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THE EMPLOYMENT OF THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN ARMY IN THE SUPPRESSION OF UPRISING IN THE CIVIL AND MILITARY FIELDS IN 1918

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Abstract

In the Habsburg Empire the provision of military assistances against civil unrests was a standard procedure in case police- and gendarmerie-forces have been insufficient. Despite existing decrees and edicts no legal framework was settled to regulate the use of these military assistances. During World War I. the question of military assistance tasks in case of civilian uprisings, demonstrations and strikes got more complicated since it became necessary to employ troops offside the frontlines also in the hinterland. The first great test and need of military assistances in an extended way came in January 1918 when measures had to be taken to suppress and turn down the so- called "January strike". The Army High Command, fully aware of the danger of the strike movement at home and the insufficiency of available units, placed additionally about 39 front-battalions at the disposal of the hinterland. The use of these front units was of special importance because in some places only their appearance led to the quick containment of the unrest. Later on assistance units were also deployed to "help" with grain requisitions in agriculture. This had unwanted negative effects on the internal bond and moral of the units since they were now directly confronted with the misery of the population. Austro-Hungarian POWs coming home from Russian war imprisonment and "infected" by revolutionary ideas proved to be an additional destabilizing factor.

As a main consequence of these military assistances the relation between the military and the civil population was worsened: the view of the common soldier as an element of protection was changed to a symbol of state operated suppression.

Keywords: Military assistance; Military-Civil-Relation; Civil Unrest in WWI; Austro-Hungarian Army 1918

When in the war year of 1918 the political leadership intended to use also military formation to suppress and turn down strike movements, this was no new ground at all. It was similar in all European countries that the armed forces were employed not only for outward defence but also for the maintenance of law and order within a country, a development to be found already in the 18th and 19th centuries. Although internal security tasks were reduced due to the establishment of the gendarmerie in the middle of the 19th century, the so-called “ordinary security service” was maintained in Austria and Austria-Hungary. It comprised above all guard duties in the garrisons, which included the protection of military buildings and real estates in garrison towns. Moreover, due to agreements with the responsible civil administration authorities, also the protection of state and public buildings could be taken over. This implied above all the supervision of prisons, detention houses or state treasuries. In bigger garrison towns the armed forces were used for the routine guard duties of the towns, which meant the provision of permanent guards and the sending out of night patrols. Furthermore, in big cities even so-called “main guards” were installed. In this “routine” guard service, the military had the function of a civil-security corps, a function which also linked to the right of imprisonment of suspects and the use of arms.⁽¹⁾

Of special interest, however, was the so-called “extraordinary” security service, which should be carried out only when there were not enough police and gendarmerie forces to meet extraordinary dangers for the proper functioning of state institutions. For the civil authorities this was the case, when not only individual persons but also so-called “mass movements” started to offend the existing law regulations. But a “mass” of people wasn’t really defined, sometimes already ten peasants being unhappy regarding their tax duties were estimated to be a “mass”.

The armed forces were to be employed to strengthen the civil security corps and to form so-called “assistances” then. In the case of “recalcitrance” and “revolts” of whole villages or a greater number of persons, who opposed the orders of the political authorities

1. Richard Georg Plaschka, Horst Haselsteiner, Arnold Suppan: *Innere Front. Militärassistentz, Widerstand und Umsturz in der Donaumonarchie 1918*, 2 Vol., Vienna 1974, Vol.1, p. 19

or refused to perform duties imposed on them like e.g. taxes, they had to interfere. When employed, these assistances were, however, not subject to the territorial military hierarchy but served as a support of the civil administration authorities. The first legal ground for such employments are found in 1775 and 1776, when the terms “military executions” and “military assistance” were legally defined.⁽²⁾ The first comprised the use of military means of power to bring in state duties like e.g. taxes or natural duties, whereas the term “military assistance” was very widely defined and comprised all military measures in the security service.

What remained especially controversial was the use of weapons, which could not be exactly defined. In a legal decision of the War Council (later on Ministry of War) of 1844 the field of “military assistance” including the use of weapons was defined more precisely, as the use of weapon had either to be ordered by the political authority requiring the assistance or was to be allowed for selfdefence purposes in the case of a direct attack on the assistance body.

To give the armed forces more exact guidelines, respective regulations on the “assistances” as such as well as on the basic behaviour and the drill use of weapons were included in the regulations for the imperial and royal infantry troops of 1873.⁽³⁾

Only in 1908 the binding military regulation “Instruction concerning the demand, provision and use of military assistances” was finally published, which remained more or less valid until the end of the war in 1918. In this regulation a reserved position was taken as to the use of weapons to bring about tint of all a de-escalation or dissolution of uprisings. The troops of the military assistance should in no way have themselves provoked to use their weapons in a careless way. Contrary to these regulations for the civil field the regulations on uprisings within the army comprised restrictive rules, which in the case of “mutinies” or “uprisings” demanded martial law and the use of weapon. But regarding all these different civil and military regulations, it’s surprising that a real legal framework based on civil laws was missing. All the definitions and recommendations have been based on simple edicts and decrees, which were definitely insufficient regarding the importance and possible consequences of using military measures in civil live. It was the military itself to improvise some kind of rules of engagement.

