

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

## Abstract

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In this retrospective assessment of the state of the Austrian army in 1854, Prussian general Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen (1827–1892) reflected on the army's use of outdated military tactics from the Napoleonic Era, its inadequate training, and its failure to respond to innovations in military thinking. He was particularly critical of what he perceived as the near complete strategic and tactical incompetence of most of the Austrian army's aristocratic officers. All of these weaknesses did in fact play a decisive role in Austria's defeat by Prussia in 1866. At the same time, Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen's scathing verdict on Austrian ineptitude had the benefit of hindsight. The following observations were taken from the first volume of his memoirs, *Aus meinem Leben [From My Life]*, which were penned in the 1880s and published posthumously.

## Source

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[...]

I became acquainted with the famous Clam Gallas at 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 boastful swashbuckler, neither a tactician nor a strategist, and could not have a coup d'oeil. The actions of this once so celebrated Austrian general in 1859 and 1866 brilliantly 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, I had several opportunities to talk a little longer with him, and I found his knowledge to be so extremely limited, his tactical and strategic judgment so immature, 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 actions of some old general staff officer. Yet he was a distinguished grand seigneur through and through, loved society, hunting, and 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 when 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.

Cavalry General Prince Franz Liechtenstein, was, as I have already mentioned, the Seydlitz of the nineteenth century in the opinion of those who mattered. When I made his acquaintance, I noticed that he carefully avoided expressing a view about historical or tactical questions, and I came to suspect that he had none whatsoever. I was confirmed in this by the remarks of some general staff officers, 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 Prince Franz Liechtenstein's court martial. But when Prince Windischgrätz fell into disfavor, his opponents made Prince Franz Liechtenstein a hero.

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 privy councilor and, contrary to the Spanish custom of the Austrian court, had claimed the rank of a field marshal and prince.

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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, but perhaps never lived. He was a noble man of character and had a stubbornness that triumphed over all understanding. He was a friend of Prussia, that is, 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 drop of blood for Austria's welfare. His thinking was slow and therefore unwavering. 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 to Prussia. This sensibility, both personal and political, was passed on to his sons. That he was injured in this sense later brought about his death from a broken heart. But this belongs to a later historical epoch.

Characters like Lieutenant Field Marshal Count Paur were not uncommon in the higher Austrian aristocracy. He went so far in his ignorance as to place 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.

In general, the ignorance of the high aristocrats 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 felt that I had been completely understood, Prince L. T. said, "All right, now, how do you play it then?"—"What?"—"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 reached most of the highest ranks, there also had to be an intellectual element that did the 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 to this end took advantage of the high lords' ignorance. They reckoned with this factor in Austria at the time. General of the Artillery 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 when admired from a distance, a celebrity in the artillery. Seen up close, this meteor shrank to a star of the third or fourth magnitude. He was an old ossified bureaucrat and prejudice-filled bombardier from the previous century, an enemy of every new invention and improvement, which he regarded merely as democratic sins. He had invented the Austrian rocket, and after that there could be nothing better. The Hungarian rebels had feared the 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 people in Austria discovered that the rockets had never actually hit anything and got rid of them in order to introduce rifled artillery.

Unfortunately, I never met the famous Schönhals. He had fallen into disgrace and secluded himself in Gratz, where he soon died.

Now I was left with 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 in him but a habitual

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drunkard who drank pure cognac from full cups and also demanded that I get drunk with him while I listened to the stories about everything he had done, this illusion faded away too. At least he was brave; even his enemies conceded that.

I had also formed a different picture of the Austrian army in its entirety before I saw it with my own eyes. Austria had waged many wars in 1848 and 1849, and it emerged from them victorious, if only with the help of Russia. The history written about these wars offered only the views of the victor, and the Austrian general staff knew to portray every battle as a great victory. The Austrian army had the luster of the foremost in the world. But it had to be reformed in 1849. Entire regiments, especially the Hungarian ones, had disappeared, and this led to lots of promotions. This circumstance and the army's reputation attracted 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. Thus, it happened that some regiments did not have a purely Austrian character in their officer corps, but were more cosmopolitan, adventurous. There was a corresponding tone within the officer corps. Camaraderie was limited to everybody calling everyone else "Du,"<sup>[1]</sup> but otherwise there was no cohesion, there was no common table, and off duty everyone went his own way.

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I found the infantry to be at a very low level of training. Even during maneuvers, it never got beyond poorly executed school movements. There was no utilization of the terrain. No value was placed on the conduct of the marksmen. Weaponry was still far behind. 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 known how to surround itself with such great splendor, 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 the 8th Hesse-Cassel Hussars, the 8th Tuscan Dragoons, and the 12th Sicilian Lancers. Even if one completely disregards the last regiment, for it was newly formed and could not match the worst Prussian army cavalry regiment, one could still not find much good about the other two regiments. As Hungarians, the hussars were born horsemen, so not much effort was spent on their training; they remained natural horsemen. Massed, the cavalry was all slow, ponderous, restless, wavering, without closed attacks. I looked for, and found, the causes. The regulations, although simplified, were very cumbersome, full of useless commands so that before an Austrian regiment begins to move forward, a Prussian one can fall into its flank. The horses were so badly fed because too much of the oats was misappropriated. 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 many, many hours. By the way, it is not necessary to apply the standards of Prussian laws to misappropriation in the Austrian army. The Austrian army was then in a transitional phase with respect to its internal administration. Only a few years earlier, a cavalry captain received a lump sum with which he dressed man and horse and fed the horses. How he went about this was his own business, and what he saved from the process flowed legally into his wallet, whereby a share went to the sergeant. The regulations had changed all that, to be sure, but the occasional hard-working old sergeant etc. could not yet find his way in these and continued to live according to the old regulations.

The artillery, whose firing practice I attended, was still very much the old constabulary arm of the previous century, with lots of useless knowledge, geography, and history manuals in the caisson, but without hitting much. One innovation, for which there was pride, consisted of uniting the harnessed teams with the artillery, since until three years before they still had cannons pulled into battle by a special train. The artillery equestrian school under Nadaszy was the beginning of this, and the

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aforementioned director engaged in a lot of nonsense with this pet idea of the Kaiser.

The exercises with mixed arms showed that both the administration and the leadership were in their infancy, which I found surprising. Everything was prescribed to both parties from the top, and the victory was determined beforehand rather than by umpires according to the leaders' actions. This resulted in some delightful maneuver concepts. This was the scenario, for example: the northern corps defends the position N. N. and occupies it with the reinforced right wing. The southern corps attacks this position.

1st moment: unsuccessful attack by the southern corps against the enemy's right wing.

2nd moment: successful attack against the enemy's left wing, and so on.

The consequence was: that the attacker used very few troops during the first attack because it was supposed to go badly, and this way not as many battalions would have to make the same trip twice; and that the defender immediately evacuated its excellent artillery position at the beginning of the second attack because this attack was supposed to succeed, which would have embarrassed the artillery.

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## NOTES

[1] The familiar form of “you,” which is reserved for close relatives, friends, or comrades—trans.

Source: Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, *Aus meinem Leben: Aufzeichnungen des Prinzen Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen*, edited by Arved von Teichman und Logischen. Berlin: Ernst Siegrid Mittler und Sohn, 1897, vol. 1, pp. 256–59, 280–82.

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Recommended Citation: Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, Observations on the State of the Austrian Army in 1854 (Retrospective Account), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-345>> [April 18, 2024].