

2019/3/4 (EN): The Old Austrian officer and his honour

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Concepts of honour and service regulations directed the behaviour of k.(u.) k. officers. Time and again they repeated what the officer owed to himself, to his unit, to the army and to the monarch: "The maxim under all circumstances is: strictest protection of the officer's honour of place!". There were, however, only few instructions on "how". This unavoidable lack of clear rules led to far reaching insecurities. So it was a matter of the respective Council of Honour to decide whether certain behaviour had to be judged correct or incorrect. His concepts of honour influenced the life of an officer much more than the national laws, the religious regulations or the traditions of his family and/or the nation. The officer's status was higher than that of the common citizen, but his freedom of action was heavily narrowed. The honour of an officer was considered his best asset and was placed above the life of the individual. It distinguished the officer as a special person sometimes standing above law. Military honour ennobled the officers' profession as a whole, thus rendering the character of chivalrousness. The willingness to subordination under the imperative concepts of honour played a decisive role in the character sketch of Old Austrian officers. Officers were remunerated poorly, but their social prestige was high. An example for this was their acceptance at court. Proudly (though with a trace of envy), according to the writer Roda-Roda, the officers looked down at the citizen who had to labour for his subsistence. His work seemed „low“ to them. Those, the officers, did not need the long way round money in order to be able to indulge in the pleasures of life. On the contrary, the emperor gave them what made them "gentlemen: servants, horses, a weapon, as well as the privilege of protecting their honour with this weapon. The Old Austrian officer appeared privileged and disadvantaged at the same time. The closeness to the imperial court (he was accepted at court, something usually reserved to the high nobility only) gave him brilliant prestige; thus he contrasted with all civil servants. Although the most popular army of Europe represented the flamboyant pillar of the Habsburg Empire, many of its officers were in a chronic financial crisis. For all these deprivations and sacrifices the officer was granted only one single compensation: his privileged status. This privilege was, however, no luxury, but the privilege of prestigious obligation instead. Thus, the price for social reputation for the officers was high – many of them lived in "lustrous wretchedness".

The time when the Old Austrian officers' corps could be called a profession in the social-historical sense ended with the First World War and the collapse of the monarchy. With the end of the war the most relevant features (principles of honour, tradition, privileges, and the awareness of a special status) disappeared, although remnants of them have been conserved up to these days.

