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The Influence of Military Considerations on the 1869 *Reichsvolksschulgesetz* in Imperial Austria

Lukas Grawe*

Abstract: »Der Einfluss von militärischen Überlegungen auf das Reichsvolksschulgesetz von 1869 im Kaisertum Österreich«. On July 3, 1866, Prussian troops defeated their Austrian opponents at Königgrätz, thereby deciding the German "fratricidal war." The defeat of the Austrian Empire came as a surprise to many contemporaries because the Austrian army was previously regarded as much more powerful. Searching for the causes, one reason was mentioned as a decisive factor in the public discussion: the poorer education of the Austrian soldiers when compared to those of the Prussians. Finally Prussia had a well-functioning school obligation, while the school system in Austria had numerous deficiencies. The slogan of the "Prussian schoolmaster," who had defeated his Austrian counterpart, led the Austrian military to demand the introduction of compulsory schooling from the political leadership. Improved schooling should thus increase the efficiency of the army. In 1869, the Austrian parliament finally passed the *Reichsvolksschulgesetz*, which introduced eight-year compulsory schooling. The article examines the military influence on development, drafting and enforcement of the law and thus analyzes its impact on the evolution of the Austrian educational policy.

Keywords: Austro-Prussian War, education, compulsory schooling, Austrian military, *Reichsvolksschulgesetz*.

1. Introduction

"Casca il mondo" – "The world collapses" (Schulze 1992, 347): with this striking phrase a high dignitary of the Vatican summarized the outcome of the Battle of Königgrätz. The fighting ended on July 3, 1866 and – surprisingly for much of the European public – with a victory of the Prussian troops over the Austrian-Saxon army, thereby deciding the German "fratricidal war." The war's unexpected result initiated a major change of power in the heart of Europe. It ended the more than one hundred years of dualism between the Empire of Austria and the Kingdom of Prussia and paved the way for a German unification in the sense of a "*kleindeutsche Lösung*" ("Lesser Germany"). Domestically and militarily, the defeat of the Austrian Empire was a cesura. It led to the

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settlement with Hungary in 1867, thus establishing the Habsburg Dual Monarchy and, at the end of 1866, was the main reason for Austria to introduce general conscription (Bremm 2016).

How could it have happened that the Habsburg army, which up to then had been seen as the strongest military power in Central Europe, clearly emerged as the loser of the fight over supremacy in Germany? This question occupied the minds of the Austrian public, politicians, and high-ranking officers after having heard the news from the battlefield. In addition to the technological inferiority, poorer leadership, less structured organization, and the previous reduction of the army's size (Allmayer-Beck 1987, 44-60), one decisive reason for the defeat was mentioned in many newspaper articles: the poorer education of the Austrian soldiers. Prussia had a well-functioning compulsory education system, while the Austrian model had many shortcomings. In hardly any part of the Empire did more than half of the school-age children take part in class every day, two-thirds of the Austrian soldiers were illiterate (Engelbrecht 1986, 112). The increased importance of ever more complicated weaponry and the systemic changes of the face of war called for autonomous soldiers with a basic education. More than ever, interlocking compulsory education and general conscription guaranteed the establishment of a victorious army (Becker 2001, 140). Only two weeks after the Battle of Königgrätz, on July 17, 1866, the Saxon geographer Oscar Peschel outlined this interdependence for the first time. In his essay "Die Lehren der jüngsten Kriegsgeschichte" ("The lessons of recent war history"), he attributed a crucial importance to education and wrote: "We now want to show, that the Prussians' defeat of the Austrians was a victory of the Prussian schoolmasters over the Austrian schoolmasters." For this reason, he argued, Austria had to cultivate the spirit of its subjects in order to restore the country to its old greatness (Peschel 1866, 695).¹ One day later, the Austrian newspaper *Neue Freie Presse* picked up Peschel's statements, printed extensive excerpts,² and thus ensured their dissemination throughout the Empire.³

The notion of the Prussian soldiers' superior intelligence and education also spread within their own kingdom (Becker 2001, 152-6). Prussian teachers quickly picked up the argument and demanded wage increases as a recognition for their service to the fatherland.⁴ Even the Prussian government announced in an 1867 official gazette:

¹ Peschel further wrote: "Mathematics is the grindstone, and in this sense one may say that the Prussian schoolmasters triumphed over the Austrian in the first section of the Bohemian campaign." Following Peschel, coincidence, greater morality, or better armament played only a minor meaning.

² "Lehren aus dem Kriege", *Neue Freie Presse*, no. 676 (July 18, 1866).

³ On July 19, the newspaper *Das Vaterland. Zeitung für die österreichische Monarchie* printed Peschel's article also in excerpts. See no. 168 (July 19, 1866).

⁴ The reason for the demands of the teachers was: "Through a gloriously conducted war, the Prussian state has become larger in area and richer in glory, and the whole world marvels at

It has been admirably said everywhere, that our army achieved last summer's unexpected success mainly because of the spiritual education and efficiency flowing through every individual. The most important experts of all countries have unanimously declared, that the miraculous success was based not only on the excellence of our weapons, but on the insight with which our crews knew how to use them, not only on the magnificence of the orders, but also on the self-sufficient wisdom and prudence with which the orders were executed, not only on the excellence of the leadership, but on the soldiers' immediate understanding of what was important at every moment, and on their correct grasp of every favorable circumstance which offered itself up. These qualities, as well as the loyalty, the obedience, the efficient discipline of man, which has proven itself even in enemy territory, can only exist with a good education at their base.⁵

