Commentary

Power and Professionalism

ALAN SKED

PROFESSOR HEINDL IS TO BE THANKED for providing us with an excellent overview of the history of the imperial civil service during the last century and a half of the Habsburg monarchy. She must also be thanked for providing us with an interesting historiography of both the Austrian and Prussian bureaucracies, although, she has to confess, at least in the Austrian case, there remains an almost endless list of unanswered questions about these people, ranging from their social and economic background, to the nature and extent of their cooperation on different levels, to their political biases and national leanings, not to mention, of course, their treatment of ordinary citizens.

She herself has been able to fill in some of the gaps in her much-praised book, *Gehorsame Rebellen*.[1] For example, in comparing the views of Viktor von Andrian-Warburg, on the one hand, who believed that an ever-growing bureaucracy, stuffed with boring bourgeois, endangered the finances of the monarchy during the Metternich period, and those of Ignaz Beidtel, on the other, who believed, on the contrary, that Francis I had created an "aristocratic bureaucracy" or a "bureaucratic aristocracy" to serve an absolute monarchy, she reaches some rather original conclusions.[2] For a start, as far as the central court offices in Vienna were concerned, there was no question of the bourgeoisie gaining in power and influence. The number of high aristocrats (*Fürsten, Grafen*, and *Freiherren*) among those employed there rose by 6.8 percent, from 16.77 percent in 1781 to 23.56 percent in 1841, while the number of small nobles and bourgeois declined by 6.8 percent, from 83.23 percent in 1781 to 76.44 percent in 1841. Yet if one separates the small nobles from the bourgeoisie, it seems that the former declined in influence to the benefit of the latter—that is, the small nobility fell from 45.45 percent to 29.88 percent, while the bourgeoisie rose from 37.78 percent to 46.56 percent. So the lesser nobility was losing out to both the higher nobility and the bourgeoisie.[3] Heindl, of course, demonstrates how nuanced these developments were by differentiating between different state departments.[4] Of the period after 1848, we have none of the same knowledge, save for the foreign ministry, although similar research should be feasible from the same sorts of sources—state handbooks—that Heindl used.[5] It should be added, finally, to give Heindl her due, that her book also paints a detailed

[1]Waltraud Heindl, *Gehorsame Rebellen. Bürokratie und Beamte in Österreich 1780 bis 1848* (Vienna, 1990).
[2]Ibid., 142–59.
[3]Ibid., 155.
[4]Ibid., 155–59.
[5]For research on the foreign ministry, see William D. Godsey, Jr., *Aristocratic Redoubt: The Austro-Hungarian Foreign Office on the Eve of the First World War* (West Lafayette, 1999); Helmut Rumpler, "Die rechtlich-organisatorischen

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picture of the rather frugal standard of living of the average bureaucratic family. Like the imperial officer corps, which I examined in a study of Radetzky's army many years ago,[6] Austrian bureaucrats were not expected to live lives of luxury, yet could nonetheless take comfort in the prospect that the state would provide for their old age through pensions and/or disability benefits or look after their widows and children if they died.

So far, so good. The trouble with taking the subject much further as an area of research depends on the nature of the assumptions made. What is a civil service supposed to do? How big should it be to do it? At what stage does it become a burden on the economy, both in terms of cost and of manpower? How does one measure its efficiency? What constitutes corruption? At what stage and in what fashion can it become "a state within the state," serving its own interests rather than those of the citizenry as a whole? All these questions are implicit in the original debate in which Heindl became involved: how honest and efficient was the imperial civil service in Austria?

