

Lawrence Sondhaus. *Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf: Architect of the Apocalypse.*
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General Franz (later Fieldmarshal and Count) Conrad von Hoetzendorf, with only a short interruption Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Dual Monarchy between 1906 and 1917 and de facto commander of the army from the outbreak of war until 1917, has remained a controversial figure especially in Austrian historiography. While all commanders of the major continental powers at the outbreak of World War I have been criticized and none still held office when the war ended, the controversy about Conrad is different.

What is involved here is not only Conrad's constant advocacy of preventive war against Serbia or Italy, most chiefs of staff during the prewar period engaged in similar dreams, nor his advocacy of the infantry attack at all costs, again an idea shared by all continental war planners, nor finally his complicated deployment scheme to counter the prospect of a multi-front war and attacking east without having arrived at firm operational agreements with the German ally. But as the author, Professor Lawrence Sondhaus of the University of Indianapolis correctly avers, the real rea-

son for the continuing interest in Conrad was that he became the symbol of the old army, "the greatest soldier in Austrian history since Prince Eugene", and defense of his reputation became enmeshed in the politics of the First, and to a lesser degree, that of the Second Austrian Republic.

During the Austrian First Republic, as indeed in France, Germany, and Britain, the compilation of the military history of the Great War was dominated by former staff officers, including three successive directors of the Kriegsarchiv. There were, to be sure, occasional military critics of specific operations, including Kuhn von Kuhnenfeld and Carl Freiherr von Bardolff, but these were exceptions, and generally the former officers closed ranks against the civilian "amateurs". Conrad became a venerated figure in the army of the First Republic and though during the war he often had been suspicious of the intentions of his German ally, he was incorporated into the ethos of the Wehrmacht after 1938.

The catastrophe of 1945 did not shake their faith. In 1955 Oskar Regele, another former k.u.k officer, published a best selling biography of Con-

rad and when the Second Republic reestablished military forces his memory, by now almost transformed into mythology, remained a potent symbol of tradition and continuity. Here an anecdote may be of interest. In the late 1960s, when I was doing research on the history of the Austrian army from 1848 to 1918 in the library of the *Kriegsarchiv* in Vienna, the seat to my left was reserved for Rudolf Kiszling, Director of the *Kriegsarchiv* from June 1938 to May 1945 and as lieutenant colonel Conrad's last chief of staff. One day he turned to me and asked if I had gotten to Conrad yet. When I replied in the affirmative, he said "but Professor Rothenberg, you must tell the truth about Conrad." When I answered that he was much better qualified than I was, he replied "but I can not do this. Ich war doch sein Mann."

By this time, however, the direction of the *Kriegsarchiv* had changed and new, archive trained civilians such as Kurt Peball, Peter Broucek, and Manfred Rauchensteiner shifted research towards a more sober evaluation. In any case, Conrad had never been an object of hero worship for foreign historians who from the outset on displayed a critical attitude towards Conrad, describing him as one of the men most responsible for the outbreak of war in 1914, a burden on any diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis, and, once operations began, as an incompetent and indecisive commander.

The volume reviewed here, the first biography of Conrad in forty-five years, generally shares this negative view of Conrad. But it is not a political, strategic or operational study, even though such matters take up about half of the volume. Its main purpose, in the words of its author, is an attempt to "explain his rise to prominence, actions, and ideas, successes and failures in terms of his personal background and formative experiences" (p.vii). It is based on archival sources in the *Kriegsarchiv* where recently acquired family documents shed additional light on Conrad's early years and the period of his retirement. The bulk

of the documentation, however, rests on the careful use of printed primary sources and the secondary literature where little has escaped the author's attention.

Almost all of the writing on Conrad deals with his activities since his appointment as Chief of the General Staff in 1906 and with Sondhaus accepting the conventional interpretation, the most important contribution of this book lies in the psychological dimension, revealing a little known Conrad, a bright child with ambitions to become an artist but compelled to follow a military career.

