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THE REBIRTH OF THE HABSBURG ARMY

Friedrich Beck and the Rise of the General Staff

Scott W. Lackey

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The Rebirth of the Habsburg Army

*Friedrich Beck and the Rise
of the General Staff*

SCOTT W. LACKEY

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To My Parents With Love

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Abbreviations

Glstb.	Generalstab (General Staff)
HHStA	Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna
KA	Kriegsarchiv, Vienna
KZ	Kanzleizahl (Chancellery number)
KM Präs.	Kriegsministerium Präsidium (Presidium of the Austro-Hungarian War Ministry)
MKSM	Militärkanzlei Seiner Majestät (Military Chancellery of His Majesty)
OpB	Operationsbüro (Operations Section of the Austro-Hungarian General Staff)
PA	Politisches Archiv (Political Archives, Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry)
RMRZ	Reichsministerratszahl (Imperial Ministerial Council Number)
res.	reservat (classified document)

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Introduction:

The Forgotten *Feldzeugmeister*

One bright September day in 1989, I stood on the Vienna Ringstraße at Schwarzenbergplatz waiting to board Tram No. 71 for the long ride to the *Zentralfriedhof*. My stay in the Austrian capital was drawing to a close and there remained one thing that I had to see before leaving for home. I had spent almost an entire calendar year researching a political-military biography of *Feldzeugmeister* (Lieutenant General) Friedrich von Beck in the Vienna archives. A visit to his final resting place at Central Cemetery seemed both a fitting conclusion and a requisite act of respect for a man whose life and career had served as my entry into the historical profession.

I had attempted the same trip the previous March on the assumption that the cemetery administration would be at work on a Sunday, generally the day of greatest visitation. Beck's name was not included among the list of the cemetery's "famous" occupants. The attendant at the main gate, a rather elderly gentleman whose father perhaps served with Austro-Hungarian forces during the Great War, had heard nothing of a General Beck. Nor was a supposedly more knowledgeable colleague watching one of the other entrances to the labyrinthine maze of tombstones of much greater help. I was advised to return during the week or on Saturday when cemetery record-keepers could assist me in my search.

Devotion to archival work during the week and to the weekend pleasures of Vienna's "new wine" restaurants, cafés, opera, and theater postponed my return visit. With the research nearing completion, my thoughts again turned to the Central Cemetery, a journey which now seemed more obligatory than ever given the massive amount of material I had assembled on Beck's career.

My second journey, however, turned out to be almost as fruitless as the first. The administrative personnel initially appeared perplexed by an American's interest in a long-dead Habsburg general. Puzzlement soon gave way to consternation when they could not locate Beck in their registers for February 1920, the date of his interment at the Central Cemetery. Was I certain that he was indeed buried there? How did I know? And who was this General Beck anyway?

Reference to obituary notices found in the *Kriegsarchiv* somewhat allayed their suspicions that I might be making the whole thing up. In answering the last question, I quickly reverted to a hackneyed formula I had

devised to explain my daily activities to Austrian students living on my floor of the residence hall: Friedrich Beck was the predecessor of the more (in)famous Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, who led the monarchy's armed forces during World War I. This statement, accompanied by the supplemental information that Beck had headed Franz Joseph's military chancellery for fourteen years and his general staff for twenty-five, generally brought nods of understanding and appreciation from the sentimental Viennese.

In this case, it spurred the cemetery officials to greater efforts to find Beck's resting place. Frenzied searching still yielded nothing. No Friedrich Beck had been buried in the Central Cemetery in February 1920. At best, they could give me the location within the vast cemetery of a relative's grave -- someone who had first been buried elsewhere but was subsequently translated there.

With only this information to go on, I entered the cemetery grounds, determined to search for Beck on foot if the reference failed to yield positive results. The knowledge that Europeans often buried family members on top of one another offered little consolation as I made my way down the broad avenue toward the Karl-Lueger-Kirche where paths met to carry the visitor into all corners of this vast city of the dead.

As I strolled, I admired the elaborate tombstones which lined the main boulevard of the cemetery. Soon I began to recognize figures that had become familiar to me over the course of a year's research. There lay Heinrich von Heß, the chief of the general quartermaster corps and Beck's teacher and mentor. Over there was Franz Freiherr von John, architect of the Custoza victory and later war minister and chief of the general staff. Franz Uchatius, the inventor of the steel-bronze smelting process which allowed for the continued domestic production of Austro-Hungarian artillery in the late nineteenth century, rested in a place of honor. Beautiful flowers, no doubt planted at municipal expense, decorated the tombstones of these dead paladins of the defunct Habsburg monarchy. Beck, I thought, could not be too far distant from these other distinguished military men. I snapped a few photographs and moved on.

