

Archaeology of Conflicts

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Eighteenth-century military camps in the light of written sources

Jiří Hofman

The army of the Habsburg Monarchy underwent constant, gradual reforms after 1740. Maria Theresa tried to modernise the whole empire, above all the army, which was meant to be transformed into a modern weapon against the emergent expansionism of Prussia (Hochedlinger 2016). The appearance of military camps of the 18th century Austrian army will be the focal point of our interest.

As a result of these modernisation efforts, the first Austrian official military regulations for individual corps of the army were issued. The first regulation was intended for infantry, the next ones for artillery and cavalry (Ortenburg 1969). It was per se a groundbreaking act. Until then, older regulations existed, but they were issued by individual colonels (regiment owners) and were thus only valid for particular regiments (Khevenhüller-Frankenburg 1739). The other regiments followed their own rules, about which we unfortunately know nothing, but they certainly were rooted deeper in the past, at least in the 17th century conflicts. Apart from individual regiment regulations, manuals of military craft have been disseminated in print since the 16th century already (Andresová 2018). However, their applicability in real warfare of the early modern era is disputable. In fact, they only represented a sort of non-binding recommendations, which might or might not have been complied with. The new Theresian regulations were generally valid and were obligatory for the whole army. Their observance was overseen by the entire military hierarchy of superior officers from the level of regiments through land headquarters to Vienna (Duffy 2003). The regulations comprised the training with weapon, manoeuvring in formation, tactical operations on the battlefield, as well as standards of military life and service in peace and war. Simply put, everything that we also today understand under the term military regulation.

The oldest regulation (Regulament) for infantry was already issued in 1749. It contains two basic parts – exercise and service orders. And it also involves two forms of presentation. The textual part with many descriptions is supplemented by illustrations mainly depicting the training with weapon, but also an ideal infantry field camp.

Nevertheless, we must always keep in mind that regulation is one thing and its real observance is another. The level of compliance with regulations was certainly different in peacetime garrisons, during self-confident advance against the enemy at the beginning of the war, and completely different in the case of retreat from a lost battle after many years of exhausting fights. And, after all, it is generally known that rules are made to be broken.

In the following text we will pay attention to how these regulations defined the military camp of the most numerous type of the 18th century armed forces – the infantry. It is important to remark that we will deal with Austrian camps because, for example, the well-documented British or generally West European military camps exhibited some differences. In many cases they had common characteristics, but in others they might be deceptively misinterpreted or misunderstood.



Fig. 1. Depiction of a military camp with soldiers' tents in the background, 18th century.

What the regulations not determine is the place where to set up a camp. This, of course, depended on many circumstances – surrounding landscape relief, accessibility of sources, planned length of stay, proximity of the enemy, etc. In general it can be said that, particularly during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), the Austrians were very skilful at setting up their camps, which is usually ascribed to the field marshal Daun. In the course of several years of manoeuvring face to face with the King of Prussia, they have raised the take-up of favourable positions to such a level that Frederick himself had to admit that the Austrian camps are almost impossible to assault (Duffy 2003, 431).

The camps were usually located in safe places, which were sufficiently well protected from possible enemy attack, with secured flanks. The threat in case of a successful attack on a military camp is exemplified by Hochkirch in 1758.

Not less important were the nearby sources. First of all, it was the drinking water because the water scarcity or bad quality of water, mainly in summer heat, may have been fatal. Also important was the proximity of a forest or some other source of firewood. Of key importance were the service roads. They enabled movements along the entire length of the camp from one end to the other, and connected the camp with its rear, i.e. with supply depots in towns, inland contingency units, forts, etc. In case of necessity and in a bad course of events, they also secured that the encamped troops had the possibility to comfortably, fluently and safely retreat from the given territory. It is in no way surprising that when a camp site was indeed favourable, it has been used repeatedly over centuries. In the Czech Republic we can, for example, name the surroundings of Budyně nad Ohří or the area around Jaroměř.

It was not easy to build up a camp for tens of thousands of soldiers. It was an extraordinarily complicated logistic operation, where dozens of autonomous troops (usually battalions), arriving on various access roads, had to be manoeuvred to the same place. Hundreds and thousands of tents of various dimensions and functions had to be built.

