

THE FALL OF THE EAGLE: THE SECOND SACKING OF FIELD MARSHAL FRANZ CONRAD VON HÖTZENDORF IN 1917

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In this paper, I would like to summarize the circumstances of the fall of Field-Marshal Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, Austro-Hungarian Chief of Staff, in 1917. Conrad served in this position from 1906 to 1911, and then again between 1912 and 1917. He was the longest-serving chief of staff on either side during the war. Undoubtedly, the general is one of the most famous commanding officers of the First World War, and his memories and notes are invaluable sources, not only for military historians, but all experts who research the history of the Dual Monarchy.¹

His remarkable career suffered a setback on February 27th, 1917, when Charles I dismissed Conrad from the post of chief of staff. Although the Field-Marshal managed to stay in the army and remained a prominent commander until the summer of 1918, Conrad's career was doomed to failure from the moment he was removed from the highest position. His successor, Arthur Arz, could not step into Conrad's shoes, but Arz's personality was more suitable to Emperor Charles I, who wanted to make peace as soon as possible. I am looking for the answers to the following questions: Which events led to the end of Conrad's career? Why did Emperor Charles choose to remove him?

Omitting the detailed description of Conrad's career, I will mention only the points that played a decisive role in his sacking. Thus, I think it is worth summarizing the main events of Conrad's pre-war career. The incumbent Field-Marshal was born on November 11th, 1852, in Vienna. Completing his military education at the famous military academy of Wiener Neustadt, he became a lieutenant in 1871. Conrad took part in the occupation of Bosnia in 1878, serving in this region until 1882. In that same year he was with Austro-Hungarian troops who crushed the Southern Dalmatian uprising.² It is necessary to mention that Conrad voluntarily took part in these conflicts, thus becoming one of the most experienced officers of the Dual Monarchy. The value of his war experiences rose steadily because more and more veterans of the wars of the mid-19th century were dying of old age.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand had known of Conrad since the last decade of the 19th century, and his reputation was excellent in military circles. The ambitious general was among the theoretical elite of the k. u. k. force.

In 1906, Conrad became the Chief of Staff of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy for the first time. His 76-year-old predecessor, Feldzeugmeister Beck,³ had been Chief of Staff for exactly 25 years, and the effect of the rejuvenated leadership was soon felt in the still quiet

¹ Franz CONRAD, *Aus meiner Dienstzeit 1906–1918. Bd. I–V*. Rikola Verlag, Wien – Berlin – Leipzig – München 1921–1925.

² For the Monarchy, this was the last major military conflict before the First World War.

³ Colonel-General Friedrich Ludwig Beck (since 1913 Beck-Rzikowsky) 1830–1920. For a detailed description of his biographical dates see: Tibor BALLA, *A Nagy Háború osztrák–magyar tábornokai* [The Austro-Hungarian Generals of World War I]. Vol. I. Argumentum, Budapest 2010, pp. 71–73.

period of *belle époque*. Conrad almost immediately became the leader of those who believed that preventive war was the answer to the general problems facing the Monarchy. Mostly related to the policy of the Neoabsolutist state, his thinking was radically different from the spirit of the liberal monarchy. Consequently, this policy was not alien to the dynasty, even though his aggressiveness irked both the emperor and the heir to the throne. This aspect was strengthened by the fact that Conrad had a cool relationship with Catholicism.⁴

Conrad had been a fierce advocate of the annexation of Bosnia in 1908. He persisted but had little success in strengthening the Monarchy's military potential, pointing out the fact that among Europe's great powers, the Dual Monarchy had the weakest armed forces. Conrad's first fall in 1911 was brought on by the Italian-Turkish War. He demanded a preventive war against Italy, which was struggling with the acquisition of Tripoli and Cyrenaica, so the general began to interfere in domestic politics. As a result, Baron Aehrenthal, the Imperial Foreign Minister, advised the emperor to remove Conrad.⁵

A few weeks later Aehrenthal died from leukemia. With the passing of his fiercest enemy, Conrad could return as Chief of Staff in December 1912. On the eve of the Great War, the Austro-Hungarian general constantly supported the idea of the Monarchy launching a war. Nevertheless, the Dual Monarchy stayed neutral during the Balkan wars. However, after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the whole picture changed. Declaring war on Serbia, Conrad emerged as one of the most powerful military leaders whose influence was felt throughout the whole of the Monarchy.