Even before the war with Prussia, the Imperial government had recognized the many shortcomings of Austria's education system. As early as November 3, 1863, the House of Representatives called on the Ministry of State to draw up a new school law. However, not much happened until the war with Prussia (Vierzig Jahre Reichsvolksschulgesetz 1909, 9-11). The Austrian school system was merely "a measure to educate the people and adapted to an absolutist form of government." (Klein 1967, 298) Its essential guidelines had already been laid down in the "Political School Constitution" of 1805, and the 1855 Concordat between Austria and the Vatican added important amendments. In theory, these two laws did establish several meaningful provisions. The reality, however, strongly deviated from this positive impression. In addition to a very lax execution of compulsory education, an extremely high number of students per class and inadequate classrooms, especially the poor training of the teachers, proved to be detrimental. The Concordat granted the church school supervision, the Austrian state on the other hand was left with no space for intervention. Lastly, the Concordat limited teaching staff to a minimum, so in many places school lessons were based on the social background of the students. In doing so, it promoted an anachronistic class mentality, making it difficult to ascend from lower milieus (Vierzig Jahre Reichsvolksschulgesetz 1909, 35-50; Mikschy 1949, 5-8, 45-8; Jellouschek 1969). Considering these numerous drawbacks, it is not surprising that the liberal faculty had advocated for an educational reform for many years. For them, the Concordat was an obstacle to achieving this goal. "Much, very much has been irretrievably lost because of

the heroic courage of the Prussian nation in arms. The school, however, believes that it contributed considerably to these rare successes, by enabling the enthusiasm for King and Fatherland and by empower their sons to defeat an enemy who had remained behind in culture by the intelligent use of their weapons." "Pädagogische Rundschau," *Freie Pädagogische Blätter*, no. 2 (January 12, 1867): 27.

⁵ "Die preußische Volksschule und der letzte Krieg," *Amts-Blatt der Königlichen Regierung zu Stralsund*, no. 12 (March 21, 1867): 81.

the Concordat,” the *Freie Pädagogische Blätter* wrote after the defeat against Prussia:

The blood of our soldiers, which drenched the soil of Bohemia and Italy, our centuries-old union with maternal Germany – both of these, in addition to many other things, were sacrificed for that pact and its consequences. Without a Concordat Austria would have suffered no Königgrätz, no Nikolsburg, without the Concordat our troops would still be masters of Northern Italy today.⁶

But how significant did Austria’s military and political decision-makers think education was in ensuring their defeat? Numerous military authorities, including the commander of the victorious Prussian troops, Helmuth von Moltke, attributed the Prussian victory after the Battle of Königgrätz to the superior military education of the Prussian soldiers⁷ and the technological superiority of the Prussian army, excluding general education as a deciding factor. Nevertheless, the powerful slogan of the “Prussian schoolmasters” persisted. The following article explains, to what extent the inadequate education system and its military effects were part of the military and political discourses and which measures for the improvement of the school system were proposed by the army and by politicians. It can certainly be assumed that the Austrian military was a relevant actor in educational politics (Obinger and Kovacevic 2016; Tantner 2005). As noted in the study “Education and Military Rivalry” published in 2012, education benefits from international military rivalries and the preparation of armed conflict (Aghion, Persson, and Rouzet 2012). In the run-up to the First World War, the “multi-ethnic character” of the Habsburg army also influenced the Empire’s education (Hämmerle 2007) and made it a factor in “social armaments” (Obinger and Kovacevic 2016, 119). The present survey, however, begins earlier and deals with the time immediately before and after the war between Austria and Prussia. Thus, the focus will be on the army’s attitude towards the *Reichsvolksschulgesetz* (Imperial Elementary School Law), which was adopted in 1869 to improve the much-criticized Austrian education system. The last aspect that will be discussed is whether the Austrian military, or whether military arguments used by politicians, contributed significantly to the emergence and adoption of the new law.

⁶ A. Chr. Jessen, “Der Anfang vom Ende,” *Freie Pädagogische Blätter*, no. 24 (June 15, 1867): 369-70, here 369.

⁷ Thus, Moltke emphasized in a parliamentary speech of February 16, 1874: “It has been said that the schoolmaster won our battles. – Gentlemen, mere knowledge does not yet elevate a man to the point where he is prepared to risk his life for an idea, for duty, for honor and country; this includes the whole education of man. Not the schoolmaster, but the educator, the rank has won our battles, he who has now soon raised sixty years of nationhood to physical strength and spiritual freshness, to order and punctuality, to loyalty and obedience, to patriotism and manliness.” *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, 2. Legislaturperiode, I. Session 1874, vol. 1, 80.

2. The Military Discourse in Professional Journals

Although the deficiencies of the education system had already been recognized within Austrian military circles before the war against Prussia began, it did not play a major role in public discourse. The *Militär-Zeitung* for example printed a speech by the Member of Parliament Dr. Nepomuk Berger in which he highlighted the numerous shortcomings within the Austrian school system. Despite all efforts for the better, he saw education as

still very insufficient in many provinces. In the year 1857 in Lombardy-Venetia 33, in Dalmatia 23, in Galicia 22, and in Bukovina only 10 pupils out of 100 attended the lower elementary schools, although in all these regions the ratio of schools and teachers to pupils is much more favorable than in the German provinces.⁸

The Austrian army was particularly interested in training rudimentarily educated recruits to be faithful, patriotic, and loyal soldiers. Officers repeatedly vented their feelings in magazines, criticizing the male adolescents' inadequate preparation for their time as soldiers. It is often nothing more than a "pious wish" that the elementary schools give their students a sense of duty, patriotism, and moral values, one author wrote. "In reality, oftentimes men come to us in a condition, not necessarily of the lowest moral development, but of complete ignorance of what is required for the foundation of our military and moral building. The elementary school has done nothing to support the troop educators in their already difficult task."⁹ The army claimed that it was the one institution ensuring the true, sustainable education of Austria's men, thereby fending off the accusation of being a "raw *Soldateska*" (pack of soldiers). It was rather

the pinnacle of education for those thousands who come every year, mentally and physically neglected, and start their military service [...], only to return home after a few years as well-mannered people, taught to cherish structure and cleanliness and with the knowledge of law and order in their hearts!¹⁰

Among other things, the educational conditions within the Military Border, which was under military administration, substantiated this claim. Although the educational institutions in this area remained far behind those in the German-Austrian parts of the country, they distinguished themselves from the adjacent

⁸ "Dr. Berger in der 24. Sitzung des niederösterreichischen Landtages am 3. März 1863," *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 16, no. 21 (March 14, 1863): 161-3, here 163.

⁹ "Gedanken über die Pflege des moralischen Elements in unserer Armee," *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 18, no. 85 (October 25, 1865): 701-2, here 701.