The key persons were quartermasters. Following the instructions issued by the staff of the army or of individual corps, a troop composed of commissioned and non-commissioned officers and other enlisted men was deployed to the given area in advance (according to the Regulament exactly two days earlier). These men, following the regulations, laid out the ground plan of the whole camp with the

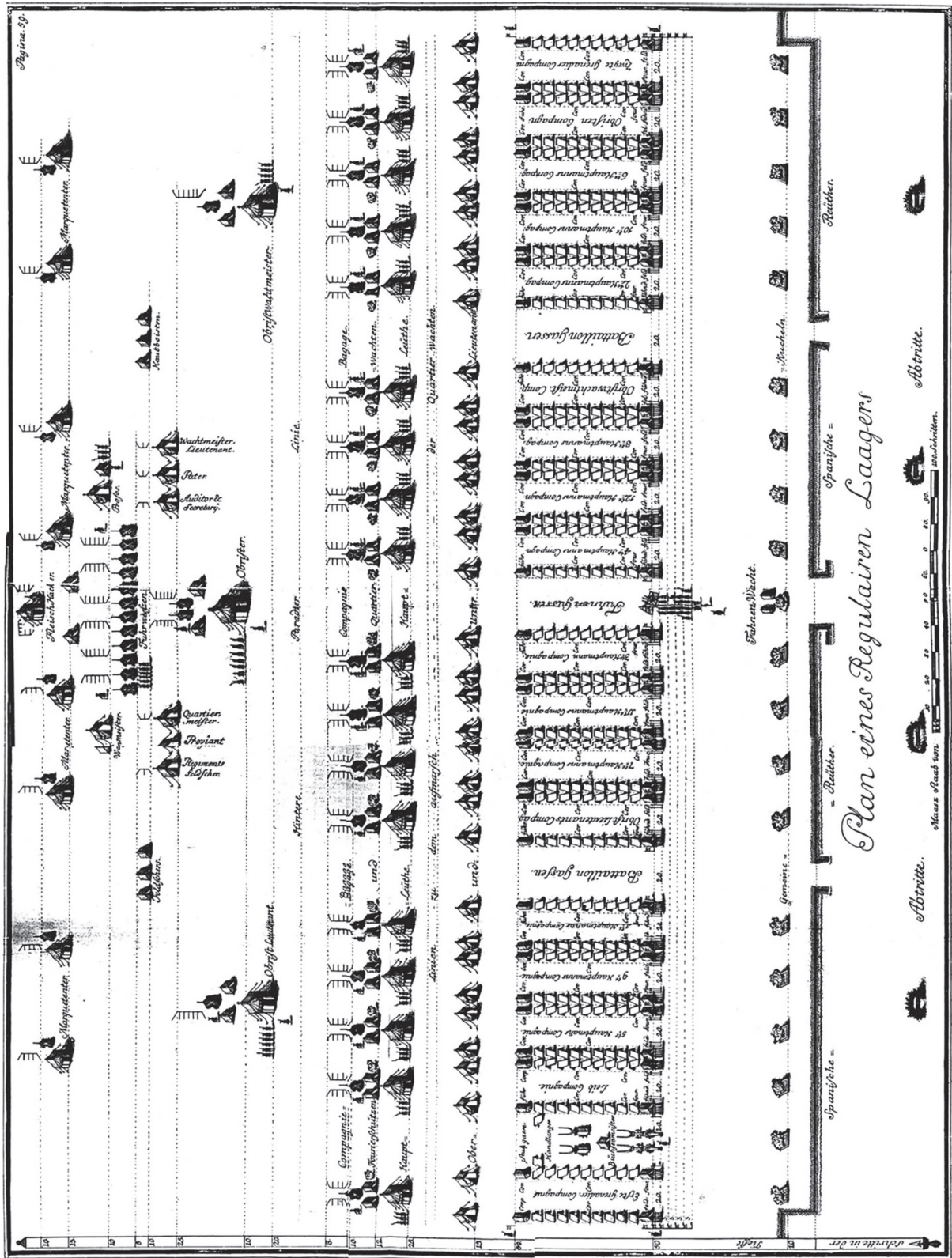


Fig. 2. Depiction of a military camp from regulament 1749.

help of cords, stakes and flags (Ortenburg 1969, 57). The oldest prescribed form of the setting-out equipment is drawn in the Aufriss, the first Austrian equipment regulation from 1773.¹ We can suppose that an older appearance of this equipment must have been very similar. Subsequently, the whole military unit arrived in place and built the camp in the predefined area.

How was the appearance of such an infantry camp according to the regulation? The structure of the camp corresponded to the structure of the army, or the infantry regiment respectively. According to the 1749 regulation, an infantry regiment comprised a total of 2,408 men inclusive of the staff. It was divided into four battalions and each of them included four companies of 136 men each (altogether 16 companies). Also added were two separate grenadier companies, each of them including 100 men.² A company also determined the basic division of the camp. Its structure refers to the position of the given unit in a combat array, where everything has its place and perfect order. Each company has built its camp in the form of a lane of 20 steps in width (ca. 12 m), with tents along both sides. This facility accommodated enlisted men and non-commissioned officers. Four such lanes, that is, four companies, formed the camp of one battalion. The camps of individual battalions were separated from one another by the so-called main street, which was a little wider; the width was 30 steps, that is, ca. 18 metres. From the enemy backwards, 15 steps behind the ranks (in fact perpendicular to their tents), the rows of officer tents began. Behind them followed an area for baggage train and draught horses of individual companies. Everything was properly structured to the depth according to individual companies. Only behind this area, the staff tents and regimental wagons were situated. And at the farthest end behind the staff, there were tents of sutlers who accompanied the armed forces and represented the provisioning support of every army of that time. At the very back of the camp, the tents and shacks of butchers may have been standing (Ortenburg 1969, 77).

