



Burkhard Koester. *Militär und Eisenbahn in der Habsburgermonarchie 1825-1859.* Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1999. xi + 335 pp. DM 68.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-486-56331-3.



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Here before Moltke? Railroads and Rifles, Part II

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Burkhard Koester is a serving officer with the Bundeswehr who completed his dissertation under Ulrich Kluge in Freiburg, the Swabian town that at the time also housed the *Militärgeschichtliche Forschungsamt*. Since then all of them have moved East: Both Kluge and Koester are now teaching at Dresden, the latter for the Army War College. Appropriately for his new environment, Koester starts his book with a quote from Marx - only his Marx is not the bearded guru of the Left, but an Austrian Lieutenant Colonel (of unknown hairstyle) who first wrote about the possible impact of railways on military operations in 1835.

Railways certainly revolutionized the nineteenth century. Yet there is curiously little scholarly literature about them (apart from amateur lovers of technical gadgets). That is even more true as far as the Habsburg Monarchy is concerned where the nationality question has succeeded in crowding out pretty much everything else. The best information is still contained in the turn of the century tomes edited by Hermann Strach to celebrate the Emperor's jubilee.[1] Moltke in Prussia had

a volume entitled *Railroads and Rifles* dedicated to his achievements.[2] There has never been an equivalent for Austria. Thus, we have to be grateful that Koester has made a start.

His book is informed by two motivations: On the one hand, he was struck by the German military's cavalier attitude to questions of logistics throughout their nineteenth and twentieth century career that contributed to all sorts of fatal miscalculations; on the other hand, he takes his cue from a stray remark by an Austrian economic historian, Alois Bachinger, who once idly mused that the monarchy's modernization may have been impeded by the military interfering too much with its infrastructure. That is a thesis that probably takes its inspiration from a much later period when millions of florins were poured into strategic lines across the Carpathian mountains during the 1880 and 1890's. Never mind, Koester does a very effective job of disproving that thesis for the railways' first quarter of a century at least. If anything, in the beginning military experts were too little interested in the potential of railways. Two of the heroes of the Austrian pre-March period are specifically excepted

from this picture of indolence: Radetzky seems to have recognized the value of rail links at an early date, as did Archduke John who proved a dedicated lobbyist for his native Styria. (One wonders what he would make of the to-and-fros about the Semmering tunnel going on in his fief around the turn of the millenium.)

True, the first railway transport of troops occurred in 1841, when a battallion was carried from Hradisch to Bruenn in Moravia, only four years after railways made their debut in Austria. Ten years later, the Habsburg monarchy achieved pioneer status for the first large scale movements of troops in military history. In between, interest in the potential of the railways was intermittent, however. True to pennyfogging form, one of the factors that militated against routine use of railways was cost. Even when railways were taken over by the state, turf wars within the bureaucracy contributed to lengthy negotiations about rebates and cut price offers for mass movements of troops. Scepticism also centered on the ability of railways to transport not just soldiers, but horses and artillery, too. Unless they did, no strategic movements could be based on them. On the other hand, the civilian economy had adapted to the use of railways to such an extent by the early 1850's that supply difficulties in Vienna resulted whenever the railways were diverted to military uses exclusively. For a long time to come, the single track system of early Austrian railways was to bedevil mass transport.

In 1848-49 a whole Russian division was already transported from Cracow to Hradisch; in Italy the Austrians were the first ones to blow up a railway bridge to delay enemy reinforcements. On top of that, there are all sorts of tantalizing allegations about the political unreliability of railway personnel. Yet, because skilled labor was scarce there are no recorded instances of reprisals against suspected offenders. Maybe those accusations were just designed to provide a sort of blanket excuse for whatever went wrong when the army used railways. Liaison between railway officials and officers improved during the 1850s even if the reduced status of the General Staff during the ascendancy of Gruenne did little to further the cause of strategic planning. In one case in Galicia, the army detailed soldiers to work on new rail lines. To prevent cross-cutting loyalties or any whiff of corruption, however, military officers were expressly forbidden to serve on the boards of railway companies in 1856.

Whenever there were disputes about the exact location of new lines, the military tended to lose their arguments. Thus, no deficiencies of the established system

can be blamed on their intervention. Whenever the term "strategic" was employed during the debates of the 1850's it was to curry favor with the political authorities not because the military masterminded those efforts. To put things in perspective, all these disputes involved minor changes, though. (The military were concerned that all rail lines should pass through their fortresses whenever possible.) The general imperatives of strategic and economic rationales for railway building did not diverge significantly. One case where may be it did was the Italian case. The link between Vienna and Trieste had almost been completed by the time the Austrians fought their next war in Italy, but the continuation to Milan was still a patch-work. For commercial purposes, it seems, Trieste could more easily be linked to Venice by boat. Again, there was no determined effort on the behalf of the military to establish an overriding priority on closing the gaps in the Italian net-work. During the campaign of 1859, bottlenecks developed wherever rail lines ended. Transport by conventional means of horse and buggy was unable (or not sufficiently well organized) to cope with the strain imposed upon it.

Koester has faithfully mined the records of the relevant Austrian archives, the War Archive as well as the Hofkammerarchiv, Grillparzer's old haunt; he expounds his case forcefully and convincingly. The one criticism this reviewer would like to add is: While conscious of the German disregard for logistics, Koester does little to overcome the even more pervasive German love of metaphysics. Even on a down-to-earth topic like use of railways, he sometimes seems more concerned with his subject's state of mind than with what they actually did. Suitably Hegelian terms like *Bewusstseinswerdungsprozess* abound. The reader also has to gnaw his way through a heavily theoretical introduction where military history pays its dues to the linguistic turn and all other sorts of trendy nonsense. But then, readers in a hurry can always leaf through the first hundred pages and start with the 12th Jaeger Battalion's historic one day trip on p. 101. Thereafter, it's well worth it.

Notes

[1]. *Geschichte der Eisenbahnen der oesterreichisch-ungarischen Monarchie*. 6 vols., vol. 1 in 2 parts (Vienna et. al.: Prochazka, 1898-1908); see esp. Hermann Strach, "Geschichte der Eisenbahnen Oesterreich-Ungarns. Von den ersten Anfaengen bis zum Jahre 1867", vol. 1, part 1, pp. 73-503, and Ignaz Konta, "Geschichte der Eisenbahnen Oesterreichs. Vom Jahre 1867 bis zur Gegenwart", vol. 1, part 2, pp. 1-426.

[2]. Dennis E. Showalter, *Railroads and Rifles: Soldiers, Technology, and the Unification of Germany* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1975).

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