleich* and the following military reforms of the late sixties led to a controversial and temporary but lasting solution, so characteristic for most institutions of the Dual Habsburg Monarchy. Legally one fifth, practically even less of the Hungarian conscripts were summoned up to the newly constructed Hungarian “Honvéd” Army, the majority of Hungarian soldiers and officers remained with the Common, Kaiserlich-Königlich Army. However, Hungarians were very proud with their little and second-line Honvéd Army, while Austrian Generals were hurt and alarmed even with such rather poor national progress.

Francis Joseph stuck to the inseparability of his beloved generality what caused the first military scandal of many. The first Hungarian Premier, An-

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drásky had planned the regulations of Honvéd with the help of some outstanding Generals of the 1848 War of Independence, as George Klapka, Anton Vetter or Maurice Perczel and also would nominate them among the first Honvéd Generals, Klapka even for Minister of Defence. Also they would be members of the united k. k. Generality. The Austrian generals, however, would not hear of Klapka, Friedrich Prinz von Liechtenstein, commander of all troops in Hungary, announced that he would retire if “the traitor” were appointed to any rank.

As a result Premier Andrásy kept the Ministry of Defence for himself, the veteran revolutionary officers could have been appointed to Honvéd officer corps only up to Colonel. True, some of these Colonels were later promoted by the Emperor to Generals, but that was by Kakanian reasoning quite different. For the time being, under Andrásy the Hungarian national Army had only two generals: for commander-in-chief Archduke Joseph and Eduard von Gräf, a kaisertreu Transylvanian German, a feared gendarme officer before the Ausgleich. Of active colonels, 7 were from the revolutionary army of 1848 and 4 transferred from the k.k. army. Of 14 lieutenant colonels, 11 were revolutionary veterans, as were 42 of the 71 majors. Of 88 captains First class, 35 were revolutionary vets, while 39 came from the Habsburg army and 14 from the retired list of the latter. Similarly, of 29 captains 2-d class, 18 were vets, of 176 first lieutenants, 65 and of 189 sublieutenants, 56.

Also, the Honvéd officer corps contained officers who had once fought against each other, no rarity in Hungarian history. Several of the colonels, for example János Máriássy, János Horváth or Eduard Czillich spent six or seven years in heavy chains in Olmütz prison or elsewhere. The adjutant of the Minister, major Count Schweinitz had served the Kaiser in 1849 as a young lieutenant and guarded the imprisoned freedom fighters in the Arad fortress, notably being very human to the prisoners. As officer of the occupation army married a Hungarian girl and became a German-speaking Hungarian patriot. The adjutant of Erzherzog Joseph, László Graf Vay, was captain of the revolutionary army who after the Revolution followed Kossuth to Turkey.

Through the seventies, only half of the senior Honvéd officers were of Hungarian nationality, no more as one tenth Croats or Serbians, the others Germans. In the eighties under the new Minister of Defence, the favourite of the Emperor, General Fejérváry, an obvious change occurred: the majority of the revolutionary vets were pensioned, the number of young Hungarian officers was growing but not yet at the command posts.

As many Hungarian k.k. officers were transferred to the Honvéd, in the k.k. officer corps remained even less Hungarian as were before. 1866 7% of the generals and 6% of the colonels on active service were of Hungarian nationality, junior officers even less. Only in the last years of the 19th century reached the number of Hungarian officers in the k.u.k. army the 8%. In spite of this low percent, the joint, k.k. army had more officers of Hungarian nationality, than

the Honvéd, struggling for a long time with a lack of commissioned officers. At these years according to the official military statistics about 78% of the career k.k. officers were Germans; by my calculations something less as 70%, but even so, even in the Hungarian regiments the majority of the officers, much more of the senior officers, strikingly more of the Regiment Commanders were Germans.