At the opposite end, before the lanes of individual companies (towards the enemy), a space of 50 steps in depth (ca. 30 metres) was left free to serve as a line-up area. In front of this area, a row of field kitchens was established. The soldiers cooked by themselves within the smallest administrative group – so-called *Kamaradenschaft* (a sort of military fellowship). This group of about eight soldiers had only an economic and administrative function. They slept together in a tent, got together the daily food portions and cooked together.

It is not known whether the Austrian army used similar sunken hearths as are documented from the British army or from American colonies.³ The regulation itself does not comment on the design of hearths. It only remarks that the fire pits should not be very deep (Ortenburg 1969, 72). However, the drawing of a camp shows something like sunken square areas with a fireplace in the centre.⁴ They represented the kitchens of enlisted personnel and non-commissioned officers. Commissioned officers had their kitchens of course behind their tents.

According to the regulation, the kitchens should have been fronted by a barrier erected ten steps away, composed of interlinked *chevaux de frise* with passages at the level of streets between individual battalions. Most advanced, and therewith closest to the enemy, surprisingly were the latrines. They were situated 100 steps (i.e. about 60 metres) in front of the kitchens (Ortenburg 1969, 72). A plain sketch on the plan indicates a simple wooden construction above a pit encircled by chopped branches and shrubs forming a screen, as some of us remember from military exercises or summer camps. The exposed location of the latrines, advanced towards the enemy, is also documented by other iconographic sources from Central Europe. Moreover, latrines were not located in “no man’s land” and were not

¹ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Kriegsarchiv, Bildersammlung, L IV 32, Allgemeiner Aufriss 1773.

² Grenadier companies, to the great displeasure of colonels and regiment owners, were removed from the regiment and were transferred to combined grenadier battalions, so that they had their own camps.

³ The best facts about North America in the 18th century are maybe provided by „The 18th Century Material Culture Resource Center“ (<https://www.scribd.com/user/209073354/The-18th-Century-Material-Culture-Resource-Center>).

⁴ The only exception is the main entrance in the centre of the camp of each unit, where the sentry was standing and where a round watch fire was depicted at the same level as the kitchens.

uncovered to the enemy, as somebody might believe. They were still placed inside the main defensive line of the camp and thus protected.

The regulation and the related plan show of course much more details of the camp. For example, during the day, soldiers had their guns placed in stands at the head of streets. Only by night or in the rain, they have taken the guns into their tents and fastened them to the poles (special tents for rifles were introduced later). Another information tells that all carcasses shall be buried at least 600 steps past the camp (Ortenburg 1969, 71–77). The location of tents of particular ranks or the position of regimental cannons also were exactly defined.

When we base ourselves on the 1749 Regulament and on the dimensions of tents defined in the first equipment regulation from 1773 (Aufriss), we can come to following measures. The depth of the whole camp from the kitchens of enlisted men as far as the butchers' tents was 275 steps, that is, ca. 165 metres. Measured from the latrines, it was 375 steps or ca. 225 metres, respectively. The width of the camp depended on the size of the given unit.

The most frequently deployed part of a regiment, actively engaged on the battlefield, was one battalion.⁵ In exceptional situations we could suppose two battalions. According to the regulation, the width of the camp of one battalion was 130 steps, that is, ca. 78 metres. Two battalions already covered a width of 270 steps, or ca. 162 metres. And so on, with three battalions it was 370 steps (ca. 222 m) and with four battalions 470 steps (ca. 282 m) (Ortenburg 1969, 77). With some exaggeration we can estimate that when Daun camped on the plains above the imperial road on the eve of the Battle of Kolín in 1757, the line of camps of his about 50 infantry battalions was more than 8 kilometres long (Cogswell 2017, 514). However, it is only a theoretic assumption because armies did not necessarily built their camps in one row and they were not always in full complement as defined by regulations (Cogswell 2017). This number was only intended to demonstrate the area on which an army may have been encamped. And, of course, we are speaking only of a regulation.

The last part of military camp which was not yet mentioned in this text was the fortification. In the regulation we can read nothing about this issue, but fortification was an integral part of every camp located close to the enemy. All depictions of military camps show some type of fortification.