Now coming to the time of World War I. and the overall situation in the Austro-Hungarian homelands.⁽⁴⁾

The provision of “military assistances” naturally depended definitely on available contingents because civil uprisings – of course – never took place at the frontline

2. August Wilfling: Administrativer Waffengebrauch der öffentlichen Vollzugsorgane und des Militärs. In: Österreichisches Staatswörterbuch. Handbuch des gesamten österreichischen Rechts, Vienna 1909, 4. Vol. p. 866

3. Dienstreglement für das kaiserliche und königliche Heer, 1. Part, Vienna 1873, p. 230-238

4. Draft. Instruktion bezüglich Anforderung, Beistellung und Verwendung militärischer Assistenzen. Nachdruckausgabe mit Berücksichtigung der bis 1908 ergangenen ergänzenden Erlässe, Vienna 1908

where troops were present. With regard to assistance tasks during civilian uprisings, demonstrations and strikes it became therefore necessary to employ soldiers deployed in the hinterland. These troops comprised above all the reinforcement troops of the field regiments, which had the task to gather new recruits, convalesced as well as repatriated prisoners of war (POWs) in so-called “march formations” - the reinforcement of the front units. So every regiment at the front got firstly every 4th week, later on every 6th week one battalion of replacements. Especially at the beginning of the war the reinforcement troops of the regiments were deployed in the respective regiment reinforcement district. During the war, however, units of Czech, Italian, Romanian or Serb nationality were deployed outside their original garrison towns because of strong nationalist concerns.⁽⁵⁾ It was thought that when “military assistances” were formed to fight unrests there, unreliability based on nationalist reasons could be prevented therewith. Therefore, Czech reinforcement troops were deployed above all in Hungary, Austro-German or Hungarian ones in Bohemia. Although there were countless little “uprisings” or moments of discontent since beginning of the war, which normally were “calmed down” just after the showing of military force, the first great test of the “military assistances” came in January 1918 when measures had to be taken to suppress and turn down the so- called “January strike”. The reason for this enormous strike movement was the miserable food situation, which had reached a catastrophic stage, especially in the industrialized areas of the Austrian part of the Empire. The daily flour rations for the population in the hinterland had partly sunk to 165 g of flour per day.⁽⁶⁾ Strikes continued to spread to all industrial centres of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy so that about 700,000 workers were on strike. The sudden strike wave completely surprised both, the civil administration authorities as well as the military territorial command. With the police and gendarmerie forces available in the hinterland the situation could not be handled so that already in the first days of the strike hinterland formations of the armed forces were demanded for military assistance. It became clear, that in January 1918 out of the army, the Austrian Landwehr and the Hungarian Honvéd only about 330 companies – about 100 soldiers each - were ready for assistance purposes, as the soldiers to be recruited for that purpose were to have completed a basic military training of at least nine weeks. Via the territorial commands more and more assistance companies were demanded by the political administration authorities. As the garrison towns of the reinforcement and replacement units were mostly not directly situated near “the strike centres”, numerous movements of troops had to be carried out. In the course of the strike it became clear that the forces present - around 700,000 workers on one side, and about 35 to 40,000 “assistance”-soldiers on the other - were barely enough.⁽⁷⁾ The low number of soldiers available can be explained because those recruits recognized

5. Plaschka, Haselsteiner, Suppan, p. 39-43

6. Gustav Gratz, Richard Schüller: Der wirtschaftliche Zusammenbruch Österreich-Ungarns. Die Tragödie der Erschöpfung (Carnegie Stiftung für den internationalen Frieden), Vienna 1930, p. 80

7. Plaschka, Haselsteiner, Suppan, p. 83 f.

as all fully trained, equipped and filled-up in battalions shouldn't be stopped on their way to the frontlines.

The Federal Ministry of War considered it especially dangerous that most of the strikes were organized ones and could not so easily be dispersed mostly because of party-political influences. Therefore, the Federal Ministry of War turned to the Army High Command with the request to strengthen the assistance forces by employing front troops. The Army High Command, which was fully aware of the danger of the strike movement (since the strike had an enormous impact on the production of highly needed artillery ammunition), placed about 39 full experienced battalions, which were employed in the conurbations of Vienna and Budapest, at the disposal of the hinterland.⁽⁸⁾ Thus the strength of the assistance troops had now almost doubled. The appearance of front troops, with all their equipment, machine guns and hand grenades, was of special importance because of the psychological effect. In some places only their appearance led to the quick containment of the unrest. Nevertheless, the hinterland demanded even more front units, which should be deployed constantly there to act as some kind of stand-by security force. The Army High Command could understandably not meet the requests but promised that, if necessary, troops being transported via the hinterland could be employed as assistance forces. These discussions between Federal Ministry of defence and Army High Command are understandable cause at that time all units at the frontlines and in the so called "supply-area" behind the trenches have been in the field of responsibility of the Army High Command, units and troops in the "hinterland" have been administrated and organised by the Federal Ministry of War.