As for the questionable statistics I don't mean forced Germanisation in the Army. The problem refers to the fact that the majority of German officers came from Hungary, Bohemia and other non-German lands of the Empire. (The less German officers were born in the lands of today's Oesterreich except Wien and Nieder-Österreich. Besides, many military historians are sharing the misbelief, as if before Königgrätz a great part of Habsburg officers were coming from non-Habsburg German lands. What is true only for the high leadership, for example Beck or Edelsheim, but not for the whole officer corps.) I came at the results that about 28% of the k.u.k. officers were born in Hungary, from them a good third were Germans what means some 15% of the German officers came from Hungary and even more from Bohemia. because there were families of mixed nationality or freshly assimilated – therefore many officers of rather Bohemian, Moravian, Hungarian or perhaps Slovenian nationality, or belonging to mixed families, reported himself for Germans.

In the Honvéd army, on the contrary, nationality would counted another way. Studying registrations of the Honvéd Ludovika Academy we learn that there were only two nationalities: Hungarians and Croats, as the Honvéd army was containing Hungarian and Croat regiments. Looking closer at the names, father's name, birth place, religion, language knowledge etc. we may assume about 15% the Honvéd officers were Germans but those who were born in Hungary counted for Hungarians, and only those born out of Hungary and transferred from the k.k. army (1%) were recognised as German nationals. The Serbian officers, 2% of the Honvéd officer corps, had free choice to be registered for Hungarians or Croats.

Looking at the Honvéd officer corps from another point of view, in the beginning young men mostly preferred the shining k.k. regiments against the poorly equipped new Honvéd. There was a lack of subaltern officers for 20-25 years and therefore were accepted cadets of humble origin or even Jews. In our days we would call such system democratic but it was only lack of aspirants. In the academic year 1879-1880 of the 141 cadets, entering the Ludovika only 27 had had a full high-school education. When a recruit seemed fit enough he was sent to the Ludovika Academy as Samuel Kohn in 1873, who as a young lieutenant had been christened, changed his family name to the patriotic Hazai and at the outbreak of First World War soon General and Minister of Defence. But under General Hazai Jewish or peasant boys since a long time did not had access to the Ludovika. The first big peasant politicians, István "Nagyatádi"

Szabó and András Áchim both serving for three years could have been no more as non-coms having no high school report.

Prior to the 1848 revolutions the Habsburg officer corps was a noble one. Not less as a half of the Hungarian officers were noblemen and the others aspired for ennoblement which they mostly gained when reached higher ranks. In 1866 60% of the generals held aristocratic titles. After Königgrätz their number diminished, but even in 1889 no less as 42%, in 1897 24%. The Hungarian aristocracy too withdrew from the active service, like the Germans. Before First World War, in 1913 there remained 59 aristocrats that is 16% of the active generals, from the 59, Hungarians are only 7 and most of them at the Honvéd.

As for the Hungarian officers, in the k.k. army as early as in the seventies about the half of them were noblemen, even in the first years of the 20th century nearly 40%. One of the reasons of that, beside the semi-feudal state of Hungarian society through the 19th century is the different social status of the various service branches. Cavalry officers were at the top and about half of the Hungarian officers in the k.k. army were cavalrists, especially hussars. In 1897 62,5% of the cavalry officers were noblemen. Even there were differences, German aristocrats preferred the 7th and 13th dragoons, Hungarian aristocrats and other “grand families” the 7th and 12th hussars, where $\frac{3}{4}$ of the officers were noblemen. To these aristocratic regiments only such reserve officers were let whose social position corresponded with the commissioned ones, brothers or nephews frequently volunteered for reserve officers to the regiment where they relatives served.

After the cavalry came only the general staff the Feldjäger (I don't know who to translate it to English), and some “mounted” artillery regiments. According to the well known statistics of Captain Kandelsdorfer, in 1897 37% of the staff officers, 24% of the Feldjägers, 22% of military engineers, 16% of the artillery officers, 14% of the Fusiliers and only 6% of the Train and Sanitary officers were nobles. But there were great differences even among Fusilier regiments. In 7 such regiments 25 to 33% amounted the noble officers, from the seven 4 were Hungarian regiments, namely the 46 (Szeged) regiment with 30%, the No 34 (Kassa) with 29%, the No 60

The Honvéd officer corps of the seventies was a strange mixture: as the revolutionary vets were mostly noblemen, in the higher ranks from major on served 12% aristocrats and 44% other titled noblemen; on the contrary, among the young subalterns much more peasant boys and others of humble origin as in the k.k. officer corps. Later these extremities diminished: the old aristocrats retired and from the late eighties the young officers were picked from the middle class or officer families.