¹⁰ "Militärisch-politische Zeitfragen," von einem süddeutschen Offizier a. D., *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 19, no. 16 (February 24, 1866): 121-4, here 121.

provinces such as Croatia-Slavonia – a fact that the military statistician Gustav Adolf Schimmer attributed to the favorable influence of the Austrian military.¹¹

At this point, however, the vast majority of military authors did not believe that education had a decisive effect on a battle's outcome. A comprehensive humanistic education was therefore considered unnecessary. After all, the work of the soldier would be a practical matter. Therefore one should only

teach the recruit what is absolutely essential and constitutes a true soldier; but those called to serve, who in the most part do not have the slightest practice in thinking independently, have been taught a large amount of unnecessary things of which they only remember bits and pieces.¹²

Instead of long marching exercises, which would increase the body's condition and steel it, Austria apparently preferred it when "man spends half a day sitting on the school bench with a crooked back, and therefore can hardly lift his shoulder after wearing the knapsack for several hours."¹³

In summary, the military especially criticized Austria's national education for its failures in training the young recruits' character and physique. However, this naming of grievances did not mean that representatives of the Austrian army had demanded a comprehensive educational reform. On the contrary: In their mind, the recruits' physical abilities were being wasted away during long school terms. Instead of demanding reform, efforts were made to promote the teaching of conscientiousness and patriotism. For this reason, rumors circulating in the Viennese coffee houses in 1866 of a great difference in the educational level between the Austrian and the allied Saxon troops did not bother the Austrian army leadership (Mikschy 1949, 8).

The defeat against Prussia did however trigger profound changes within military discussions. The military observers largely agreed in their search for the causes of defeat and in the lessons to be learned from the experience, with a few exceptions (Wagner 1971, 56). While an anonymous author in the *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift* did not classify the Prussian victory as "the victory of intelligence over brute force" and instead blamed it on an erroneous deployment, fragmentation of forces, hesitant and inactive leadership, and inferior tactics,¹⁴ other military officials held the inadequate educational system responsible for the crushing defeat. Although the impact of a "developed mind" would count "too little to avert or bring about catastrophes," they saw the Austrian's poor education as at worst "the lowest of the decisive factors," but

¹¹ Schimmer, Gustav Adolf, "Das Schulwesen in der k.k. österreichischen Militärgrenze, im Vergleiche zu jenem der Monarchie und zu Civil-Croatien insbesondere." *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, vol. 2, tome 5, (1861): 72-86, 119-31.

¹² "Gedankenpläne und Lesefrüchte," *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 15, no. 28, (April 5, 1862): 118.

¹³ "Gedankenpläne und Lesefrüchte," *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 15, no. 28, (April 5, 1862): 118.

¹⁴ "Über die Ursachen und Misserfolge bei der österreichischen Nordarmee im Kriege Preussens gegen Deutschland im Jahre 1866," *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, vol. 7, tome 2 (1866): 341-61.

thought the advantage of “a well-educated corps of recruits is large enough to demand, that in the future the elementary school educates all adolescents, thoroughly teaches them the basics in healthy and well-lit rooms, promotes the general development of their mental abilities and logical thinking, educates them morally and supports their physical development through gymnastics.” After all, a higher education increased the effectiveness of military training.¹⁵

Another anonymous author called for an improvement in the current educational system in a detailed series of articles. War opponent Prussia should be regarded as an archetype:

How much time has passed since it [Prussia] renounced absolutism, and yet its education has not been disregarded, on the contrary, we have had sufficient opportunity to acknowledge how much the Prussian elementary school has done for the individual, for the soldier with a rifle in his hand. Not only was he able to use his weapon with clever calculation, he was able to possess an active demeanor. All these combined arguments form a most eloquent plea for the improve- and development of education.¹⁶

The Prussian soldiers are consistently more independent than the Austrian, concluded another anonymous military author. The fighting of the Prussians proved that “they paid more attention to the thoughts of each commander’s spirit than to brute force or strict order, this was the cause of their tactical successes. To be sure, in Austria it is not as easy to leave space for ideas, because the countries’ intelligence has not progressed as far as Prussia’s.” Consequently, the author called for a reform of the educational system. Intelligence should be “nurtured throughout the nation by means of a more adequate and widespread education of the people, so as to implant a specific set of ideas into the mind of the masses and every individual within them.”¹⁷

Another author also criticized the soldiers’ lack of an active demeanor and independence. This “lack of military intelligence” made it difficult to learn new tactics, which have to attend to the increased firepower, because these tactics rely on independent soldiers. In the Battle of Königgrätz, the Austrian soldiers had often advanced in closed lines to attack the enemy with the bayonet. The result of this antiquated tactic was high losses amid Prussia’s hail of bullets (Allmayer-Beck 1987, 56). In fact, the Austrian military leadership did not believe that their troops, which consisted largely of uneducated farmers, could learn and implement a more complex tactic (Déak 1991, 67). That the “warfare of ‘Hurray!’ failed against that of the intelligentsia,” as the Austrian general

¹⁵ “Unsere Aufgabe,” *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, vol. 7, tome 4 (1866): 34–46, here 36–7.

¹⁶ “Des verwichenen Jahres neue Folge,” *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 20, no. 73 (September 18, 1867): 587–90, here 589.

¹⁷ “Noch einmal über unsere militärischen Mißerfolge,” *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 20, no. 6 (January 23, 1867): 45–6.

Karl Moering noted in his diary,¹⁸ seemed to be clear to the anonymous military author. So, he argued, the Austrian soldiers' low level of education had a negative impact on other sectors as well. Therefore, it had proven difficult to employ the numerous technical innovations of the age appropriately and organize them properly because of the army's "spellbound mental elements and laborers" standing in the way of putting them to a meaningful use.¹⁹

Statistical figures often substantiated the education system's urgent need for reforms. Another article stressed, that although literacy rates were at 96.2 percent in Lower Austria, 89.3 in Upper Austria, 68.1 in Bohemia, 62 in Silesia, and 60 percent in Salzburg, Styria was the only other Austrian province to reach a rate of more than 50 percent. In Hungary, only 24.2 percent of conscripts, and in Carinthia only 20.4 percent, could read and write and the situation looked even more alarming in other parts of the Empire. In Galicia and Bukovina, for example, only 4.5 percent of conscripted men could read and write; in Dalmatia, the figure was even at 0.8 percent. These numbers clearly showed "how much, especially in the east and south, remains to be done for the schools."²⁰

Military men did not confine their criticism of Austrian soldiers' deficient education to the journals; it also appeared in independent publications. An anonymous writer's study, published in Vienna in 1867, came to similar conclusions as previous journal articles had:

The higher intelligence has triumphed, the Prussian schoolmaster has beaten the Austrian, this is the dazzling dictum which has now become the general verdict of last year's campaign [...]. We cannot deny the justification of this conviction – for the needle-gun is also a result of this intelligence.