The end of the "January strikes" was finally and mainly brought about because of the interference of the Social Democrat Workers Party, even if in lots of cases only the appearance of the assistance-units worked in certain places as well. Thus the question now arose how, due to these findings, the question of military - assistances could further be handled or how an efficient organization could be found in the future. As the troops employed for assistance purposes were not to affect the reinforcements of the front units, another solution had to be found. In agreement with the Ministry of War the Army High Command decided to withdraw especially battle-weary divisions from the front and refresh them in the hinterland. At the same time these divisions were to undergo an intensive military training and - if necessary - were to serve as assistance units at the same time. Due to this measure a total of four field division's use came to the Austrian part of the monarchy, three to Hungary and Croatia-Slavonia. To avoid any possible legal problems regarding the dualistic structure of the monarchy, a special military function was created, also to keep some consistency within these divisions: "General of all mobile units deployed in the hinterland" (General of Cavalry Count Schönburg-Hartenstein was

8. Austrian State Archives (ÖSTA)/War Archives (KA)/Army High Command (Armeeoberkommando) Op. Nr. 49.568 resp. Federal Ministry of war (Kriegsministerium) 10. Abteilung 2 – 1 ex 1918

the first person to be promoted to the job in February 1918).⁽⁹⁾ It has to be mentioned that these divisions were put on some rotation system to provide a greater number of units some kind of rest and recreation away from the trenches. The average duration of these deployments in the hinterland was limited to about ten weeks.⁽¹⁰⁾

While the first big employment of assistance troops in January was aimed at suppressing strike movements, the task spectre changed from mid-1918 onwards. Not only social problems led to uprisings and revolts, but also nationalist tensions had their share in it. Moreover, due to the precarious food situation military assistances were also called for to help with grain requisitions in agriculture. This had especially negative effects on the internal bond of the assistance troops, as they were now directly confronted with the misery of the population – making lots of soldiers starting to question not only victory but the war itself.⁽¹¹⁾

The Austro-Hungarian POWs coming home from Russian war imprisonment proved to be an additional destabilizing factor. In Russia many of them had come in touch with the social upheavals of the Russian Revolution and transferred their thoughts into the Austro-Hungarian armed forces. Due to the permanent shortage of staff at the front most of the repatriated soldiers had to join the ranks of the reinforcement units and to return to the front after a short vacation only. It was the prospect of having to go back to the front again after having suffered innumerable privations during war imprisonment as well as the precarious food situation that considerably worsened the mood of the repatriated soldiers. Together with nationalist tensions the feeling of dissatisfaction began to spread to the rest of the reinforcement troops. The consequences were numerous uprisings and mutinies, which affected those units actually designated to suppress such movements by means of an assistance operations.⁽¹²⁾

The military authorities reacted by mean of a renewed change of garrisons, as the repatriated ranks much too often took up the mood of the people living there - be it in a social or nationalist respect - and became unreliable. Moreover, drastic measures were taken which classified all revolts as mutiny or “uprising” and punished them according to martial law. Thus, the reliability of the “assistance troops” as shown during the strike in January was heavily impaired and prevented their employment during the overthrow situation in October/November 1918.

To conclude: The use of “military assistances” proved to be quite useful in a psychological way when soldiers showed up fully equipped and were in well trained and supplied condition. Front troops tended to act more disciplined and stayed loyal

9. Carl Freiherr von Bardolff: Soldat im alten Österreich. Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben, Jena 1938, p.305

10. Plaschka, Haselsteiner, Suppan, p. 179

11. Plaschka, Haselsteiner, Suppan, p. 231

12. Inge Przybilowski: Die Rückführung der österreichisch-ungarischen Kriegsgefangenen aus dem Osten in den letzten Monaten der k.u.k. Monarchie. Phil. Diss. Vienna 1965, p. 118 ff.

to their commanders even when facing civil misery. Young and inexperienced soldiers, employed during the suppression of civil unrests tended to feel sympathy with the people and even more questioned the meaning and sense of their mission. Although there was a deep impact on moral and mind most of these soldiers obeyed – if not misled by nationalist or political leaders – their orders.

The employment of former prisoners of war from Russia not only regarding “military assistances” but also as regular replacements to frontline units had an enormous impact on the moral situation of other soldiers. Together with the rising of national feelings within the military in general the cohesion within the army started to disrupt. But also the relation between the military and the civil population was worsened by “military assistances” cause the view of the common soldier as an element of protection was changed to a symbol of state operated suppression.

Author's short CV

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School education (primary and secondary school) in Linz; A Level 1987; Military service as army officer, Commencement of studies in history in October 1988 with focus on military, contemporary, Austrian and East European history; Several internships in the Austrian State Archive/War Archive and the Museum of Military History

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