This is a debate in which size matters. How many civil servants were there? Heindl, in her book, states that, in the 1840s, there were about 140,000 (up from approximately 71,000 in 1828), taking all kinds together—this for an empire of 56 million people, including Hungary and Transylvania.[7] This accords with other estimates. For example, Peter Evan Turnbull, in his two-volume account of Austria, published in London in 1840—a work which is perhaps the best description of Austria at the time, but which Heindl does not include in the bibliography of her *Gehorsame Rebellen*—stated that the civil service consisted of 27,118 permanent and 5,665 temporary appointees who had gymnasium and university certificates along with others—toll-collectors, porters, miners, and the like—who held inferior qualifications but who numbered 85,774.[8] Thus, there were almost 120,000 civil servants in all. Turnbull got his statistics from the same official sources as Heindl, which she says were published from 1828. These statistics, according to Turnbull, were perhaps the best in Europe. Indeed, he quotes an Austrian minister as saying: "I often wonder at motions made in your parliament for statistical information, which, even when produced is very defective; whereas I have no occasion to go beyond my own library for any detail whatever, however minute, of all that exists in any part of the empire."[9]

Yet what do these statistics mean? Today, historians have great trouble discovering how large European bureaucracies were in the nineteenth century and how to compare them. Turnbull, for example, states that in 1813–14, the British civil service employed more than 130,000 civil servants, although it had no internal customs men or royal monopolies like tobacco to worry about.[10] Yet Raymond Grew says that there were 640,000 civil servants in Italy in 1900 and only 150,000 in Britain by the 1880s. Russia apparently needed only 38,000 civil servants in 1800

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und sozialen Rahmenbedingungen für die Außenpolitik der Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918," in *Die Habsburgermonarchie*, vol. 4, part 1, *Die Habsburgermonarchie im System der internationalen Beziehungen*, ed. Adam Wandruszka and Peter Urbanitsch (Vienna, 1989), 1–121; Éva Somogyi, "Magyar Diplomaták a közsös külügyminisztériumban" [Hungarian diplomats in the common Ministry of Foreign Affairs], in *Századok. A Magyar történelmi társulat folyóirata. Az alapítás Éve 1867. Különlenyomat* [Centuries: The journal of the Hungarian Historical Society. Founded in 1867. Offprint] 138, no. 3 (2004): 602–72; and Somogyi, "Im Dienst der Monarchie oder der Nation? Ungarische Führungsbeamte am Ballhausplatz," *Österreichische Osthefte* 44, nos. 3–4 (2002): 596–626.

[6]Alan Sked, *The Survival of the Habsburg Empire: Radetzky, the Imperial Army and the Class War, 1848* (London, 1979), chap. 1.

[7]Heindl, *Gehorsame Rebellen*, 140.

[8]Professor Herbert Matis, Austria's leading economic historian, first pointed out to me the value of Turnbull's volumes many years ago. See Peter Evan Turnbull, *Austria*, 2 vols. (London, 1840). For his figure for the number of civil servants, see ibid., 2:241.

[9]Ibid., 2:248.

[10]Ibid., 2:244.

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but 113,990 by 1856, whereas Germany by 1914 needed 1,200,000 imperial civil servants "and as many more state employees below them."[11] The large German figure is confirmed by Hamerow,[12] and both quote the figures by the Andersons that, in 1910, there were 200 public officials for every ten thousand inhabitants in Belgium, whereas the equivalent figures for France, Germany, and England were 176, 126, and 73, respectively.[13] None of these authorities has anything to say on Austria; Aylmer in his chapter on bureaucracy in the *Companion Volume* of *The New Cambridge Modern History,* has nothing to say either.[14] So in the absence of statistics, it is difficult to come to firm or fast judgments concerning the efficiency of the Austrian bureaucracy in the nineteenth century compared with others. Nonetheless, a start can certainly be made.