Upon reaching the church, I swung right toward a darker corner of the cemetery. Beck's relative was somewhere in the morass of lanes and byways. After fifteen minutes of searching, I found, to my amazement, Beck's grave. At first, I could not be sure. Great trees threw up leafy branches to obscure lettering worn by years of exposure to wind and water. But yes, the tall black pillar bore the name of *Generaloberst*¹ Friedrich Count Beck-Rzikowsky as well as those of his uncle, wife, and son.

I stood for a few minutes in silent reverence to this military man of peace. After a while, I stooped to clear away some of the undergrowth. Before leaving, I attempted to take a few pictures of the site, but even a flash could not sufficiently brighten the darkness. Without scrambling atop the stone,

something that seemed almost sacrilegious, I knew that the names inscribed on the obelisk would never come out in my photographs.

I returned to the administration building with a sense of triumph. I had found someone resting within the cemetery who was not supposed to be there. The officials were dumbfounded. How could Beck be there without there being a record of it? After twenty minutes or so of much mumbling and pulling of hair, one of them found the answer. Back in 1920, those bodies interred in vaults (*Grufte*)--that is, in walled graves--were listed in a separate register. A check of these records soon revealed that a Friedrich Beck had indeed been laid to rest in the Vienna Central Cemetery on 10 February 1920.

This incident served to underscore an impression that had been building since I began work: Beck was the monarchy's forgotten general. As I stood silently in front of his grave, I reflected on Beck's obituary notice in the *Neue Wiener Tagblatt*. All of old imperial Vienna, in 1920 a tarnished memory in a city threatened with starvation in the aftermath of the World War, turned out to honor the close personal friend of Emperor Franz Joseph I. The latter's nephew, Emperor Karl I, wired his condolences to the Beck family from his exile in Switzerland and placed an imperial-sized order of flowers with city florists. In personal attendance were the Dutch and German ambassadors, the former Austrian Minister-President Max Vladimir von Beck (no relation), the former common minister of foreign affairs and finance Stephan Burian, the former *Obersthofmeister*² August Lobkowitz, the former director of Franz Joseph's civilian cabinet Alois Czedik, the former Austrian Defense Minister Friedrich Georgi, the Police President of Vienna Johann Schober, as well as numerous retired generals led by the last head of the imperial military chancellery Arthur Bolfras. Almost seventy years later, even those entrusted with the record-keeping of the cemetery had temporarily lost track of the man so honored by his contemporaries.

Beck's modern-day obscurity became almost a source of embarrassment to me as I pursued my research in the Vienna archives. My Conrad formula served me well in placing Beck in the minds of Austrian colleagues, most of whom were pursuing studies in fields other than history. It, however, quickly lent meaning and perspective to my work, for after a time I found much to admire in Friedrich Beck. A private mission began to take shape in my mind. I would fashion a political biography of a late nineteenth-century military leader of whom Austrians could justifiably be proud.

The archivists and historians with whom I met had of course heard of Friedrich Beck and fancied the idea of an American looking into the career of one of the old monarchy's military leaders. The shadow of the great Conrad, however, extended even into this more specialized realm. As the monarchy's last generalissimo, Conrad remains a defining figure in the political-military history of the monarchy. Already on my first day in the military archives,

Conrad stared at me disapprovingly from his high perch on an office wall. A few weeks later, a visit to Conrad's grave in Hietzing cemetery revealed a gigantic tombstone bearing a huge inscription arrogant in its simplicity: "FELDMARSCHALL CONRAD." The name of Gina von Reininghaus, the woman whose heart he planned to win by unleashing a world war, was relegated to an obscure corner of the massive stone financed by Austrian taxpayers. Two freshly laid wreaths from the Austrian *Bundesheer* offered evidence that public institutions continued to honor his memory.

By contrast, the old *Stiftskaserne*, to which the *Kriegsarchiv* had moved while still under Beck's administrative control, bore no portraits or other reminders of his long career in Habsburg military service. Beck had served as Franz Joseph's chief of the general staff for twenty-five years--over two and a half times longer than Conrad--and as head of his military chancellery for an additional fourteen years before that. Pictures of Franz Joseph and Archduke Albrecht guarded the reading room, but Beck, their longtime friend and colleague, was nowhere to be found. The 1867-1914 section of the Military History Museum in the Vienna Arsenal inexplicably failed to mention the man who exercised decisive influence over the monarchy's armed forces for all but the last eight years of this period.

