

The military potential of small countries: Austria before World War II*

*Alexandru V. Ștefănescu***

** PhD candidate, "Valahia" University of Târgoviște, Department of History and Archaeology, Str. Lt. Stancu Ion, Nr. 34/36, Târgoviște, 130105, Romania. E-mail: stefanescu_alexandru@hotmail.com

Abstract: The military potential of small countries: Austria before World War II. Restricted by the peace treaty, the Austrian army would practically become a police force, the part of which, in the troubled inter-bellum history of the new state would increase as the danger of losing independence was growing. Under these circumstances, the Republic of Austria, missing a border with a great democracy and having only the platonic sympathy of the West and small border fortifications, and defended by a thinned army, could not face the Reich. Despite these factors, the Austrian military thinking was defensive, lucid and pragmatic especially thanks to the acknowledgement of country's limits, without useless heroism, an excellent exemple for other small powers like Roumania.

Key-Words: Austrian army, inter-bellum history, military potential, military thinking, Anschluss.

The peace conference in 1919 decided for the first time in history the priority of the ethnic principle over the economic and strategic ones in drawing borders. However, there was an exception: the Republic of Austria (Republik Österreich). The fact that an independent Austria had appeared was a severe violation of the ethnic principle, of the peoples' right to self determination, conducted by the Antanta in order not to provide new territories to the defeated Germany. The old imperial capital, Vienna, would now become the great capital of a small state, spreading over just 84,000 km², with a population of 6.7 million inhabitants, buried in debt, with no possibility of a quick economic recovery, and devastated by famine.

The Situation of Inter-bellum Austria

Since the Article 88 of the peace treaty was forbidding Germany to annex Austria. The new state would become economically and politically dependent of the League of Nations. For the

economic recovery the Geneva protocols were signed (October the 4th, 1922), renewing the annexation interdiction and granting a loan of 650 million gold crowns (E. Zollner, 1997, p.623), but Austria's survival as an independent state required a strong army. But the Saint Germain treaty compelled Austria to respect the same restrictions as the revisionist states (Hungary and Bulgaria), the independence of which was not threatened in any way.

The army was reduced to 30,000 people, with a ban on armament, compulsory military service, weaponry imports and forming new types of armies. Restricted by these interdictions, the Austrian army would practically become a police force, the part of which, in the troubled inter-bellum history of the new state would increase as the danger of losing independence was growing.

However, Austria's armament continued, secretly, as demonstrated by the protests sent by Small Settlement to the Paris Ambassadors

Conference in 1923 and to the British and French governments in 1927 and 1933.

Also, Hungary's secret armament was done with weapons secretly sent by Italy through Austria, which would create an international scandal known as „The Hirtenberg Affair”. After very energetic interventions from the West and the Small Settlement, the Austrian government promised to return the weapons (E. Zollner, 1997). Still, according to some French sources in January 1933 alone, 40 wagons were sent to Hungary, filled with weaponry and ammunition, and other 7 were Austria's part for mediating the deal. Some French newspapers claimed that, through Austria, 195,000 tons of suffocating gas and dozens of aircrafts were transported to Italy (M. Vanku, 1979).

These political crises have deeply affected the internal and external situation of Austria, putting the small state on the list of potential trespassers, according to the plans elaborated by the headquarters of the Small Settlement, without strengthening its military force in any way.

The political life of the state was troubled repeatedly by the confrontations between the „self-defense formations” of the parties or of the organizations close to them, confrontations which often ended with loss of human lives. These paramilitary formations outnumbered the federal army, an army which minister Carl Vaugoin was hoping would bring back to life the old ways (E. Zollner, 1997, p.625). Among the paramilitary formations, the most active ones would prove to be those of the right wing: „*Heimwehren*” („*The Home Defense*”), „*Vaterländischer Schutzbund*” („*The League for Homeland Defense*”) and „*Deutschewehr*” („*The German Defense*”).

