

Evaluation of the Armed Forces of the Holy Roman Empire after their Defeat under Austrian Command at the Battle of Roßbach (November 24, 1757)

Abstract

The defeat at Roßbach by Frederick II's smaller but more effectively deployed army was a devastating blow to the reputation of the Habsburg-led Imperial force. Here, General Field Marshal Joseph Friedrich von Sachsen-Hildburghausen (1702–1787), Imperial commander at Roßbach, addresses Emperor Franz I, consort of Empress Maria Theresa, detailing the weaknesses of the defeated army, a coalition of anti-Prussian German forces acting in concert with France.

He distinguishes, on one hand, between the Imperial army of the Holy Roman Empire (Reich), formed from units supplied by various member states and principalities, and, on the other hand, the army of the Austrian monarchy, recruited from the Habsburg rulers' several lands within the Holy Roman Empire. When mentioned in the text below, the latter army, also designated as an Imperial force (since the Austrian ruler was simultaneously Holy Roman Emperor), is qualified as specifically Austrian. The commander speaks, perhaps confusingly, of "detachments," meaning sorties or smaller mounted units that separated from their larger formations to carry out various battlefield actions. He proposes reforming the relationship between the Reich army and the Austrian army, but in the aftermath of Roßbach, the army of the Holy Roman Empire no longer figured in the Seven Years War (1756–1783).

Source

[...]

Far be it from me to despise the troops supplied, with most praiseworthy patriotic zeal, by so many distinguished Electors, Princes, and other territorial rulers. Nor do I wish to dispute that, given time, something good could be made of them all. There are many valiant men both among the generals, staff officers, and regular officers, and it is undeniable that, if the good soldier-subjects were selected from all the regiments and formed into a single whole, a body would emerge that could rightly be called great and powerful.

But these good subjects are too dispersed, and where, for example, a regiment has an outstanding colonel, things might be worse among the remaining officers' staff. Another regiment will be distinguished by a good major, another by a few good captains, so that, if they were all assembled in one corps they would perform miracles. But in the places they now occupy they can accomplish nothing because the number of inexperienced too greatly exceeds that of the able people. Nonetheless, with time much could be made of them, for it is undeniable that the rank and file consist of admirable men. I cannot in the least complain of their good will, but instead have often marveled at how they carry out everything ordered of them when they have so often gone without food [bread]. Indeed, the day of battle was the seventh on which they received no rations.

And what is still more, More Gracious Lord, I must confess that there was not the slightest sign among them of the religious fanaticism whose expression has been constantly feared --- even though the French, by their inhumane behavior in the non-Catholic lands, especially toward clergy and churches, gave soldiers [especially Protestants] more than ample occasion for embitterment.

[...]

Permit me, Your Imperial Majesty, an allegory: these men should be viewed as hunting hounds of the best breed that have not yet been trained to the chase; a good trainer will not set them first on bear or lion, lest they be frightened and made fearful. Instead, he sets them first on a weak animal, and then on a somewhat fiercer one, until finally, accustomed to attack, they can be released on anything that shows itself. If these troops had been handled in this way; if they had been instructed in maneuvers, shifts, forward and rearward marching, in facing and maneuvering before the enemy; if each had been trained in attack and standing guard, in making camp, marching and operating in detachments, in securing the artillery, baggage, provisions, etc.; in short, if in each a proper military discipline had been instilled, then I myself do not doubt that they would have fulfilled their duty as well as any others, and still would do so. Yet these men, completely unaccustomed to facing gunfire and the enemy's visage, had to be led in their first encounter against the most redoubtable enemy in present-day Europe [the Prussians]. And the example of the French troops, who are soldiers hardened in battle, can hardly have bolstered their courage, so that Your Imperial Majesty will find it easy to guess their fate ["read their horoscope"].

But since it is not a question, Most Gracious Lord, of what can be made of these troops but rather of their actual condition at the present moment, I must -- having expressed my views twice in war-council to all the generals -- stand by them and say that, here and now, they cannot without mighty support from Imperial [Austrian] troops be led before the eyes of this enemy.

Your Imperial Majesty, Most Gracious Emperor and Lord, must now be told that no wagon-train is on hand, the draught-horses of most of the regimental provisioning and encampment wagons have disappeared, also that some regiments are wholly without tents. I leave it to Your Excellency's Most High judgment and decision whether and how such troops, especially now in this late season of the year, are to be further mobilized. Moreover, there is the enormously important circumstance that I possess next to no cavalry -- these are too few, and their quality is greatly deficient.