Beck's obscurity is undoubtedly linked to a general neglect of Habsburg military history outside the Republic of Austria. In 1967 Paul Schroeder termed the field "an underdeveloped area which ought to qualify for Point 4 aid or the government's poverty program."³ The situation has improved little since. This is especially true for the period between the 1867 Compromise and the appointment of Conrad as chief of the general staff in 1906. The lack of any real military "action" apart from the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1878 and the relative decline over the subsequent decades of the monarchy's armed forces vis-à-vis those of the other Great European Powers made the last third of the nineteenth century uninviting to traditional military historians. Researchers, more interested in Austria-Hungary's increasing troubles in the Balkans during the decade leading up to World War I, have viewed military affairs of the preceding period as an uninteresting interlude between the monumental events of the 1850s and 1860s and those of 1914-18.

Fortunately, I was not without some historical assistance in my search for Beck. Since the appearance in 1930 of *Franz Josephs Weggefährte*, the name Edmund von Glaise-Horstenau has been inextricably linked with Beck and the history of the Austro-Hungarian army in the last half of the nineteenth century.⁴ As an inter-war director of the Vienna *Kriegsarchiv*, Glaise-Horstenau had access to vast amounts of material unavailable to others, including the Beck diaries, lost for decades until very recently.⁵ Indeed, his almost complete reliance on the latter gives his biography, at points, the character of a primary source.⁶ However, it appears probable that he used little

more than the diaries themselves and perhaps a few other bits of evidence from Beck's private papers in the writing of the biography.

More recently, Gunther Rothenberg has provided us with a survey of the Habsburg army during Franz Joseph's reign.⁷ Excellent in his succinctness, Rothenberg broadly summarizes the developments in weaponry and military planning that occurred during Beck's tenure in high military office. The latter has also received detailed treatment in a Ph.D. dissertation by Dieter Degreif.⁸ István Deák's new work offers, through a statistical study of two year-groups of Habsburg officers and a useful gleaning of some of the memoir literature, an interesting picture of life and career in Austro-Hungarian military service during the 1867-1914 period.⁹

The newest Austrian scholarship has centered on administrative history of the Austro-Hungarian military during Franz Joseph's reign. The Academy of Sciences volume on the armed forces offers a useful overview of administrative structures and army organization, influenced by the work of Walter Wagner, one of the principal authors of the volume, on the Austro-Hungarian war ministry to 1888.¹⁰ The latter work is especially useful on the so-called "general staff question" of the late 1860s and early 1870s. The best work on the Austro-Hungarian general staff itself remains the massive unpublished manuscript by Colonel Oskar Wolf-Schneider von Arno.¹¹ Wolf-Schneider was preparing a multivolume work on the general staff for Styria Verlag when he died in the early 1950s. The manuscripts, contained in the collection of his private papers housed in the *Kriegsarchiv*, clearly demonstrate his command of the archival sources and provide an excellent institutional history of the general staff corps. The work is particularly strong in covering Beck's enhancement of the position of chief of the general staff after 1881 and improvements in war planning and mobilization capability.

This literature, however, did not completely answer all the questions about the development of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces in the late nineteenth century. How did the militarily inept monarchy of mid-century transform itself into the modern military state that existed by 1890? What was the nature of this transformation, and who were the major actors? What part did Beck play in this process?

A closer examination of these questions revealed that Friedrich Beck played the crucial role in the reform of the army after 1866. As head of the military chancellery between 1867 and 1881 and then chief of the general staff until 1906, Beck exercised often absolute control over the military destiny of the Habsburg empire. He took a leading role in the reorganization of the army after 1866 and emerged as the sole army representative capable of negotiating the military aspects of the 1867 Compromise with the Hungarians. By the mid-1870s, Beck made the emperor's military chancellery the focal point of power in the Austro-Hungarian army, overturning the system of ministerial dominance

established after Königgrätz. The failure of the war ministry to organize an effective military intervention in the Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870 provided the main impetus for Beck's reforms.