The mobilization signified Conrad's first great mistake in the war. According to the so-called B plan, the general wanted the conquest of Serbia before the Russians could intervene with the full power of their massive army. But the Monarchy was unable to win the war in the Balkans, and the Russians attacked rapidly. Conrad's wrong decision caused a major catastrophe in Galicia, and most of the province was conquered by tsarist troops. Even though Conrad had earned victories in two battles (the 1st Army at Kraśnik and the 4th Army defeating the enemy at Komarów) in the Russian-Poland territory, the 3rd Army suffered a devastating defeat by tsarist troops in East Galicia. Lemberg (Lviv) itself had been taken by the Russians on September 2nd, 1914. In addition to the loss of the capital of Galicia, the eastern and central parts of the province were also conquered by the enemy, and Bukovina fell as well. Consequently, the Monarchy's offensive bogged down on the Northern Front,⁶ and Conrad was forced to order a general retreat on September 11th, which would be worthy of the title of the "Black Day of the Monarchy's Armed Forces."⁷ The first crisis occurred immediately in September 1914. The main reason for this failure was that Conrad has underestimated

⁴ E. g. On one occasion in Bohemia in 1913, Conrad did not attend a Sunday Mass that was part of an army exercise. Franz Ferdinand told the general that "I know your lack of religious conviction well, but if I go to church, you must go, too." Franz CONRAD, *Aus meiner Dienstzeit 1906–1918. Dritter Band. 1913 und das erste Halbjahr 1914. Der Ausgang des Balkankrieges und die Zeit bis zum Fürstenmord in Sarajevo*, Rikola Verlag, Wien – Berlin – Leipzig – München 1922, p. 436.

⁵ Franz CONRAD, *Aus meiner Dienstzeit 1906–1918. Zweiter Band. 1910–1912. Die Zeit der libyschen Kriegen und des Balkankrieges bis Ende 1912*, Rikola Verlag, Wien – Berlin – Leipzig – München 1922, p. 218ff.

⁶ The theatre of war was officially called northern, not eastern, until the breakthrough at Gorlice.

⁷ David LIGETI, *A Monarchia szeptember tizenegyedikéje. A Nagy Háború első hetei a keleti fronton*. [The Monarchy's September Eleventh. The Great War's First Weeks on the Eastern Front]. In: Veritas Évkönyv 2014. (Ed.) Gábor UJVÁRY. Veritas – Magyar Napló, Budapest 2015, pp. 81–99.

the magnitude of the Russian forces arrayed against the Monarchy: he could not have known that the Russian Empire would be able to move faster than Conrad's projections and that more than two-thirds of the tsarist army would fight against the Dual Monarchy. It became clear that the possibility of quick victory was no longer feasible, and the Dual Monarchy would have to fight in a long war. Although these operations led to massive losses among k. u. k. troops, they eased the Russian pressure on Germany. However, these events were a blow to Conrad's reputation. Franz Joseph I pondered the dismissal of the general, but Conrad was allowed to stay because there was no one qualified to succeed him.

Finally, Conrad avoided Moltke's fate (who had been the chief of staff of the German armed forces) and continued to lead the Monarchy, largely due to the overall failures of most of the Monarchy's other generals.

Despite initial failures and unimaginable numbers of casualties, losing more than 1 million soldiers (dead, wounded and POW) in the first five months of the war, Conrad did not give up his offensive approach. Supporting the German army, which was in a tight spot in the east, Conrad led numerous attacks against tsarist units, while the Germans also supported the Monarchy in the harsh fighting in the Carpathians. This is an explanation for the repeated attacks along the San River and the winter battle in the Carpathians in 1915. In December 1914 he achieved a significant victory at Limanowa – Łapanów. However, the huge loss of life suffered in 1914 could no longer be replenished. Conrad's successor Arz summarized this as follows: "*The solution which Conrad von Hötzendorf had chosen for the Austro-Hungarian army failed. Indeed, it succeeded in halting the onslaught of strong Russian potential, but success required such huge casualties as to be irreplaceable. The army could never overcome this loss.*"⁸