At the same time, however, the author refused to see the improvement of national education as a universal remedy. After all, the neglected education system was "the least cause for our failures and intellectual skills are the smallest of our soldierly deficiencies" (*Erinnerungen an die Tage des Unheils 1867*, 7).

The study was not limited to the subject of education, but also held the inferior armament, the army's inadequate organization, and the inability of the Austrian military leaders responsible for the defeat (*ibid.*, 21). Thus, the anonymous author did not advocate for the introduction of a better educational system. It is true, he wrote, that nobody recognizes

¹⁸ Diary entry from Moering, July 17, 1866, reprinted in: Wandruszka, *Schicksalsjahr 1866* (1966): 270.

¹⁹ "Ideen über die Mittel zur Heranbildung der für den Bedarf einer Armee in Österreich von der in neuester Zeit postulierten Stärke – nahezu einer Million Soldaten – nöthigen Anzahl intelligenter Ober- und Unteroffiziere," *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, vol. 8, tome 1, (1867): 175-82, here 175-6.

²⁰ Sehr, "Heeresergänzung in Italien 1865 im Vergleiche zu jener von Oesterreich," *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 20, no. 73 (September 18, 1867): 590-1, here 591.

the high value of national education for state and society more than we do; no one yearns more than us for the time in which we can hand over the rules of self-study to the ordinary soldier; we are also fully convinced that it is irrefutably necessary for lieutenants to study, in order to later become leaders, who do not invite new ignominy into the army and the nation; – but this seed’s harvest is reserved for a later time, we need an immediate remedy now, we have no time to expect the Holy Spirit to enlighten us, because the worst can face us again tomorrow. (ibid., 19-20)

What one needed above all right now was the “strengthening of character” and the “enhancement of morality; because that of intelligence is the result of years” (ibid., 43-4).

Another anonymous author, quoted in the same study, also emphasized personal qualities that had to be nurtured and cared for. “They, together with heightened intelligence, should form the fertile soil from which laurel trees will grow, that will then tower over those of the Prussians at Königgrätz or the French at Solferino” (ibid., 67). That the two anonymous writings were widely received seems certain, especially since excerpts were published in the *Militär-Zeitung*, which characterized the book as “a small but very readable paper.”²¹ The *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift* also gave the study a positive review and explicitly singled it out among the flood of other publications.²²

There was a broad consensus regarding the undervaluation of the educational basics needed for warfare as one reason for defeat, but the responsible military circles disagreed on how these grievances could be remedied (Wagner 1971, 56). Promoting the future officers’ character development did not seem to be enough for Austria’s army leadership. That is why, at first, they hoped to start resolving the crisis by introducing universal military conscription. Minister of War Franz von John advocated this strategy in a lecture before Emperor Franz Joseph on December 26, 1866 (Allmayer-Beck 1987, 61; Hämmerle 2007, 227-8). In addition to a comprehensive school reform, the defeat of Königgrätz could also justify reforming the army, he said. In his remarks, John also referred to the low level of education within the army, mostly agreeing with the general opinion expressed in the military discourse. According to him, one should not hope that introducing compulsory military service would “immediately supply the army with that quantity of intelligence it requires, and of which it will only benefit if national education, without which nothing extraordinary can be achieved, is generally brought to a higher level.” John thought it likely, that the school reform’s positive effects would take several years to materialize. Therefore, the Austrian army should be “the first weapon school of

²¹ “Erinnerungen an die Tage des Unheils,” *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 20, nos. 84 and 85 (October 26 and 30, 1867).

²² Reviews for “Erinnerungen an die Tage des Unheils,” *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, vol. 8, tome 3 (1867): 335-6.

the nation,” which could support the civil branches in educating the male population.²³

Although accompanied by fierce disputes, general conscription was finally introduced in both parts of the monarchy. This caused the discussion about national education to continue to gain momentum. An anonymous author called for the adaptation of the educational system to the new structure of the army. After all, in a system with general military service “the children’s teacher should work for the soldier, and the future military leader should in turn work for the sake of national education. Expert knowledge is not supposed to be confined to a caste. Education for state purposes should become a priority.” For this reason, the author of the short article advocated for the introduction of a seminar for teachers and a coordination body, which would organize the various branches of the educational system.²⁴

The same arguments were made in the book *Ueber Reorganisierung der Militär-Bildungs-Anstalten (On Reorganization of Military Education Institutions)*, which was anonymously published in 1868 by the influential Field Marshal Lieutenant and later Minister of War Franz Kuhn von Kuhnenfeld. Therein, Kuhn called for a comprehensive reform of the military educational system, which he saw as inevitable because of general conscription and the associated *Verbürgerlichung* (bourgeoisification) of the army. Military academies should, “first of all mold humans and then soldiers.” He added that “military education should be more interrelated with that of other citizens.” To achieve this, officer candidates should receive a broader humanistic education.²⁵ Consequently, Valentin Ritter von Streffleur, the publisher of the *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, personally advocated for the establishment of a seminar for the military’s instructors.²⁶ Starting in 1867/68, numerous “military scientific associations” were founded in Vienna; their goal: promoting strategic and tactical training and lessons in military history (Allmayer-Beck 1987, 70).

Progressive endeavors notwithstanding, the calls for increased training of the recruits’ character and physical fitness remained persistent. Captain Freiherr von Mayerhofer, in his lecture entitled “Das Volk in Waffen und seine Erziehung” (“The people in arms and their education”), advocated for the introduction of military youth education and the establishment of gymnastics and

²³ Lecture of the Minister of War Franz von John, December 28, 1866, reprinted in: Kaiserliche Verordnung vom 28. Dezember 1866 über die allgemeine Wehrpflicht (Prague: 1868), 9-14, here 12.