Their actions would bring a crisis upon the Austrian democracy, would have extremely severe consequences for the internal situation of the state and, eventually, for the external one. We remind the 1927 crisis, the attempted coup of the commander of the „*Heimwehren*” in Stiria in 1931 and the national-socialist coup in July 1934, prepared by Germany, when federal chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß was killed, all defeated with the help of the army, after hard battles, where local defense leagues participated.

The death of chancellor Dollfuß (on July the 25th 1934) in the fight against national-socialism was a terrible loss for inter-bellum Austria. Ever since 1932, when he had taken over the reins of the Government, Dollfuß had fought a successful fight

for the awakening of the Austrian state awareness (E. Zollner, 1997), considering the increased aggressiveness of Nazi Germany. Former Education minister, Kurt von Schuschnigg, would take over the Government, and in 1935 would take on reorganizing the army.

The Austrian Defense System

Till mid 1935, the Austrian army was made of 6 mixed brigades, mostly infantry, but also cavalry, rather poorly armed, and more experienced in police-like actions than in battlefields. Due to the situation created by the national-socialists coup in July 1934, when an Anglo-French diplomatic intervention was needed, but especially Italy's energetic action (who's troops, deployed in Brenner were getting ready for an intervention on Austrian territory), the Anglo-French-Italian conference in Stresa (April 1935) reconfirmed the guarantees on Austria's independence, approving for the clauses imposed to the defeated countries regarding armament to be revised*. Thus, on Italy's request, England and France agreed, in principle, that Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria become armed.

Under these circumstances, on June the 1st 1935, the 6 mixed brigades, become, after the army expansion, 7 infantry divisions plus an infantry brigade. Later, in 1936, a fast division was also created. The infantry divisions differed, as far as their force and components were concerned. They usually had 2-3 infantry regiments, 1 light artillery regiment and one anti-tank battalion, hunters (*jäger*), pioneers (engineers) and telegraph. Some divisions also had motorized battalions (H. Mangenheimer, 1978).

The Fast Division, created in 1936, is an original product of the military thinking in Central-Western Europe. We find it in Austria, but also in Germany, Italy and Czechoslovakia, as these countries were developing their armored forces. This type of division, bringing together armored units, but also cavalry troops, was, in the military thinking, an element of slow transition from the cavalry battle towards modern, motorized battles, using armored units. The new element reflects, perhaps better than any other, the link between antebellum and post-bellum military thinking, demonstrating the reminiscence of the first thinking by keeping the cavalry as an active element in the inter-bellum army, but also accepting modern ideas by including the armored units. This hybrid was explained by its creators as a combination of the impact force of the

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armored units and the mobility that cavalry had on any type of field. The Second World War would prove the combination to be completely inefficient. In the Austrian army, the Fast Division would bring together all the armored units and most cavalry troops, being the most mobile unit of the federal army. Its structure: 2 cavalry regiments (dragons), 4 motorized battalions, 1 light artillery regiment, a medium tanks company (12 ADGZ tanks) and 4 light tanks companies (72 CV-33 Italian tanks and 35 small tanks). The penetration force of this unit was rather low, but as a backup unit in a defensive battle, it could have quickly covered the possible gaps caused by the enemy.

The new structure of the army did not reduce its part in providing internal order, and as proof stands the fact that its strongest units, the 1st and 2nd Infantry divisions and the Fast Division were settled in Vienna, and the other units in various important centers (3rd division in Sankt Polten, 4th Division in Linz, 5th Division in Graz, 7th Division in Klagenfurt, 6th Division in Innsbruck, 8th Brigade in Salzburg).