Displacing ministerial absolutism, he erected a Prussian-style general staff with sole responsibility for military planning. The general staff functioned as the central nervous system for the monarchy's armed forces. Central general staff bureaus in Vienna formulated war plans to meet all political contingencies and devise mobilization, transportation, and logistical schedules. The central general staff bureaus formed the brain of the military organism. The periodic rotation of general staff officers to troop commands on the model of the Prussian *Truppengeneralstab* ensured the smooth execution of the brain's instructions during mobilization. Admission to and successful completion of the general staff course at the *Kriegsschule* determined membership in this elite officer corps. Staff rides and army maneuvers made sure that general staff officers remained well-honed in their craft of leading the army in wartime.

Beck shaped the role and missions of the general staff in 1874, a full eight years before he himself was appointed by Franz Joseph to lead it. Throughout the remainder of the 1870s, however, he exercised a dominant role from the military chancellery. In particular, he succeeded in forcing a reluctant Count Gyula Andrassy to place the acquisition of the Turkish provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the foreign political agenda. In the spring of 1875, Beck convinced Franz Joseph to undertake a highly controversial tour of Dalmatia to demonstrate the sovereign's concern for the well-being of his subjects and those of the Turkish sultan in the neighboring territories.

The reemergence of the Eastern Question served to postpone any real reform in the Habsburg "way of war" until 1881, when Beck took over personal direction of the general staff. As chief, Beck oversaw the first systematic peacetime war planning in the monarchy's history. The deployment plans of the early 1880s, however, revealed that much work still had to be done in improving military readiness. In 1881 Austria-Hungary faced the possibility of a four-front war with Russia, Italy, Serbia, and Romania. The effective neutralization of most of these threats by the Habsburg foreign office by mid-decade did not deter Beck from pushing through a series of dramatic reforms aimed at increasing army readiness. Over the initial resistance of the war ministry and the inspector general of the army, he pushed through the reorganization of the army on a territorial basis to allow for a faster mobilization and deployment. Beck also obtained a significant expansion of the railroad network from the Austrian and Hungarian governments. In 1881 the Habsburg army could achieve war readiness in Galicia against Russia only after six weeks. By the end of the decade, this mobilization time had been cut in half.

Increases in the military strength of Great Power neighbors and the possibility of a multifront war forced Beck to call for the development of a

people's army of unprecedented size. The militias established as a result of the 1867 Compromise would have to abandon their home defense role to join the common army in the field. At Beck's instigation, new levies (*Landsturm*) would take over home defense duties from the *Landwehr* and *Honvéd* militias of Austria and Hungary. The arming of untrained and unindoctrinated civilians in wartime, unthinkable in the 1860s, was approved under a mounting threat of war with Russia.

The 1880s, therefore, saw the radical transformation of Austria-Hungary into a modern military state under Beck's direction. The establishment of routine war planning against the state's probable enemies, the improvement of the rail network, and a slow strengthening of the fighting capabilities of the militias increased greatly the monarchy's capability of waging a successful war. The extension of the military service obligation to age forty-two in 1886 and the lifting of statutory limitations on the maximum size of the armed forces in the 1889 Military Law enabled the state to mobilize its manpower resources to an unprecedented degree in wartime. The development of both intelligence and counterespionage capabilities, coupled with the passage of emergency legislation restricting civilian rights in wartime, rounded out this picture of increasing effectiveness.

Beck's ability to carry out these reforms rested squarely upon his friendship with the emperor, a product of years of close contact at the military chancellery. Indeed, his virtual domination over military affairs can be viewed as a throwback to the early days of Franz Joseph's reign when another imperial favorite, Count Karl Grünne, ran the army. Unlike Grünne, Beck used his power to construct a sensible system of army administration with a purposeful distribution of power and functions among various military agencies. Beck recognized the war minister's highly important role in representing the army's interests before the Austrian and Hungarian Delegations and the need to maintain at least the appearance of ministerial control over the common forces. He therefore never attempted to free the general staff from its nominal subordination to the war ministry. But as chief of the general staff, Beck did insist upon complete autonomy in matters pertaining to the operational use of the armed forces and upon having the decisive voice in the determination of military requirements.

His sometimes turbulent relationship with the ministries of war and foreign affairs over the creation of the general staff corps and the imperialist agenda in the Balkans calmed considerably after Beck's transfer to the general staff in 1881. He made a concerted effort to coordinate political-military policy with both these agencies and never purposely undermined their authority or influence. He also cooperated closely with the Austrian and Hungarian governments to obtain passage of the much-needed *Landsturm* legislation in 1886 and improvements in the existing militia forces.