²⁴ “Das Unterrichtswesen und die allgemeine Wehrpflicht”, *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, vol. 9, tome 4 (1868): 288.

²⁵ “Ueber Reorganisierung der Militär-Bildungs-Anstalten,” 1868, cited in: Allmayer-Beck, *Die bewaffnete Macht* (1987), 65-6.

²⁶ “Über die Errichtung eines Militär Lehrer-Seminars. (Eine Skizze.),” *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, vol. 8, tome 1 (1867): 239-40.

sports in elementary schools. He additionally criticized the current state these schools were in.

In accordance with all schools of antiquity, physical education should go hand in hand with the cognitive, and the children – especially those of the poor factory population, coming out of their dull living rooms – should not be crowded together in dusty classrooms for hours, but rather be encouraged to move and strengthen their bodies outside in the free, healthy air.²⁷

He also demanded that the elementary schools provide a spiritual military education and introduce lessons teaching patriotism, which should above all convey values such as loyalty and a sense of duty.²⁸ These demands were by no means new, as a look at the discussions preceding 1866 shows.

Numerous authors, such as the journalist and former military writer Hermann Ritter von Orges, saw the army, rather than the elementary schools, as the true “school of the nation” (Hämmerle 2007, 228): “That no school is as excellently suited to the school of life as the army, that no teacher is so effective in guiding the pupil and promoting his development, like that of the officer, need scarcely any proof.”²⁹ No measure was more suited to compensating the lack of schools and teachers than military service. Nevertheless, it would be very valuable “if every recruit would bring with him a certain amount of basic knowledge.” Assuming the school and lessons were to be perfected in the future, they would serve as a useful supplement to the army’s training.³⁰ Orges suggested rewarding well-educated men by offering to cut their time in school for the army’s sake. He thereby hoped to encourage more citizens to strive for and acquire basic knowledge.³¹

Such proposals were accompanied by demands for the introduction of the one-year volunteer institute. In his 1866 speech addressed to the Emperor, Minister of War John had already emphasized that “the army, in addition to an increase of its numbers, requires intelligence, which until now it has lacked due mostly to statutory exemption.”³² After all, it was obvious that a modern conscript army could not work without the intellectual potential of the nation (Allmayer-Beck 1987, 76). As an officer wrote in retrospect, it was precisely

²⁷ Mayerhofer, “Das Volk in Waffen und seine Erziehung,” *Neue Militär-Zeitung*, no. 10 (February 3, 1869): 81-2.

²⁸ Mayerhofer, “Das Volk in Waffen und seine Erziehung,” *Neue Militär-Zeitung*, nos. 11 and 12 (February 6 and 10, 1869): 91-2, 102-4.

²⁹ Orges, Hermann Ritter von, “Die volkswirtschaftliche Bedeutung der allgemeinen Wehrpflicht,” *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 20, no. 36 (May 8, 1867): 290.

³⁰ Orges, Hermann Ritter von, “Die volkswirtschaftliche Bedeutung der allgemeinen Wehrpflicht,” *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 20, no. 36 (May 8, 1867): 290.

³¹ Orges, Hermann Ritter von, “Die volkswirtschaftliche Bedeutung der allgemeinen Wehrpflicht,” *Militär-Zeitung*, vol. 20, no. 37 (May 11, 1867): 297.

³² Lecture of the Minister of War Franz von John, December 28, 1866, reprinted in: Kaiserliche Verordnung vom 28. Dezember 1866 über die allgemeine Wehrpflicht (Prague: 1868), 9-14, here 10.

the purpose of the one-year volunteer institute “to offer the intelligent, young people, who are suitable for military service, the opportunity [...] to acquire the scientific education they need in only one year, whereas the great majority needs three years” (ibid., 77). If a recruit visited a grammar school or an upper secondary school, he had to spend only one year in the army instead of the mandatory three-year service, and could subsequently become a reserve officer (Engelbrecht 1986, 13-6; Allmayer-Beck 1987, 76-9). However, as the further development up to the First World War would show, the new institution was only partially successful in encouraging the “intelligence” of the nation to serve within the Austrian army.

In summary, it is obvious that the grievances of the Austrian education system were certainly discussed within military circles. The Austrian soldiers’ low level of education was seen as partly responsible for the defeat against Prussia, even though most writers were reluctant to speak of it as a decisive disadvantage. Consequently, demands for the expansion of the civil educational system were articulated, but only got limited attention. They went hand in hand with calls for the introduction of general conscription. Apart from the demands for the expansion of sole military spheres, such as the introduction of new rifles and a new army organization, tactical innovations, and the expansion of railway lines,³³ there was no consensus on promoting education. The military focused its attention on their own educational institutions, which were to be opened to include humanistic curriculums. In addition, demands for better moral and physical education of the youth, which had dominated discussions before 1866, persisted.

3. The Reichsvolksschulgesetz – an Immediate Consequence of Königgrätz?

Although the Austrian House of Representatives had already made initial demands for a reform of the educational system at the end of 1863, hardly anything happened in the following years to improve the unsatisfactory situation. Only the defeat against Prussia gave the Austrian government new impetus and thus accelerated the drawing up of improvements (Vierzig Jahre Reichsvolksschulgesetz 1909, 10). Far-reaching reforms finally seemed feasible. Following the December constitution, the Austrian government led by Prime Minister Karl von Auersperg began its work. The liberal cabinet was largely composed of commoners and therefore quickly got the nickname “*Bürgerministerium*” (Citizens’ Ministry; Mazohl 2016, 411-5).

³³ “Die österreichische Armee der Zukunft,” *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, vol. 9, tome 1 (1868): 123-42.