In spite of its new structure, the Austrian army would remain limited, regarding its force and technical endowment, due to the poor economic state of the country. Austria had recovered economically thanks to huge loans contracted in the West and at the League of Nations. The most affected sectors were, obviously, the ones based on technical endowment. The aviation, the expansion of which was due to begin in 1938, depended on the deliveries from Germany and Italy. In March 1938, the Austrian air force only had 2 aviation regiments: the 1st Regiment with 3 hunting escadrille (a total of 36 Fiat C32 bis planes) and 2 escadrilles with older Italian aircrafts (Romeo Ro-37) and 2nd Regiment also with 3 hunting escadrilles (36 Fiat C32 bis) and 2 bombardment escadrilles (5 Caproni, 2 Junkers Ju-52 and 1 Ju-86), and also the 3 training escadrilles (with Fiat CR 20/30). The aviation also had a radio transmissions company, and the only parts and repairs workshop was at Graz (E. Steinbock, 1988, p. 163-164).

The antiaircraft defense, the importance of which was already affirmed by the inter-bellum thinking for the upcoming war, was even more poorly endowed than the air forces. At the beginning of 1938 there were: a heavy battery (with 80 mm cannons) 2 medium sides (each with 3 40 mm batteries), a 20 mm light cannons company, an anti-aircraft machine

guns company and a radio transmissions company. The entire force of the Austrian anti-aircraft could have defended, at the most, a city the size of Innsbruck or a rather small piece of land, but it certainly couldn't have defended the capital.

In a defensive, the action of the fleet on the Danube would have been an important support, but it was small, as far as both number and fire power went. Austria had a 60 tons patrol ship from the late Imperial Danube Fleet, named *Birago* and armed with a 7.5 mm cannon and a series of light pieces. The 4 *Flöcheboote* and 2 tug boats were also part of the former fleet. Other than these, there also were newer ships: 8 motorized barges, 6 tug boats, 2 armed vessels and 8 assault vessels (in production). The Austrian supreme commander was thinking clearly, and had no illusions regarding the force of his army and its endurance capacity. An advantage for the defensive army was the landscape of the respective country. Austria was a country with numerous mountains and lots of water, both being extremely important in combat. The defense, even with a weak army such as the Austrian one, was in advantage under these circumstances, and the defense plan drawn by the Austrian Headquarters took that into account.

Even more important than the high landscape was Italy's support. Neighboring Italy was one of the great successes of the Schober government. Since 1929, Italy would remain Austria's ally, supporting its armament, first secretly, then officially, in the Stresa Conference in 1935. Most of the weaponry of the Austrian army was Italian, and Austria kept on importing, as much as possible, fighting technique from Italy. Italy's influence over Austria strengthened in the meantime, finding its expression in the „Roman Protocols” of March the 14th 1934. Other than economic matters, the treaty also provided for mutual consultation on foreign policy issues, and, secretly, were added military agreements providing for an intervention from Italy in the case of movements from inside Austria (E. Zollner, 1997) and even an Austrian intervention in the case of an Italian-Yugoslavian conflict. Although Italy was not yet loved among the Austrians, the collaboration would strengthen Austria's position against the German Reich. In 1938, the situation had changed, but Italy had remained the main piece in Austria's defensive plan.

Since the Danube could not be, due to its geographic position (parallel to the Austrian-

Czechoslovakian border, and not to the Austrian-German one) a natural barrier in the case of an attack from the Reich, they chose to organize the main defensive line on one of Danube's affluent, Enns (Traun). Behind this river, assuming battle positions were infantry divisions 2, 1, 3 and 5, which formed the Western Army, its main part being to defend the road to the capital. Please find the position of the Austrian forces in the map enclosed in the subchapter dedicated to Czechoslovakia.