Without Beck's intervention, the reforms of the 1880s might never have taken place. The emperor, the war minister, the foreign minister, and the inspector general of the armed forces all at one time or another had opposed some or all of these measures. All had to be placed on the political agenda by Beck for consideration by the ministerial council and the Austrian and Hungarian ministries. But for Beck's intervention the territorialization of the army and the simplification of deployment and logistical planning that this reform entailed might never have occurred. Staff planning and the need to maximize troop strengths in Galicia for a likely war against Russia led directly to the creation of home defense levies in both halves of the monarchy. This reform, coupled with the lifting of the statutory ceilings on the army's wartime strength, allowed for an eventual total mobilization of Habsburg society for war.

Unlike his successor, Conrad von Hötzendorf, Beck never hoped to test the improved readiness of the Habsburg armed forces in war. In 1870 he opposed Austro-Hungarian intervention in the Franco-Prussian War as a senseless prolongation of the 1866 German civil war and pushed subsequently for the improvement of Austro-Prussian relations. While a keen advocate of Habsburg expansion in the Balkans, Beck worked assiduously throughout his career to avoid a confrontation with Russia and welcomed cooperation with St. Petersburg via the Three Emperors' League. When Russia threatened the monarchy with war in the aftermath of the Bulgarian crisis, Beck restrained the Austro-Hungarian military response in order to avoid war. Perhaps more than any other military leader of his age, Beck understood the moral and spiritual burdens involved in unleashing the military machines of Europe. Unlike his successor, he firmly believed that no conflict on the continent involving a Great Power could remain a local one. The growth of alliance systems would ensure that the next war would be a "great war."

These latter views alone make Beck a significant military figure of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. No less than the elder Moltke, who, after all, had the experience of leading large forces in wartime, Beck realized the carnage of a modern European war. A political conservative, Beck saw in war the real danger of social and political upheaval, an overturning of the imperial regime to which he had devoted his life. From the quiet retirement of his Molkerbastei apartment in the center of Vienna, Beck sadly looked on while his predictions came true in the Great War.

As I stood before his grave in the shady corner of the *Zentralfriedhof*, I could not help but feel a bit sad myself over the historical fate of this military man of peace, this visionary of the Habsburg monarchy. Glaise-Horstenau's biography, still of tremendous use to specialists, has done little to enhance Beck's historical importance and reputation. The more recent administrative and political-social studies have largely failed to give him his due as the principal architect of the post-*Ausgleich* Habsburg armed forces. The present volume

aims both to correct these deficiencies and to illustrate civil-military policymaking in the unique constitutional framework of the dual monarchy.

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Chapter 1

Death and Rebirth

On 4 July 1866, remnants of the Habsburg North Army staggered away from the bloody battlefield of Königgrätz. The tired columns marched toward Olmütz, the army's base in Moravia where it had begun the campaign against Prussia. There Habsburg commanders hoped to regroup their shattered forces for a final stand in front of Vienna. On the fields of northern Bohemia, the retreating Austrians had left some 14,307 dead and wounded comrades. A further 29,906 had been captured or were reported missing. These losses, while not exorbitant by the standards of mid-nineteenth-century conflict, especially given the fact that nearly half a million men had been engaged, nonetheless stunned the Habsburg civil-military leadership. The army's inability to inflict comparable punishment on the Prussian enemy greatly magnified the impact of these high casualties.¹

The loss of the Austro-Prussian War shook the very foundations of the Habsburg empire. Hungarian nationalists, led by Francis Deák and Gyula Andrassy, forced the creation of a dual monarchy, a constitutional arrangement that gave the Kingdom of Hungary its own government with autonomy in all areas except foreign and military policy.² The *Ausgleich* constitution of 1867 created a new "Austrian" state, an amalgam comprising all the non-Hungarian Habsburg territories, with functions and responsibilities identical to those given to the Hungarian government.³ The armed forces also changed to reflect the new political realities. Most within the military recognized a need for reform, but there was little agreement on policies and goals needed to transform the defeated army into an effective fighting force that would simultaneously reflect the new dualist constitution of the Habsburg state.

Continuity and Reform, 1848-1866

Military reform preoccupied much of the early reign of Franz Joseph I, a fact often obscured by the catastrophic failure at Königgrätz. Details of military spectacle and regimen fascinated Franz Joseph, who rarely appeared in public out of uniform throughout his sixty-eight years as emperor.⁴ This intense