For my calculations, to the end of the 19th Century no less as 25% of the Honvéd officers had civil servant fathers, not counting some 8% teachers, professors, railway- and postmen. From officer's and military official's families came not so many, as in the k.u.k. army but no less than 12%. Also almost

the half of them were from school graduated middle class fathers, belonging to the state.

There were less middle class fathers active in business, free professions etc., about 16%. 8% were gentlemen landowners, relatively much agricultural officials and foresters, above 9%. Very few capitalists, big house-owners. Artisans, shopkeepers, innkeepers and similar “Kleinbürger” about 10%. About 5% were peasant boys, from proletarian families only 1% or less. Counting Ludovika cadets by school years, the general proportions are similar, but sons of gentlemen landowners were reported less from year to year, but on the contrary, more and more came from civil servant, teacher, railway and post official families. Peasant boys number to the pre-war years diminished to 2% and they also mostly from poor Szekler, also Transylvanian Grenzer. In the first years came less from officers’ families as in the whole officer corps, but before the war they had reach the average proportion.

In the first years of the 20th century Honvéd officer corps both socially and for military level closed up to the k.u.k. officer corps. The Croat regiments were slightly different. Croat aristocracy and higher officer’s sons were striving for the k.u.k. army, for the Honvéd (Domobran in Croat) remained the simpler “Grenzersöhne”, graničar’s. As for k.u.k. officers of Hungarian nationality, they are a little – but not much – better situated as the Honvéd officers, especially in the early years, but the great difference is, there were much more “Offiziersöhne”, near to 20%. (By the non-Hungarian officers about 26%.)

Before First War about 40 Hungarian generals served in both armies. 8% of their fathers were aristocrats, 35% other noblemen. About one sixth of fathers were officers, another one sixth from the free professions.

After the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy the little but independent Hungary had to build up an independent army. Interestingly in the new officer corps, even in higher ranks, prevailed the Honvéd’s. This phenomenon had many reasons, one of them. the comradesly or cliquish holding together, the brotherhood of Ludovika graduates. Another reason the withdrawal of aristocratic or well-to-do nobility (“bene possessionati” called in Hungary), partly because of general decay, decadence, partly because after the unsuccessful attempts of Charles, the last king (or emperor) to regain the Hungarian crown, many royalist higher officers left the army of the “traitor” Horthy.

Many good reserve officers of mixed origin were activated during or after the war, especially political followers of Horthy. After the war the middle class disintegrated itself: the mostly gentry office-holding or meritocratic part of it kept a distance against the partly Jewish bourgeois middle-class. The latter were gradually pushed out of civil services, first of all of officer corps. Before the war on the base of their high school grades one quarter of Hungarian reserve officers had been Jewish, their number in the twenties was extremely minimized. On the other hand the gentry officer corps were being filled up gradually with sons of non-coms, lower officials and even office servants (I

don't mean civil servants). It is disputed, whether is that phenomenon to be called a democratisation or rather something other. It could be if among the young officers would be growing significantly the number of peasant's and workmen's sons but it was not the case.

We don't have yet a general study on the social background of the whole officer corps of the Horthy era, but we can depend on the very detailed research of Sándor Szakály on the military elite. He studied the data of 412 leading officers, mainly generals and some colonels in key positions during second world war. Only 1,3% of them came from a worker's and 3,8% from a peasant's family. On the other side, only 1% of them were aristocrats but even from these no one of the old, exclusive families may we see among them. Lesser nobles were enough from the officer's families. The fathers of 14,6% were army officers. The great majority middle class. However, inside of the middle classes only about 20% had artisan, merchant, shopkeeper or business official father. That is, of all the business world came only one fourth of the military elite. Another quarter of the fathers were civil servants, without teachers, railway and post officials. From the latter occupations – Post and Railways – came some 12,6%, a striking number, because their ethos and subordination were the closest to the military. Teachers or professors 11%. To the free professions, as advocates, medical doctors etc, also engineers, belonged less as ten percent.