Initially, Austria's leading politicians had to lay the foundations for a new school law. A handwritten letter from the Kaiser, dated March 2, 1867, reinstated the Ministry of Education, which was dissolved in 1860 (Bundesministerium für Unterricht 1948, 15). On December 30, 1867, Leopold Hasner von Artha assumed the position of head of the ministry and declared the improvement of the Austrian educational system as the main objective of his term in office. Looking back at his tenure, he stated:

My first idea when I took up office was to inspect the Austrian educational system from the bottom up. The basis of the entire building, the elementary school, was particularly in need of reform, and although there were some issues in the middle and high schools which urgently needed solving, we had to start by reforming elementary schools to reach that level, which had produced excellent results in other civilized nations. (Battista 1948, 14)

The December Constitution of December 21, 1867, granted the state the right to supervise the educational system, thereby eroding a crucial part of the 1855 Concordat. Based on this premise, Auersperg began to implement the reforms he considered most urgent. With the "Gesetz über die Regelung des Verhältnisses zwischen Kirche und Staat" ("Law on the Regulation of the Relationship between Church and State") of May 25, 1868, the Austrian government created the necessary legal foundations (Vierzig Jahre Reichsvolksschulgesetz 1909, 22-3; Battista 1948, 13-4; Mikschy 1949, 8), the preconditions for an educational reform were established. Undersecretary of State in the Ministry of Education, Ernst von Feuchtersleben, together with Ministerial Counsellors Franz Exner and Adolf Beer, devised a "Draft of the Principles of Public Education in Austria," which was the basis for all further efforts (Hönigmann 1969, 653). In the course of the preparatory work, the first versions were sent to educational experts, and their suggestions for improvements were taken into account in further drafts.³⁴ Unfortunately, there are no files in the Austrian State Archive that provide information about the development of the first drafts of the Reichsvolksschulgesetz. Additionally, a fire destroyed the relevant minutes of the Council of Ministers.³⁵ It can be shown, however, that in March 1868, more than a year before the law came into effect, drafts were discussed within the Ministry of Education.³⁶

In spite of the military discussions on the need for better education, the military authorities did not come forth with concrete proposals. In the documents of the Ministry of Education, there were neither letters from the k.u.k. (imperial and royal) Ministry of War nor the k.k. (cisleithanian) Ministry of National

³⁴ Lecture by Hasner von Artha for Emperor Franz Joseph, December 31, 1868, ÖStA-AVA, UM-Präs., 772/1868 and in ÖStA-AVA, UM-Präs., 108/1869.

³⁵ Information received via email from the Austrian Academy of Sciences, January 18, 2017 as well as own archival research.

³⁶ Memorandum of the Presidium of the Ministry of Education, March 13, 1868, ÖStA-AVA, UM-Präs., 133/1868. First drafts can be found in ÖStA-AVA, UM-Präs., 605/1868.

Defense to be found. The lack of documents on the Reichsvolksschulgesetz in the inventory of the military authorities themselves is also striking; especially seeing as how high-ranking military men presented the Emperor with a statistic shortly after the defeat against Prussia, according to which only 31 percent of the Austrian soldiers could read and write (Schilcher 2009, 123). Despite this, far-reaching demands for remedial measures were missing. A basic lecture held by Hasner von Artha on December 31, 1868, only two and a half years after Königgrätz, to Emperor Franz Joseph shows, however, that military necessities played an important role in the drafting of the law. As the state now has the authority to reform the school system, Hasner concluded, a comprehensive educational reform must still be passed in the current session of the House of Representatives.

The more clearly it is recognized that the increase of the nation's prosperity, the improvement of its moral conditions and the increase of its military strength depends on the success of the elementary school, the more important it is not to deceive oneself that a great deal still has to be done in order to bring the Austrian school system up to the same level, which other countries have already achieved and which they are restlessly continuing to improve.³⁷

After this flaming plea, however, it took another two months before the Kaiser gave his consent to submit the draft to the House of Representatives on March 1, 1869.³⁸

The Minister of Education Leopold Hasner von Artha submitted the draft of a new school law to the House of Representatives a mere day after the Imperial permission (Ebner 1969, 306). The draft was designed to be a break with the past and to remedy the education system's previous deficiencies. It included the creation of an interdenominational elementary school, in which clerical supervision was replaced by state supervision. In addition, the draft prescribed an improvement in the teachers' education and wages, which was an effort to make the profession more appealing. Finally, it included the introduction of eight years of compulsory schooling and the limitation of the class size to 80 children (Mikschy 1949, 4, 10; Feldbauer 1979, 461; Scheipl and Seel 1985, 55-61). Military institutions influenced the creation of the draft, which can be seen in the numerous ideas clearly inspired by the military sector. For example, classes for the schoolchildren are scheduled to begin in the fall, just like the service of newly conscripted recruits. Separating the schoolchildren according to their age was also an idea derived from the army (Schilcher 2009, 125-6; Schilcher 2012, 9, 60-2). As the Austrian educational expert Bernd Schilcher

³⁷ Lecture by Hasner von Artha for Emperor Franz Joseph, December 31, 1868, ÖStA-AVA, UM-Präs., 772/1868 and in ÖStA-AVA, UM-Präs., 108/1869.

³⁸ Note of the Ministry of Education, without date, ÖStA-AVA, UM-Präs., 108/1869.

emphasizes, the “50-minute units were inspired by drill exercises and the school bell signaling break time comes from the drill sergeant’s whistle.”³⁹

Hasner started the report on his motivation for the draft with a short introduction to the historical development of the Austrian school system and concluded that much still had to be done “in order to raise the standards of the elementary school to the level, which it must achieve to keep pace with modern times, and in particular meet the requirements of the national economy.”⁴⁰ The Minister of Education did not give any indication of the military necessity to improve education.

In-depth discussions of the draft were assigned to a denominational commission on March 4. Four weeks later, it recommended adopting the law. The rapporteur of the committee, Dr. Dinkel, read the commission’s report at the beginning of the general debate on April 21, once again summarizing the reasons for the new bill: “The elementary school should be the youth’s institution for their general education. The people’s level of education primarily relies on the state of these elementary schools, seeing as they are the only schools attended by the majority of the youth. In Austria however, the elementary school has until now fulfilled this task insufficiently and only to a limited degree.”⁴¹ The report of the denominational commission also contains no indications of military motives.