While in the first five months of the war, the battlefield failures would have been the main cause of Conrad's sacking, the constant infighting with his German colleague, Erich von Falkenhayn, could have sealed his fate in 1915. As is well known, throughout the duration of the war, Conrad wanted to win the war in the East, whereas Falkenhayn focused on the West. Conrad's destiny was connected with the fate of the besieged fortress of Przemyśl. In order to relieve the vital city on the San, the Austro-Hungarian general led numerous attacks on the Carpathian front. These attempts were doomed to failure once again. On March 22nd, 1915, the fortress capitulated and 120 thousand soldiers went into captivity. Nevertheless, the k. u. k. army lost 800 000 troops between January 1st and April 30th; the Dual Monarchy was on the verge of final defeat. Conrad's last hope was significant help from the Germans, which he received in April 1915.

The great victories in the East, which began with the breakthrough at Gorlice saved not only the Dual Monarchy but also Conrad's career. 1915 was the most successful year not only for the Central Powers but for the general himself. After the triumphant conquering of Russian Poland,⁹ and the retaking of most of Galicia and Bukovina, the esteem of the Austro-Hungarian chief of staff was at its apex. Conrad received numerous awards, including the famous German Pour le Mérite, and was promoted to the rank of Colonel-General. However, the main result was that he successfully lobbied his German colleague Erich von Falkenhayn

⁸ Arthur ARZ, *Kampf und Sturz der Kaiserreiche*. Johannes Günther Verlag, Wien – Leipzig 1935, pp. 35–36.

⁹ David LIGETI, *Breakthrough at Gorlice. Consequences, aftermath*. In: Léta do pole okovaná II. 1915 – noví nepřátelé, nové výzvy. (Ed.) Jaroslav LÁNÍK – Tomáš KYKAL. VHU, Praha 2017, pp. 295–303.

on the significance of the Eastern theatre of war. This was a great personal success for him after their arduous dispute in the early weeks of 1915.

But this debate was reborn in autumn 1915 when the Central Powers subdued the Balkans. The successes in the south further strengthened the position of the Austro-Hungarian general. The renewed debate between the two generals focused on the question of how to continue the war in this theatre. After the conquest of Serbia, Conrad wanted to sweep out any Entente troops from the Balkan Peninsula, whereas Falkenhayn concentrated on the West, and removed most of the German troops from the southern front. Conrad occupied all of Montenegro and two-thirds of Albania on his own initiative in January 1916. This success represented the zenith of his military career.

The eve of Conrad's final failure began with the offensive in South Tyrol in May 1916. The Colonel-General wanted to eliminate Italy, which had attacked the Monarchy one year earlier. The chief of staff planned an offensive in order to ease Italian pressure on the Isonzo front. In spite of the initial achievements, the general was forced to stop the operation by the imminent Brusilov Offensive. The Russians launched their offensive on June 4th, 1916, and the operation devastated two Austro-Hungarian armies. The blow was shocking for Conrad himself. He wrote his wife, who lived near the Teschen headquarters, that she needed to leave for Vienna as soon as possible, although the city was approximately 500 km behind the frontlines of the East.

Somehow Conrad survived that catastrophe despite the tremendous fact that he had lost more than 600,000 soldiers (mainly as POW's). The awful morale of the k. u. k. troops was illustrated by in how many of them gave up to the Russians. As an adjutant of the chief of staff noted: "*The whole k. u. k. 4th Army has been captured by the enemy*".¹⁰ In Hungary, the political elite demanded the head of the general after the disastrous invasion of Transylvania by Romania, which commenced on August 27th, 1916. After the heavy losses of the previous years, which had been connected directly to the Colonel-General's unfortunate strategy, only 34 thousand troops faced the enemy on the eve of the new war against Romania.