From the above and other sources we may come to the conclusion that the officer corps both for social position and mentality changed very much after First World War. Some of my colleagues are of the meaning, the after-war officer corps turned more open as before. I'd say yes, but only in clearly fixed directions. For another aspects it remained closed or closed up more as before the war. During 19th century well-to-do officers were preferred, especially at cavalry, staff corps and at nomination for regiment commandant. This aspect lost of importance and also belonging to the nobility. They were not so choosy for origin and wealth of the bride, except perhaps of military attaché's, resulting in growing number of married officers.

As for the nobility occurred a new problem: army was always one of the best channels for ennoblement. Horthy as Regent hadn't the right to make nobles therefore among younger officers were much less nobles. Horthy founded a strange substitution, the so-called Vitézi Rend, a sort of Order. To become a Vitéz (hard to translate, more as brave, less as hero, coming from the slavic витязь) one had to have strictly defined war decorations and front service. It was open for non-coms too, but not for Jews, socialists, freemasons and similar unpatriotic persons. The vitéz peasant non-coms could even gain by the land reform a "family farm". A vitéz had to be preferred by obtaining a status in civil or military services. In spite of that many well decorated officers didn't ask for it, obviously considering ridiculous.

As for nationality, in the army of Horthy there was no such differentiation. A Hungarian officer had to be Hungarian. Many enough were of German ori-

gin, for whom was enough to change the German family for a gentry-like Hungarian – for Knausz vitéz Szombathelyi, for Gröller vitéz Kisfaludy and so on (also some Grenzersöhne as the Hungarian Quisling, vitéz Sztójay-Stojakovits. It is a much debated question whether had the national origin of many generals some significance in Hungary's place in second World War?

As for my opinion one oughtn't be judged politically as an individual by his origin as for a long time used to be in Hungary, but on the contrary a vain attempt to deny practical importance of prevalence German connections, general knowledge of German language contrary to weak knowledge of western languages and the "enemy" states. One half of the military elite were born in towns or villages broken off from Hungary by Paris peace treaty; here no comment may seem necessary.

After First World War a big change occurred in the social position of officer corps. Before the war the strange partition of Hungarian armed forces and the tensions between Wien and Budapest had made unlikely for it to have important role in Hungarian politics. There were exceptions: Defence Minister Fejérváry from about 1894 and 1906 was an important personality in Hungarian politics, some retired officers went to parliament, but generally in liberal Hungary army and politics were little connected. Horthy created a militaristic regime, career officers were made cabinet members, even Premiers, nothing to say of other civilian posts. The army took part in boys education (Levente, boy-scouts) and during Second World War took over important state functions. Some characteristics of the officer corps remained unchanged. Except formalities, the organisation of Ludovika Academy, cadet schools and military high schools, important was that unlike other modernised armies as the German or the Soviet in Hungary for the best soldiers or non-coms remained impossible to be commissioned officers, obsolete 19th Century barriers between officers and soldiers remained unmoved.

Trying to compare Horthy's army elite with that of Francis Joseph one can say the tendency striving from the supranational, discrepant organisation of the Dual Monarchy to a nationalistic army, with a non-aristocratic middle-class officer corps had both its good and bad sides. Uniformity is useful for an army, ignorance of non-military values may be practical. With the aristocratic officers vanished amateurism but chivalry too. During the war officers frequently perpetrated things once unthinkable for them who were wearing the coat of Francis Joseph. To abandon the meritocratic system of choosing reserve officers', by which any book-keeper with a high-school report but without any knowledge of peasant lads could be an army officer, could make the officer corps more consistent. Getting rid off with other-thinking intellectuals might be good for begin a war but catastrophic at the end; the officers' average level could improved but in this military elite wasn't present a Prinz Eugen and perhaps couldn't be.