The 1749 Regulament tells only about a row of *chevaux de frise*, which is also visible on the plan of an ideal camp. The Aufriss from 1773 even contains its exact design, dimensions and applied material (Aufriss 1773). It is a sophisticated blacksmith's and joiner's work, about which we know that it was indeed produced, but the question is whether at all, since when and to what extent the advancing army had enough of these products. We can rather suppose a makeshift *cheval de frise*, which was made on site from sources of the nearby forest, as we know it from the oldest 19th century photographs.

In front of the row of *chevaux de frise* and the strategically important latrines, there was a fortification ring protecting the camp. As it was already mentioned, the Austrian army has built its camps traditionally very safe and well protected (Duffy 2003, 431). The form of what we can call a fortification markedly resembled the regulations for bastion fortifications and was also based on the same ideological source. Many printed fortification manuals were published in the 18th century.⁶

The camp itself and its fortification were mostly situated on the top of a moderate and elongated elevation in an open landscape. This location perfectly simulated the gentle slope of the glacis in bastion fortress. On the top of the elevation (or immediately below), a field fortification was built. Historical manuals offered a wide spectrum of various constructions and shapes, but the preserved depictions and terrain finds rather refer to an artillery position consisting of an earthen rampart and a ditch which might have been occasionally supplemented by some wooden constructions (palisade, timbering of the parapet, fascines, gabions). To a big surprise of French observers, the Austrians allegedly did not

⁵ The remaining parts of the regiment served, for example, as fortress guards or as recruitment or training units.

⁶ As an example we can name the list of digitised books on fortress and fortification in the library of the Institute of Military History.

really like to build standard redoubts during the Seven Years' War. The Frenchmen argued that a good and spacious redoubt can be built by 600 men within 6 hours. But the Austrians reputedly did not like to use this fortification feature because they worried that the enemy would conquer the redoubt and they would have to fight hard to win it back (Duffy 2003, 432). It is indeed much easier to conquer a mere earthen rampart from the rear, where it is not protected by a ditch. This is probably the reason why the First Military Survey much more often recorded various *flèches* (arrows), *bonnets* or other irregular shapes rather than enclosed fortification elements such as redoubts.

These fortified artillery positions (sometimes also connected through a rampart and a ditch) were distributed so that they covered each other by flanking fire. The attack on such positions thus more than exactly resembled an attack on a fortress (Duffy 2003, 432). The enemy would have to advance some hundred metres up a gentle slope, most probably in fields, without any possibility to conceal. The advance forward would be intensively enfiladed by cannons protected by the fortification on the top. They would thus surely have advantage against the enemy cannons firing from the valley. Moreover, the attacker would come under a deadly cross fire of grapeshots within a distance of about 400 metres. Immediately thereafter, another ca. 100 metres further ahead, he would come under a rolling fire of compact rows of infantry. There was definitely nothing to be longed for, so it is no wonder that Frederick was so frustrated by the Austrian camps. He himself advanced against such Austrian positions near Kolín in June 1757.

However, we must keep in mind that it is only a norm defined by a regulation. It is no description of reality. As it often happens, the reality might have been completely different from the pages of military regulations. It surely depended on circumstances, under which such an Austrian military camp was established. Material situation of the army in the first years of reign of Maria Theresa was relatively unfavourable. It was reported that soldiers camped in various shacks built from wattle, straw and similar materials (Duffy 2003). Military provisioning has improved in the course of time, but during the war years – particularly the unsuccessful war years – we can suppose, as in every war, a stagnant supply and moral laxity.

The prescribed form of a camp, complying with the 1749 regulation, can be mainly expected in the peace years, during military exercises attended by the supreme command or by the ruler himself. Joseph II particularly loved such exercises. The then army was very similar to present-day armed forces in this regard. We can suppose that the camp was set out according to the regulation, with tents distributed very accurately over the area, and with perfectly built latrines. Put simply: everything was made to give the emperor the best possible account of his army.

On the other hand, during a war, after a lost battle or after a long and demanding retreat, when troops often lost contact with the command, we can hardly expect any perfect layout of the camp, complying with regulations. If any camp can be taken into consideration at all. Firstly, the soldiers and officers may have thought about other things in that situation and, secondly, a retreating defeated army with broken-down baggage train often had nothing to build a camp of.

The 18th century personal sources, such as diaries and letters of officers or soldiers, are very scarce in Central European territory (Bräker 1951; Cogswell 2017). Many military reports stored in the Vienna War Archives either were not yet studied at all, or were only studied to exploit information regarding the standard military history full of brave commanders, heroic battles and major redeployments.⁷ Everyday life of ordinary soldiers is often forgotten. The time before the French Revolution did not yet produce so many personal sources as we know them from the Napoleonic Wars (Jeník z Bratřic 1947). So, this issue must be treated within a cooperation between archaeologists and historians, who are collaborating to reveal, or at least to partly uncover, the historical reality of military camps by comparing the military regulations and depictions with real finds on site (Matoušek – Sýkora 2018).

⁷ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Kriegsarchiv, Alte Feldakten.

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