What caused the general's second fall? His fate was ironically sealed not by the failures on the battlefields. The main cause of his fiasco was related to the death of Franz Joseph I and the general direction of the war. Under Conrad's leadership, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had been waging war for four years and the ever-increasing moral and financial consequences of the conflict convinced the new ruler Charles I of the need for peace. Thus, he chose to take over the High Command on December 2nd, 1916, and relieved the former supreme commander, Field-Marshal Archduke Friedrich. But a week earlier Charles had promoted Conrad to the same rank, becoming the first Field-Marshal of non-Habsburg origin since 1867. The ruler's gesture, however, would only lead to Conrad's eventual failure.

The main cause of this process was the peace-seeking attitude of the new ruler. To bring his ideas to fruition, that is to say, to make peace, Charles I undertook a major reshuffling of the leadership of the empire. In this process, a veteran, a man as tired and ill-fated as Conrad, could not have remained in his position. He noted: "*It is a fact that when a daughter*

¹⁰ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv – Kriegsarchiv Wien (ÖStA-KA), Militärische Nachlässe (NL), 1450 (A,B,C) CONRAD von HÖTZENDORF, Graf Freiherr Familie, Kt. 124, Maschinschriftliche Übertragung der Tagebuchaufzeichnungen Kundmanns 1. 01. 1915 bis 4. 11. 1916, p. 447.

gets married and starts her own household, she does not wish to take her chaperones.”¹¹ Of course, the position of the Austro-Hungarian Chief of Staff was put in the crosshairs several times during the war, as we have already seen.

Good fortune never lasts, however, and in the summer of 1916, Conrad knew that he was in a predicament as a disastrous result of the Brusilov Offensive. Although the general knew well that removing him would not be difficult, finding a competent successor would be. Concerning the possible candidates, one of his adjutants, Colonel Kundmann, said, “*Think of the possible generals! Arz? Krauss? Tersztyánszky? Each in his own way is somewhat valuable, but none are greater!*”¹²

Conrad’s reputation and prestige were also proved by the fact that as an heir to the throne, Charles simply referred to him as the “Boss” out of respect for the general and his endeavours.¹³ Paradoxically, the fall of the general was not caused by battlefield failures, but rather by court intrigue. It was his misfortune that he had a particularly bad relationship with the young Empress Zita, who, even as a crown princess, openly criticized Conrad’s second marriage.¹⁴ The widowed General had married a divorced woman in 1915, making him *persona non grata* to the deeply devoted Catholic empress. Her influence on Charles was well known to public opinion, too. Although Conrad’s second wife was herself of Italian origin, the Field-Marshal belonged to members of the army suspicious of Zita’s political machinations. In the spring of 1918, Conrad’s fear was somewhat justified, for it was discovered that Charles had become acquainted with the French government via his brother-in-law.

Conrad himself was partially responsible for his weakening position: he had criticized the rapid military promotion of the heir to the throne in 1916, disagreeing with the assignment of Charles appointed as Corps-Commander on the eve of the South Tyrol offensive. After the Brusilov Offensive the heir was commander of the 12th Army, and a few weeks later to the so-called Army-Group Archduke Charles Franz Joseph. The Chief of Staff thought that Charles was too young and incompetent for these tasks. Privately he also noted: “*Charles hated the 1st AOK as he could not and did not get any leading role.*”¹⁵ Besides their bad personal relationship, Conrad was a victim of the process by which Charles I renewed the leadership of the Monarchy. All men were replaced in the leading political and military positions, including the Hungarian Prime Minister Count István Tisza. On the first day of his rule, Charles dismissed Field-Marshal Archduke Friedrich and took over the high command. With this move, the emperor sealed the fate of the 1st AOK. Conrad also considered the

¹¹ August CRAMON, *Unser österreichisch-ungarischer Bundesgenosse im Weltkriege. Erinnerungen aus meiner vierjährigen Tätigkeit als bevollmächtigter deutscher General beim k. u. k. Armeoberkommando*. Mittler, Berlin 1922, p. 172.

¹² Rudolf JEŘÁBEK, *Die Brussilowoffensive 1916. Ein Wendepunkt der Koalitionskriegführung der Mittelmächte*. II. Dissertation, University Wien, Wien 1982, p. 509.