In our investigations into the Austrian civil service and the Austrian officer corps respectively, both Heindl and I came to believe that, by the Metternich period, both were becoming something of a caste—self-recruiting, self-perpetuating, and living in a sort of social and professional bubble. Turnbull certainly had this impression also:

> ... all educated on the same plan; all having read (as far as their respective degrees extend) the same books, and most of them probably no others; all upholding the stability of the government, not only for their own daily bread, but as hostages also for the multitude of families with which they are connected; and in a certain degree for every family in the empire; each of whom, may expect similar future provision for others of their children and connections. Neither even does this constitute the whole of their personal interest in the conservation of existing institutions. The government deserts not its servants in their old age, nor their families after they have gone.[15]

It was one of Turnbull's main points that the Austrian monarchy had no need to oppress its subjects, since so many were beholden to it by reason of education, employment, and welfare.

Yet Turnbull also believed that bureaucracy was "one of the greatest evils of the Austrian system."[16] This was because, in his view, it put its own interests first; or rather that it had become such a mainstay of the system that the system had become impervious to change. Let me quote him at length: "Yet Austria has her points of *difficulty*.... [I]f we investigate the details of the fiscal and administrative departments, we shall find in them, it may be feared, considerable amount of mismanagement, abuse and corruption. The ministers Metternich and Kolowrat are fully aware of their existence and abundantly anxious for their removal, but all who have comprehended the structure of the civil service ... will perceive that, with an organization so peculiar, no large measure of official reform can be attempted without great embarrassment and probably even danger to the state."[17] And why was this the case? Because:

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[11]Raymond Grew, "The Nineteenth-Century European State," in *Statemaking and Social Movements: Essays in History and Theory*, ed. Charles Bright and Susan Harding (Ann Arbor, 1987), 83–120, esp. 87.

[12]Theodore S. Hamerow, *The Birth of a New Europe: State and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1983), 264. On page 263, he gives the figures for British civil servants employed by central government as 50,000 in 1881 and 116,000 in 1901. These again demonstrate, given the figures in the main text, just how difficult it is to find reliable, never mind comparable, statistics.

[13]Eugene N. Anderson and Pauline R. Anderson, *Political Institutions and Social Change in Continental Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), 167. It is not clear whether *England* refers to the entire United Kingdom in this case.

[14]G. E. Aylmer, "Bureaucracy," in *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 13, *Companion Volume*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge, 1979). On the other hand, there are some (economic) statistics on Austria Hungary in B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750–1970* (Stanford, 1978).

[15]Turnbull, *Austria*, 2:242.

[16]Ibid., 2:244.

[17]Ibid., 2:390–91.

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> Persons obstinately attached to an antique system, or profiting habitually by the products of long-established abuse, cannot be safely displaced from employments to which they have risen by the usual routine of the service. They cannot, with safety, be sent forth to disseminate dissatisfaction and distrust among the thousands and tens of thousands of families, where attachment to the government is blended with the expectation, almost as a matter of right, that their children shall inherit the provision it affords. It is in this respect that the cohesive principle itself, which blends the public with the government, is a collateral source of difficulty; since in many points it prevents the adoption of changes, whereby the public feeling would be jarred through the shock that would be felt in the public service; and hence it is only by slow and cautious degrees, that the Austrian ministry can effect those improvements which are essentially important to the welfare of the state.[18]

Thus, Turnbull argued that what I have elsewhere termed "the Habsburg welfare state"[19] had become a two-edged sword.

The so-called Metternich System did of course break down and was swept away by revolution. Yet the Josephinist system of an enlightened imperial bureaucracy remained. (Metternich's Austria, of course, had itself been thoroughly Josephinist in nature.)[20] Was the system that held sway between 1851 and 1918 any different? Ideally, we should distinguish between the period from 1851 to 1867 and that from 1867 to 1918, and perhaps between subdivisions of these two periods. But the evidence is missing; the research still remains to be done.[21]