I have no complaint about the Imperial cavalry's bravery, but my God, they are, Most Gracious Lord, completely inexpert in maneuver. The King of Prussia can run his cavalry faster around our whole army than I can succeed in getting a few squadrons of ours to wheel about. And it is not unknown to Your Gracious Imperial Majesty that swift maneuvers alone are capable of making any gains against this enemy.

Your Imperial Vice-Chancellor will not deny the unambiguous, emphatic views that I expressed before my departure from Vienna and thereafter in almost all my letters. I was hardly in a position to dispense with so much as one detachment of troops, and I well know how I was feeling when they were absent from our army with [French commander] St. Germain. They numbered only 400 Imperial Austrian cuirassiers [armored cavalymen], the rest being Imperial [not Austrian] troops and Frenchmen. And this was the aforementioned St. Germain's pretext for his inaction, as he complained in all his letters, that he lacked cavalymen. Yet the absence of so few men made itself strongly felt in Your two regiments.

When among 12,000 horses one or two thousand are detached, one hardly notices, but when among 1,200 four hundred are missing, their absence is strongly felt. Your Imperial Majesty is Himself a great field commander, so I ask You to consider, in light of Your own experience, how immobile an army is that cannot send out any detachments to undertake necessary actions. Now one needs to observe the enemy, now cover a convoy, now lead another away, now support the hussars, now disperse enemy outposts and detachments -- in sum, everyone knows that in the previous war practically every advantage won against the enemy was gained through mounted detachments, and many splendid advantages earlier in this campaign too.

Oh God, if I, Most Gracious Monarch, had had only 6,000 Imperial cavalry, the war-theater would look

different, and it wouldn't be necessary to throw the enemy's numerical weakness in my face so often. For what good is it, Most Gracious Lord, if he possesses only half my strength [in soldiers], when his cavalry is superior, so that he can fall on my flank with 6,000 horses, against which I can set only 1,200? This was truly the case in this battle and the cause of its loss, since the enemy advanced with some twenty mounted squadrons, against which fourteen Imperial squadrons, already very weak, had to stand. Your regiments worked marvels nonetheless, and it is completely irrefutable that, if I had had only two more Imperial [Austrian] regiments, the enemy cavalry could not have regrouped and attacked, and we would have won the most complete of victories. For if we could have only maintained the advantage we gained early on over their cavalry, the French would not have been overcome by terrible terror and panic, and Your Majesty may rest assured that the bones of not one enemy infantryman would have been saved -- leaving aside that our combined armies are almost twice as large as the enemy's. Yes, God knows how far our victory, which was in our hands and only lost because of departure [to the French allies] of Imperial [Austrian] cavalry, might have extended. For the enemy was confined by waterways and obliged to withdraw across bridges.

This shows that without additional Imperial cavalry not the slightest further step can be taken.

All-Gracious Lord, Your Imperial Majesty will not take it amiss if I recommend, from a heart well-known for its true devotion, the only means by which You, in light of my weak reason but also my practical knowledge, may draw advantage from this army.

Allow me to make two chief observations:

One: not to allow, for above-stated reasons, these troops to stand alone against the Prussians.

Two: neither generals nor regiments are of equal quality.

From which the conclusion follows, as to the first point, that, to raise these troops to proper strength, sufficient numbers of Imperial [Austrian] soldiers should be added to them. Second, the less good generals and regiments should be separated out and kept on the sidelines.

[...]

I firmly believe, All-Gracious Emperor and Lord, that Your Imperial Majesty will draw no proper service from this Imperial [Reich] Army unless Your Highness decides to form a corps of 40,000 men of Your own subjects alone, without Bavarians, Württembergers, or other auxiliary soldiers, for these are only good when intermixed with Your troops as the tenth part of the Austrian army, so that here I view them as Reich troops. The pure, true Imperial [Austrian] regiments, with hussars, irregular cavalry ["Croatians"], artillery, ammunition, transport, and food-provisioning, supplemented by some 10,000 Reich troops with selected generals, will form an army of 50,000 men, leaving others to defend the home-fronts or to man garrisons. In this way, Your Imperial Majesty would have an army to execute the Empire's decisions [*Executions-Armée*] without having to rely on such an army consisting purely of Reich troops.

It is true, All-Gracious Emperor and Lord, that the whole structure governing Reich troops must be cast in a new mold, for if the enemy does not defeat this army, its structure will do so. This is a point, however, in whose thorough discussion I would abuse Your Majesty's patience all too greatly.

[...]

Source: War Archive, Vienna. Alte Feldakten 1757 Reichsarmee 11/85; reprinted in Helmut Neuhaus, ed., *Zeitalter des Absolutismus 1648-1789*. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, ed.

Rainer A. Müller, Volume 5. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1997, pp. 113–121.

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