¹³ Erich FEIGL, *Kaiser Karl I. Persönliche Aufzeichnungen, Zeugnisse und Dokumente*. Amalthea, Wien – München 1987, p. 51.

¹⁴ Zita’s negative preconceptions about Conrad were proved in 1925. When the general died, the ex-empress did not even send a funeral telegram. There were rumors that Zita had sent a wreath with black-yellow ribbons to the funeral, but this news was denied by her. Lawrence SONDHAUS, *Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf. Architekt der Apokalypse*. Neuer Wissenschaftlicher, Wien – Graz 2003, p. 247.

¹⁵ Kurt PEBALL, *Conrad von Hötzendorf. Private Aufzeichnungen*. Amalthea, Wien – München 1977, p. 262.

emperor's decision as a mistake, on the grounds that "*this organization, having grown up during the war, was well-organized, serious, professional, tireless and persistent.*"¹⁶ In addition to these events, Charles I changed the location of the headquarters. The former centre of the AOK was moved from Teschen to Baden, the spa suburb of Vienna. This step drew criticism from the Field-Marshal, who believed that the emperor was guilty of physically splitting up the leaderships of the Central Powers on the Eastern front. The Germans stayed in Pleß, which was exceedingly far from Baden.¹⁷

Cramon noted: "*The sacking of army chief commander (Archduke Friedrich) was soon followed by Conrad's dismissal. In the presence of the Chief of the Military Chancellery, Emperor Charles informed me that he had decided to relieve Conrad of his duties as Chief of Staff; he is too stubborn and confrontational; his strategic thinking is not the best, and he has problems with civilian employees. Moreover, the "womanwirtschaft of Teschen" (the wives of the officers) are on his account – in other words, it would be better if he stepped down.*"¹⁸

The k. u. k. General Ferdinand von Marterer noted about Conrad: "*He angers [Charles – D. L.] too often, does stupid things, is one-sided and lets himself be controlled by his surroundings.*"¹⁹ Conrad took part in the Common Council of Ministers on January 12th, 1917.²⁰ He argued that the conquered Polish territories should be annexed by the Monarchy. Nevertheless, his power and influence were dramatically reduced.

Charles dismissed Conrad at the end of February 1917. When the emperor informed Conrad about his sacking, the general was no longer surprised. Although four months earlier the general had been appointed to the highest military rank, k. u. k. Field-Marshal, Conrad felt that Charles would try to replace him as soon as possible.²¹ In the weeks after Franz Joseph's passing, the impossibility of Charles and Conrad working together manifested itself.

The emperor saw in the general a possible threat to his own peace movement. Getting the news of his sacking as chief of staff, Conrad fancied retirement. After long discussions, Charles convinced him to take command of a newly created army group in Tirol. Conrad's depression and frustration were obvious when he had not been particularly motivated to continue to fight against liberal Italy, which he so hated. At that time, Charles placed the Grand Cross of the Military Order of Maria Theresa, taken from his own uniform, onto Conrad's jacket, indicating how much he appreciated the work Conrad was doing.²² Even though the Grand Cross of the Military Order of the Maria Theresia was the highest military award of the Dual Monarchy, this theatrical act did not console the general. He wrote meekly to his wife in January 1917: "*If I get more crosses I will look like a cemetery.*"²³

¹⁶ Karl Friedrich NOWAK, *Der Weg zur Katastrophe*. Kulturpolitik, Berlin 1926, p. CXI.

¹⁷ K. F. NOWAK, *Der Weg zur Katastrophe*, p. CXI.

¹⁸ A. CRAMON, *Unser österreichisch-ungarischer Bundesgenosse*, p. 100.

¹⁹ ÖStA-KA, Allerhöchster Oberbefehl (AhOB), Militärkanzlei Seiner Majestät des Kaisers (MKSM), Sonderreihe, Fasz. 91, February 22nd, 1917.

²⁰ *Die Protokolle des gemeinsamen Ministerrates der Österreichisch-Ungarischen Monarchie*. (Ed.) Miklós KOMJÁTHY. Akadémiai, Budapest 1966, p. 440.