Despite the urgent need for an educational reform, well recognized by many Members of Parliament, the bill encountered some resistance. Liberal and conservative forces were irreconcilably at odds. In a veritable Kulturkampf, numerous parliamentarians voiced federal, financial, and organizational concerns, while the confessional and religious resistance weighed most heavily. In particular, representatives of the Catholic Church flatly rejected the equality of all denominations as proposed in the draft (Jellouschek 1969, 299-302). However, the general debate, which lasted until April 23, did not lack members proclaiming their advocacy for the bill, either. The defeat at Königgrätz, which had only been three years ago at that point, played an important role in the discussions; this can be deduced from the numerous military arguments that were picked up by both opponents and supporters of the law. Representative Schneider insistently advocated for the bill’s adoption and pronounced emphatically: “This law seems to me, I say this quite definitely, to be a spiritual law of defense, which wards off the power of darkness and adorns the people with the

³⁹ „Bildungsexperte Bernd Schilcher tot,” Obituary by the ORF of May 30, 2015, <<http://steiermark.orf.at/news/stories/2713723/>>; May 28, 2018. See also Schilcher (2009): 126.

⁴⁰ „Begründung des Entwurfes eines Gesetzes, durch welches die Grundsätze des Unterrichtswesens bezüglich der Volksschulen festgestellt werden.” Printed in: Deutschösterreichisches Unterrichtsamt, Zur Fünfzigjahrfeier des Reichsvolksschulgesetzes (1919): 1-46, here 3.

⁴¹ Protokolle des Abgeordnetenhauses, 1. Session, 189. Sitzung (April 21, 1869): 5726.

weapons of light; it is made to spread education and enlightenment.”⁴² The term “*geistiges Wehrgesetz*” (“spiritual military law”) was remembered and picked up again forty years after the passing of the law (Vierzig Jahre Reichsvolksschulgesetz 1909, 3). It symbolized the widespread feeling that, in addition to the army, the educational system too had to be reformed in order to eliminate the causes for the defeat of 1866.

Even opponents of the draft like the Tyrolean deputy Josef Greuter expected nothing less of a new educational law than “the salvation of Austria’s future,” but doubted that the bill could meet this demand.⁴³ In his speech, Greuter also referred to the “Prussian schoolmasters” thesis and ironically said: “By always saying, that the elementary school is most important, the elementary school teachers of Prussia have triumphed at Sadowa [Königgrätz], you will encourage teachers to wish that they, when they replace the generals at Sadowa, also receive the salary of a general.”⁴⁴ Deputy Dr. Albert Jäger, who also opposed the law, spoke of a “school illness of our time” and of “an overestimation of the value of elementary school.”⁴⁵

Ultimately, the law’s advocates benefitted from the military necessities and the calls for a better education of the recruits, which came from within the army. For example, the representative Dr. Ignaz Karl Figuly von Szep confirmed the need for new regulations using military data.

I have an official record of how many recruits among 100 can read and write, because this is tested during the medical examinations. This index is not uninteresting! In Lower Austria 96 out of 100 can read and write, in Upper Austria 89, in Bohemia 68, in Silesia 62, in Salzburg 60, in Moravia 46, in Styria 50, in Galicia 4, in Bukovina 4, in Carniola 3, in Dalmatia 2.⁴⁶

The deputy Dr. Anton Ryger emphasized the population’s need for reform, which in his mind could not be denied. He explicitly pointed to the defeat against Prussia as having tipped the scales towards innovating the educational system: “It vibrates in the air, it shakes public opinion; from the farmer’s smallest child up to the highest classes, the need has become palpable, and has, especially since 1866, been loudly expressed everywhere and anywhere.”⁴⁷

At the end of the general debate, Minister of Education Hasner was responsible for once again highlighting the advantages of the bill and proving the critics’ arguments wrong. In his detailed speech, he especially targeted those who had been admonishing to implement the bill for federalist or confessional

⁴² Protokolle des Abgeordnetenhauses, 1. Session, 189. Sitzung (April 21, 1869): 5733.

⁴³ Protokolle des Abgeordnetenhauses, 1. Session, 190. Sitzung (April 22, 1869): 5746.

⁴⁴ Protokolle des Abgeordnetenhauses, 1. Session, 190. Sitzung (April 22, 1869): 5751.

⁴⁵ Protokolle des Abgeordnetenhauses, 1. Session, 191. Sitzung (April 23, 1869): 5781.

⁴⁶ Protokolle des Abgeordnetenhauses, 1. Session, 191. Sitzung (April 23, 1869): 5777.

⁴⁷ Protokolle des Abgeordnetenhauses, 1. Session, 191. Sitzung (April 23, 1869): 5790.

reasons (Ebner 1969, 309-16). Finally, Hasner also invoked military motives and stated:

If we do not have a good elementary school, then we will never be strong [...]. Not only on the battlefield, but also in the field, which is farmed by the peasant, the elementary school plays a decisive role everywhere. This will be everyone's right, and it is why the poorest countries in particular need good schools.⁴⁸

Hasner's speech was followed by thunderous applause and paved the way for the passing of the draft. The "Gesetz, durch welches die Grundsätze des Unterrichtswesens bezüglich der Volksschulen festgestellt werden" ("Law establishing the Principles of Education concerning Elementary Schools") was consequently adopted by the House of Representatives on April 24, 1869, with 111 votes in favor and 4 votes against. The greater part of the opposition had left the Chamber before the ballot (Jellouschek 1969, 289).

Subsequently, the bill had to pass the Austrian House of Lords. Their appointed commission also emphasized the merits of the new regulations and stated in its final report:

If this draft is approved by the House and it obtains the imperial sanction, the political school constitution of 1805 will be replaced by a constitutional school policy, and the much-tested Austria, which has carried out its rebirth in the weapons through the new military law, will, by dint of the new educational law, carry out its resurrection in spirit. (Ebner 1969, 308)

Again, the consonance of compulsory schooling and compulsory military service was noticeable. The Reichsvolksschulgesetz thus acted as the *geistiges Wehrgesetz* (spiritual military law) of Austria. The discussions in the House of Lords did not last as long as those in the House of Representatives had and the military argument was hardly mentioned at all. Ultimately, the House of Lords agreed to the Reichsvolksschulgesetz on May 10, 1869. Four days later, Emperor Franz Joseph sanctioned the draft and expressed his hope, that the new elementary school "will provide the Fatherland with the wealth of knowledge and skill which, as history has taught, forms the strongest foundation of states' and peoples' power and prosperity."⁴⁹ The law was published in the law gazette under No. 62/1869 and came into effect at the beginning of the school year 1869/70 (Jellouschek 1969, 289).