Once again, there are some clues. If Turnbull commented intelligently on Metternich's Austria, A. Lawrence Lowell, the president of Harvard University, made many interesting observations on the Dual Monarchy in an important work first published in 1896.[22] First, he noted that "the bureaucracy, or body of civil officials, demands ... especial notice on account of its extraordinary power."[23] He was quick to point out, on the other hand, that the bureaucracy was not politicized. Count Taaffe, who himself had been trained as a civil servant, had "steadily refused to use it as a party tool, and [had] made few appointments or removals for party purposes; and this although the Germans were generally opposed to him in Parliament."[24] He added: "The absence of the spoils system is all the more creditable, inasmuch as corruption appears to be deep seated in Austrian public life. I say appears to be, because there is nothing so difficult to determine in any country as the probity of the public officials, and the loudest outcry by no means indicates the greatest venality."[25] Still, Lowell noted that in various trials, even ministers involved in fraud cases had admitted in court that "tipping" was an Austrian institution that extended from waiters to cabinet members—the expression *Trinkgeld*, covering percentage cuts and bribes, as well as tips. He shuddered to think what might happen should the (corrupt) political parties ever get control of the bureaucracy.

Lowell's real complaint against the imperial bureaucracy was not against its probity but against its power: "The bureaucracy has, indeed, almost unlimited power."[26] Fundamental

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[18]Ibid., 2:391.

[19]See Alan Sked, *The Decline and Fall of the Habsburg Empire, 1815–1918*, 2nd ed. (London, 2001), 294–99.

[20]Ibid., 280–99: "Metternich's Austria as a Josephinist State."

[21]Research has been done, of course, on the foreign ministry, as Heindl points out. What is missing is research on the home civil service. See note 5.

[22]A. Lawrence Lowell, *Governments and Parties in Continental Europe*, 2 vols. (London, 1986). Austria-Hungary is dealt with in ibid., 2:70–179.

[23]Ibid., 2:78.

[24]Ibid., 2:78.

[25]Ibid., 2:78–79.

[26]Ibid., 2:79.

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rights enshrined in the constitution were unenforced or ineffective. For example, it was impossible to sue officials for injuries done in the exercise of their offices. The right of free assembly was undermined by the fact that associations could only be formed if an official certificate was granted, and if this was granted, the state could then demand to know the names of all members, to have copies of all regulations, to know of all business transacted, and to have minutes of all meetings; it could ban political correspondence between associations, could refuse permission to hold meetings, could have police or other officials present at them, and could break them up if it so desired. Likewise, despite the right to a free press, newspapers were still required to have licenses, magazines still had to pay deposits, and publications still had to be submitted in advance to the police to ensure they contained nothing illegal.[27] The Austrian police remained "the most inquisitorial, the most minutely and severely vigilant in the world.... It keeps up a careful supervision over both citizens and strangers, watching their conduct and recording their movements. Its activity is, indeed, so rigorous and all-pervasive that every man habitually carries about his person an official certificate of his identity and good standing, just as a ship carries her papers on the high seas."[28] A footnote recorded: "There is a vast amount of legislation about the keeping of registers, giving notices of change of residence, etc., and issuing passports and certificates."[29] Little wonder that Lowell was afraid of political parties gaining control of such an apparatus. As it was, a peculiar body known as the Reichsgericht (Imperial Court) existed to protect the citizen from the bureaucrats. The judges on it held office for life, and only the president was appointed directly by the emperor. All the rest—twelve in number—were nominated by one or other house of Parliament, with the emperor then choosing from three names offered on each occasion a vacancy was to be filled. Yet the court had no means of enforcing its decisions, other than a "conclusive moral force."[30] Finally, Lowell stressed: "It must be remembered, however, that the Reichsgericht cannot prevent the bureaucracy from using any arbitrary powers granted by statute, even when these impair the rights granted by the constitution, because, like every other Austrian court, it is forbidden to question the validity of a statute which has been promulgated in proper form."[31] In short, no Austrian court had the right of judicial review.