The Austrian commanders were aware of the fact that a future German attack would have been planned as a surprise, with motorized forces, so that the Western Army wouldn't have the time to assume the defensive positions. In order to prevent this from happening, the 4th Infantry Division (which, besides 2 Infantry Regiments, also had a rangers/mountain hunters regiment „*Alpenjäger*”), was based in Linz, close to the German border, and was able to quickly assume defensive positions at the border. Its endurance to annihilation (which was provided for by the Austrian Headquarters) would give the Western Army enough time to assume its positions on the Enns. Once the enemy would have been in the perimeter closed by the rivers Salzach, Enns and the Danube, they could have been attacked by the 8th Infantry Brigade, defending the Salzach River. The core reserve of the Western Army was the Fast Division. In Tirol, the 6th Infantry Division was supposed to avoid a confrontation with the enemy, saving its forces while waiting for the Italian help (The Pad Army with 3 fast divisions and 2 motorized infantry divisions). The existence of this division was vital for the very existence of the Austrian state, its task being to show that the Austrian army had not been destroyed, it can continue to fight and, therefore, there is a point to the Italian help. The connection between this division and the Western Army was made by the 7th infantry division, deployed at the Luegg. After the battle on Enns would begin, the 7th infantry Division was supposed to attack the enemy from the side. For the defense of Vienna, several units were deployed. In March 1938 the capital hosted 1 Guard Battalion, as infantry, 1 engineering battalion (which would fortify the capital), 1 telegraphic transmissions battalion and several smaller units.

Some conclusions can be drawn from this plan:

- The outstanding lucidity of the Austrian Headquarters, with no illusions regarding the endurance capacity of their own forces;

- The decisive part played by the Italian military help in the defense of Austria's independence;

- Keeping troops out of heat of the battle in order to justify the Italian help;

- Keeping a well organized defensive frontline in order to defend the capital, rather than withdraw in the mountains for a guerilla or resistance war in a high land. Austria had a wide mountain landscape, which would have allowed for the defeated troops to retire in order to resist as much as possible (even Hitler himself was planning in 1945 an „*alpine citadel*” on Austrian territory, where the Germans would fight till their last breath (E. Zollner, 1997). For the Austrians, the situation was a lot more complicated. Would the army have fought with such determination against the Germans? The Austrians were Germans, too, even better German than the Prussians who had been „shallowly Germanized” (E. Zollner, 1997, p.642), according to their belief

- Neither Dollfuß nor Schuschnigg ever proclaimed a contradiction between the Austrian and the German specific. The successes of the third Reich strongly echoed in Austria, the Reich obtaining its international rights equity, and the venerable imperial idea would once again surface.

Annexing Austria to Germany meant living inside a great power respected and feared by the neighbors, who saw Austria as a potential transgressor, even in 1938.

It is proven by a strategy of the Small Settlement in the case of a general conflict in 1938. Both scenarios assumed Austria had attacked either Czechoslovakia (1st hypothesis) or Yugoslavia (2nd hypothesis) (M. Vanku, 1979).

With Italy getting closer to Germany and the creation of the Rome-Berlin Axis in 1936, Austria would lose its main ally. Mussolini did not approve of the idea of annexing Austria to Germany, but he couldn't make a military move on his ally either (L. Jedlika, 1975).

Under these circumstances, the Republic of Austria, missing a border with a great democracy and having only the platonic sympathy of the West and small border fortifications, and defended by a thinned army, could not face the Reich.

The interests of other countries in the *Anschluss* can be added here. England, through its Berlin Ambassador, Neville Henderson, and the deputy of foreign affairs minister Lord Halifax, reaffirmed his favorable position towards changes in Central Europe, referring to Austria (E. Zollner,

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1997). Also, Poland was hoping to add Austria to Germany, which would have changed the course of the expansion of the Reich from the Western border to the South, towards Czechoslovakia.

The outcome of all these internal and external factors was highlighted on the night of March the 12 1938, when the Nazi troops attacked Austria, with the support of the Nazi groups that already had the power in certain lands and with the complicity of the government, newly formed after the Schuschnigg office had resigned on the evening of March the 11th.

As for the Austrian army, it would become the 44th and 45th infantry divisions and the 2nd and 3rd mountain divisions of the German army.

The Austrian military thinking is, undoubtedly, adequate to a small state that understands its material and human limits. It also is defensive, lucid and pragmatic especially thanks to the acknowledgement of those limits, without any resistance to the last breath or useless heroism. However, there is one mistake, common to all interbellum defense plans of the small powers: the hope that an allied country would make a decisive intervention.

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