²¹ Conrad became the first Field-Marshal of the Empire not of Habsburg origin since 1867. Wolfram DORNIK, *Des Kaisers Falke. Wirken und Nach-Wirken von Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf*. Studien Verlag, Innsbruck – Wien – Bozen 2013, p. 167; K. PEBALL, *Conrad von Hötzendorf*, p. 88.

²² L. SONDDHAUS, *Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf*, p. 211.

²³ L. SONDDHAUS, *Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf*, p. 208.

At the time of his dismissal, Conrad had served for thirty-one months as chief of staff over the course of the war. If we include his service in peacetime, Conrad served for nearly ten years. This total made him one of the longest-serving chiefs of staff of the Monarchy.²⁴ In the same position, the generals Cadorna, Joffre and Hindenburg served for 30, 28 and 27 months, respectively.²⁵ Conrad summarized the reasons for his being replaced as follows: 1. The question of relations with Germany: Charles saw that Conrad would not participate in any conspiracy aimed at breaking the alliance of Central Powers. 2. Charles' relationship with the Czechs and the related amnesty and the influence of the Church on Charles. The Marshal opposed Charles' policy in these matters, although the general amnesty was issued only after his fall, in the summer of 1917. The general said in a confidential way that "*the new course is anti-German, pro-Czech, religious, and I am not suitable for this system.*"²⁶

The German liaison to Vienna General Cramon said: "*I was always of the opinion that despite Conrad's shortcomings, he was the right man in the right position, and that such a young ruler should not have dismissed him. A man like Conrad was extremely valuable, honestly telling the truth and not talking like a butler to the emperor. Moreover, the reasons for his dismissal were not only military but largely personal; they did not come from the emperor, but those who surrounded him. Conrad's presence was uncomfortable for many people who had seen that his final hours as Chief of Staff were approaching.*" Conrad's successor would be Arthur Arz von Straussenburg,²⁷ who wrote to Conrad at this time: "*Your Excellency's achievements for the army, everlasting and in these days even more spoken about. [...] There is no need to put into words the utmost results of your Excellency because they are world-historical events. [...] The Staff today, which is to say, the Staff of the World War, is entirely the result of your Excellency's work.*" Arz was very depressed when he received his new office. In 1921, he summed up his circumstances at the time: "*As a successor to Conrad, in a difficult hour, I tried to maintain as much as possible of what the Field-Marshal had reached. At the end of the fighting, as we were deep into hostile territory in every theatre of war, both Conrad's leadership and unparalleled organizational skills were decisive. As an official successor, it is my obligation to look back on his activities with a grateful heart.*"²⁸

The independence of the k. u. k. army was over by this time. Arz had to lead a decimated army dependent upon Germany. Nevertheless, fatalities in Conrad's era were ten times greater than during Arz's tenure.

Although Conrad's fall as chief of staff did not mean inevitable catastrophe for the Monarchy as the army of the Dualist State fought to the bitter end of the war, Charles' decision – *nolente volente* – weakened the moral of the k. u. k. armed forces. In that manner, Arz's promotion sowed the seeds of the final defeat of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

²⁴ Theodor ZEYNEK, *Ein Generalstabsoffizier erinnert sich.* (Ed.) Peter BROUCEK, Böhlau, Wien – Köln – Weimar 2009, p. 407ff.

²⁵ Oskar REGELE, *Feldmarschall Conrad. Auftrag und Erfüllung 1906–1918.* Herold, Wien 1955, p. 488.

²⁶ K. F. NOWAK, *Der Weg zur Katastrophe*, pp. XXXVI–XXXVII.

²⁷ See my monograph about Arz: David LIGETI, *A monarchia utolsó vezérkari főnöke. Arthur Arz von Straussenburg élete és pályafutása.* Dissertation, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest 2013. Available at: <http://doktori.btk.elte.hu/hist/ligetidavidadam/diss.pdf> [accessed 2023-04-20].

²⁸ Oskar REGELE, *Gericht über Habsburgs Wehrmacht. Letzte Siege und Untergang unter dem Armee-Oberkommando Kaiser Karls I., Generaloberst Arz von Straussenburg.* Herold, Wien – München 1968, p. 54.