Joseph II, Francis I, Metternich, and Bach were all ghosts in the machine of Dualist Austria, if Lowell is to be believed. But were the Austrians put out? Not at all, in his opinion, since he deliberately refrained from calling the bureaucracy "vexatious."[32] That, he wrote, would have been to imply "that its conduct is disliked by the people."[33] His clear opinion was that the Austrians *liked* being run by their bureaucracy. Joseph II remained the people's emperor.

Perhaps Lowell was correct. Certainly one Austrian who admired the imperial civil service was the banker Rudolf Sieghart, whose analysis of the last decades of the monarchy contains a eulogy to *Das Beamtentum*.[34] He declares that any final balance sheet of old Austria would place two highly important institutions on the credit side—the administration and the army: "Old Austria possessed an administration whose sense of duty, probity (*Sauberkeit*), devotion, and

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[27]For these examples, see ibid., 2:80–82.

[28]Ibid., 2:82–83.

[29]Ibid., 2:83n1.

[30]Ibid., 2:84.

[31]Ibid., 2:84.

[32]Ibid., 2:82.

[33]Ibid., 2:82.

[34]Rudolf Sieghart, *Die Letzten Jahrzehnte einer Grossmacht. Menschen, Völker, Probleme des Habsburger-Reichs* (Berlin, 1932), 265–69.

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professionalism (*sachlicher Ernst*) were exemplary."[35] Heads of departments such as Czoernig, Niebauer, Baumgartner, and Fierlinger were surrounded by a mysterious aura of prestige, partly on account of their expertise, partly on account of their sheer work performance. Yet even ordinary officials possessed a healthy professionalism and moral purity that derived from self-respect. If they paid too much attention to titles, orders, and uniforms and people made fun of this, that in no way detracted from the fact that they were faithful servants of the state and that such things were only a proper compensation for their relatively modest salaries. They deserved respect and were not to be seen as mere wage slaves.

Sieghart attributed the high quality of civil servants in Austria—particularly among the higher ranks—to two factors: the close links between the bureaucracy and the universities and the practice of transferring civil servants as they rose through the ranks from one province to another. This enabled them not only to develop a wider view of the nature and problems of the monarchy, but also to learn several of its languages. Sieghart admitted that the bureaucracy was not perfect. Its "little conceits" included pedantic formalism, rigid petty regulation, and the presence of irremovable section heads, who strangled talent. Many of the latter were graduates of the Theresianum, who obviously operated an old-boy network, based on the presumption, according to Sieghart, that each "had a marshal's baton in his knapsack."[36] Toward the end of the monarchy, much damage was done when ministers sent high-level favorites to provinces where they were ignorant of the local language or lacked the tact to deal with tricky situations. Devotion to Austria was often undermined by such arrogant emissaries.

Yet "all in all," Sieghart concluded: "The German civil service was a blessing to Austria and one of the strongest clamps of the state. Impartial in the nationality question, the natural referee in disputes between employers and workers, the quiet, industrious, devoted actions of this bureaucracy prevented collapse, so long as this was possible and played no little part thereafter in ensuring that the peoples who had come of age, could build their new houses relatively quickly and without friction."[37]

In conclusion, there seem to be five points to be made: first, that the Austrian bureaucracy endured many formal changes of regime without any essential loss of influence; second, that its professional standards and social prestige remained relatively high; third, that it probably did constitute "a state within a state," albeit one that, fourth, in spite of relatively low wages, did not mire itself in corruption. Finally, there seems no reason to suppose that the Austrians fundamentally resented their bureaucracy; indeed, they may have liked it. In any case, Heindl may well be right—although she bases her judgment more on intuition than hard evidence—that its *Schlamperei* should be seen in the context of Niklas Luhmann's theories, and that it represented a rational, pragmatic, dare one even say, *gemütlich* response to complicated bureaucratic challenges. It would certainly be nice to think so, at least until further research forces us to reassess that verdict.

Alan Sked is Senior Lecturer in International History at the London School of Economics, United Kingdom.

[35]Ibid., 265.
[36]Ibid., 268.
[37]Ibid., 269.

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