He was born in 1852 in Penzing, then a Vienna suburb, into a mid-level civil service family ennobled in 1815. His father had been the first family member to become an officer, invalided and pensioned off in 1848. Young Franz was clearly under the dominant influence of his mother Barbara, who, with the family means modest, shared his household with his first wife Wilhelmine who died in 1905, and when he remarried in 1915 with his second wife, Virginia. While never wealthy or accepted by the 'first society', Conrad attended the Hainburg cadet school from 1863 to 1867, then made the all important jump to the Military Academy in Wiener Neustadt and was commissioned into the *Jaeger*.

Intellectually highly gifted and hard working, he gained admission into the *Kriegsschule* in 1874, graduating first in his class and transferred to the General Staff Corps. As a captain he participated in the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, returned to teach tactics at the *Kriegsschule* where he not only was a success as a lecturer, but also began to publish studies on tactics, a practice intensified in coming years, which attracted wide interest and gained him a devoted following. Shifting to line duty, commanding a regiment in Troppau, a brigade in Trieste, and a division in Innsbruck he was able to test some of his ideas in practice.

A strong advocate of psychological factors, Conrad regarded a well trained, offensive-minded infantry as the key to victory. He paid little attention to the need for artillery support and maintained, disregarding the lessons of the Boer and the Russo-Japanese War, that infantry could overcome an entrenched enemy with its own resources. Here, perhaps, Sondheim overstates the uniqueness of Conrad's innovations. New and aggressive infantry tactics were coming into use everywhere. But as a successful troop commander and trainer and a well known author Conrad clearly stood well above the average level of the Habsburg officer corps and when in 1906 Archduke Francis Ferdinand managed to have the then *Feldmarschall Leutnant* Conrad elevated to the post of Chief of the General Staff the appointment was well received. Succeeding *Feldmarschall* Friedrich Graf von Beck, an intimate of Emperor Francis Joseph who had held the office for 35 years, Conrad was widely welcomed as the man to bring the army up-to-date.

By then Conrad was 54 years old and had been on active service for 35 years. He had made a brilliant career, but now his fortune changed. Sondhaus considers him the wrong man. A tactician rather than a strategist he lacked the necessary qualifications and his "appointment came after he had passed his intellectual peak" (p.243). As Chief of Staff he constantly sought to remedy the shortcomings in manpower, equipment, and training to ready the Dual Monarchy for the great war which as a convinced Darwinist, he believed was inevitable. His efforts were only partially successful, and his main objective - preventive war against Russia, Italy, and Serbia - repeatedly were frustrated by Emperor Francis Joseph, Archduke Ferdinand, Foreign Minister Aehrenthal and others. As a partial solution, Conrad and his staff developed a series of mobilization schemes and reopened relations with the Prusso-German General Staff. But the mobilization schemes were compli-

cated and contradictory and no firm military agreements were reached with Germany.

Conrad became more and more pessimistic while after 1907 his affair with Virginia (Gina) von Reininghaus, the 28 year old wife of a Styrian industrialist whom he finally married in 1915, added complications. From about 1911 on his private diary and his letters to Gina reveal an increasing pessimism about the future of the monarchy, culminating in the letter written the evening after the assassination of Francis Ferdinand in which he declared that the coming conflict would be a hopeless struggle, but one which must be fought because such an ancient monarchy and such an ancient army cannot perish ingloriously (p.141).

The book then provides a short account of Conrad's wartime activities, stressing his dislike of the Monarchy's ever growing dependence on Germany, relief from his post by Emperor Charles, and his actions as Army Group Commander in the Tyrol. All this is based on the standard printed sources and provides little that is new. But there is new, and archival based, material in the discussion of the difficult post-war years, his relations with right-wing ex-officer groups, and finally, long an agnostic, Conrad's alleged reconciliation with the Church on the day before his death in 1925.

The epilogue is most interesting, discussing his reputation as seen by historians, semi-scholars, and publicists in the coming three decades during which Conrad's advocates generally framed their hagiographic argument along the lines that Conrad had been a great commander, but that he always lacked the instrument to carry out his plans. As has already been pointed out and as the subtitle indicates, Sondhaus rejects this interpretation. Overall, while perhaps providing little information that is new for the specialist, and on occasion relying too much on Conrad's memoirs, this is a most useful book bringing the voluminous literature on Conrad up to date.

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