Although the general debate mainly focused on other issues, primarily because of the liberal Bürgerministerium's disputes with the conservative opposition, the military considerations ultimately played an important role in the adoption of the Reichsvolksschulgesetz. Most members of parliament seemed to remember the shock of the 1866 defeat. The first effects of the law were

⁴⁸ Protokolle des Abgeordnetenhauses, 1. Session, 191. Sitzung (April 23, 1869): 5800.

⁴⁹ Speech by Franz Joseph, May 15, 1869, cited in: Vierzig Jahre Reichsvolksschulgesetz (1909), 21.

already evident some years after its adoption. While in 1870 only 45 percent of all conscripts could read and write, in 1882 this figure had reached 67 percent (Mikschy 1949, 40).

The Austrian press also made a connection between the defeat against Prussia and the passing of the Reichsvolksschulgesetz. The *Deutsche Volks-Zeitung* emphasized on April 30, 1869, that the “clerical teaching in Austria was hit on the head in Königgrätz” and that the new law “now goes into the right direction.”⁵⁰ Later, the *Salzburger Zeitung* wrote:

As the state can demand of every one of its citizens that he or she comply with both the tax obligation and its military service to the best of their ability, it must also be anxious to improve both aforementioned duties by the improvement of its schools. There is no doubt that the government has taken these civic duties into account in the drafting of the school laws.⁵¹

Other newspapers even perceived the law as a measure to prepare Austria for revenge against Prussia.⁵² Military newspapers however did not cover the passing of the law.

The very progressive provisions nonetheless contained some disadvantages and vague phrasing, so that the theoretically compulsory education could easily be circumvented. Additionally, most of the requirements “resulted in threatening sanctions and understood the school to be a compulsory institution with the goal to secure socially and economically necessary qualifications” (Feldbauer 1979, 462). The elementary school as a “disciplinary institution” thereby often had a distinct military character (Feldbauer 1979, 462), which had to have been in keeping with those members of the army that had advocated for an improvement of the youth’s discipline, patriotism, and strength of character. For years after its implementation, resolute opposition to the law prevailed, especially in ecclesiastical circles (Mikschy 1949, 37-40). The Catholics, in particular, advocated the repeal or amendment of the reform. As early as 1871, barely two years after the law came into effect, the Austrian government, in light of the ongoing criticism, was considering modifying some of the provisions. The idea ultimately did not receive a majority in parliament. But with the amendment to the school law of May 5, 1883, some major points of the Reichsvolksschulgesetz were revoked. Among other things, the amendment included special exemptions and allowed for taking the religious denomination into account when appointing senior teachers and school leaders (Vierzig Jahre Reichsvolksschulgesetz 1909, 24-35).

⁵⁰ “Volksschulgesetz,” *Deutsche Volks-Zeitung*, vol. 3, no. 17 (April 28, 1869): 209.

⁵¹ “Die zweite Hauptversammlung des Salzburger Lehrervereins,” *Salzburger Zeitung*, no. 226 (October 6, 1869).

⁵² *Volks- und Schützenzeitung*, vol. 24, no. 61 (May 21, 1869): 288.

4. Conclusion

In 2012, the Austrian education expert Bernd Schilcher emphasized that the Austrian Reichsvolksschulgesetz was primarily introduced for military reasons:

It is not surprising that Austria was once again lagging behind and only a lost war against Prussia was the decisive reason to establish this copy of a German school institution. After the lost battle of Königgrätz in 1866, the high-ranking Austrian military officials tried again – this time with Emperor Franz Josef [*sic*]. Once more, they convinced the monarch that Prussia's better schools, with eight years of compulsory education instead of six and classes sorted by age that had worked well for 48 years, and more efficient teacher training, led to victory over the far less educated Austrian soldiers. Therefore the answer was again: not a new army, but a new Reichsvolksschulgesetz 1869. (Schilcher 2012, 67)

As has been shown, Schilcher exaggerates at this point. Austrian military forces did not advocate educational reform directly. Though it is true that a close connection between the Battle of Königgrätz, the introduction of universal conscription, and, finally, the adoption of the Reichsvolksschulgesetz cannot be denied, this connection is less striking than Schilcher makes it seem.

In fact, the Reichsvolksschulgesetz was the beginning of the modernization of the Austrian educational system, which had been long overdue, and was partly bolstered by military considerations. The deficiency of Austria's school system had been widely acknowledged before 1866, but it took the unexpected defeat against Prussia to initiate comprehensive reforms. The supposed fact that it was the "Prussian schoolmaster," who had brought about Prussia's victory in the Battle of Königgrätz particularly spurred the reform effort. Consequently, both the military academic literature and military leadership relied on the saying to back up their demands for a better education system.

Although there is a lack of relevant archival sources on the development of the law, military motivations can be proven to have had an influence on its drafting. In his presentation to Emperor Franz Joseph, Minister of Education Hasner von Artha not only emphasized that better education would increase Austria's prosperity and improve the people's morality, he also stressed that it would strengthen the military. Instances of military authorities directly influencing the development the Reichsvolksschulgesetz cannot be proven. At that time, the Ministry of War was much more concerned with the reform of the Military Penal Code.

Ultimately, politicians used the military narrative in support of the draft. They even coined the term "geistiges Wehrgesetz." The law was compared to the introduction of universal military service and both reforms were intended to ensure that the new Dual Monarchy regained international competitiveness after the Austrian defeat, militarily and economically. The preceding remarks have shown that the military considerations were not the decisive or sole mo-

tives for reforming the Austrian educational system. They did however provide ammunition for the advocates of the reform and thereby helped to enforce it despite insistent resistance. The Austrian military also came forward with tentative demands, not for progressive reasons, but out of pure self-interest: if the army once again wanted to compete with the other European armies, its soldiers had to have a uniformly high level of education. Knowing that such a transition could not be achieved overnight, the introduction of the Reichsvolksschulgesetz seemed like a good place to start. In the following years, the military repeatedly demanded improvements of the education system to meet the technical and tactical challenges facing modern mass armies (Obinger and Kovacevic 2016, 131-3).

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