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## Combat Training of the Assault Troops of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy

DOI 10.17047/HADTUD.2023.33.2.85

Most of the military thinkers in Austria-Hungary believed in 1914 that the new war would be fought in the same way as the previous ones. They thought so despite the fact that local wars at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century showed otherwise. However, the proliferation of new, modern military equipment and the unprecedented number of mass armies put the military perspectives in the First World War in a new dimension. The war of positions with its endless trenches demanded a transformation, and one of the many opportunities was the setting up the stormtrooper units.

KEYWORDS: First World War, Stormtroopers, Trenches, Position War

### *Az Osztrák–Magyar Monarchia rohamcsapatainak harci kiképzése*

1914-ben a legtöbb katonai gondolkodó úgy vélte, hogy az új háborút a korábbiakhoz hasonlóan fogják megvívni. Annak ellenére gondolták így, hogy az előző század végén és a 20. század elején a helyi háborúk mást mutattak. Az új, modern haditechnikai eszközök elterjedése és a soha nem látott tömeghadseregek létszáma új dimenzióba helyezte az első világháború hadászati perspektíváit. Az állásháború a végtelen lövészárkaival átalakulást követelt, s ennek egyik lehetősége a rohamcsapatok felállítása is.

KULCSSZAVAK: I. világháború, rohamosztigosok, árkok, állásháború

### *History*

The First World War radically changed warfare. We can still talk about mobile warfare, with classic ideas in 1914: masses of people tense up against each other on a large scale, trying to flank and encircle the enemy troops. A year later, it was trench warfare which dominated both the Western and Eastern theatres of war. To break through the trench systems, the parties deployed a mass of new tactics and tools in

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order to assert their will on the battlefields<sup>1</sup>. The trenches were dug for defensive purposes, and their spread was a self-stimulating process. The developing technology raised both firearms and artillery devices to such devastating levels that the soldiers quickly tried – in Austria-Hungary too – to take advantage of the features of the terrain and find cover in them<sup>2</sup>. At the end of this process, you can see a sort of self-incitement: more and more destructive tools were deployed on one side, consequently the other party tried to strengthen their defensive positions, and vice versa. As a result, the fronts became rigid, which required technological innovations and new tactics. The creation of the assault troops is one of such novelties.

### *Qualification before the war*

Although the Austro-Hungarian Empire was at the forefront of military technology developments, its army was still considered obsolete from a technical point of view. The reason for this was the conservatism of the ruler, who dismissed the domestically designed tank<sup>3</sup> and called the already completed armoured cars toys. On the other hand, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg throne, also advocated the naval developments because he considered this branch – along with the land forces – to be matter of his heart<sup>4</sup>.

The primary goal in the training process was to develop fanaticism for the nation above all else before the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. Morals were taken very seriously and five methods were used to develop them: training, discipline, cohesion, leadership, support. The practises in which they were applied depended on the state ideology, as well as on the work force and methods of officers. In order to create the moral foundations throughout Europe, strict punishment of those who violated the principles was typical<sup>5</sup>.

Although the military observers of the dual empire did not take part in wars outside the continent (for example, the Russo-Japanese war), the high command did not even implement lessons learned from these military conflicts, stating that they were purely local peculiarities. However, in those wars, attention was already drawn to the explosive development of technology as well as the new combat procedures. In the Monarchy an important part of this was that the infantry was to attack in a skirmish line, rather than in closed combat formations.<sup>6</sup> Infantry was considered the decisive combat arm in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and the key factor of its

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1 Szilágyi-Kiss 2021, 141, 143.

2 Bencze 2009, 139–173.

3 It is a *Motorgeschütz* designed by First Lieutenant Günther Burstyn. The prototype was not even completed due to the lack of demand (an important factor is that the idea was also rejected by the German side as well). Even according to today's approach, it meets the criteria to be called a tank: it was to have a turret capable of turning 360 degrees, equipped with primary and secondary armaments, moving on tracks. The main gun was a 3,7 cm *Schnellgeschütz* (rapid-firing gun) and secondary armament consisted of two 7 mm machine guns.

4 Balla 2014, 636.

5 Watson 2014, 174–177.

6 Balla 2014, 636.

success was the frontal mass attack and encirclement. During exercises, speed was considered more important than the more relaxed form of movement in the forward chains, and the personnel were trained for temporary defence, not for trench warfare. Conrad<sup>7</sup> believed that a foot soldier should have good endurance, so the backbone of the drills was long marches with heavy equipment in marching column.<sup>8</sup> (Although his doublemindedness is manifested in the fact that he nevertheless advocated the introduction of pike-grey uniforms which were better for concealment than colourful attires).<sup>9</sup>

### *The origin of assault troops: The German stormtroopers*

As early as the late autumn of 1914, in the Battle of Argonne, the German Empire deployed assault troops in small units, which used hand grenades methodically. The name “assault team” itself presumably comes from a pioneer, Major Hermann Reddemann (himself a flamethrower specialist). According to the concepts of the time, the assault team meant a light infantry subunit with limited technical capabilities, mobility, fighting with high firepower. The first ‘real’ assault formation was named ‘Sturmabteilung Calsow’ after its commander, Major Georg Calsow.<sup>10</sup> In September 1915, the new commander became Captain Wilhelm Rohr, who continued the training based on his own experience. The goal of his training was to develop tactics based on the assault groups of 2-3 soldiers attacking specific points, and eliminating fortified strongholds after adequate artillery preparation.<sup>11</sup> An important part of the training was to make the participants able to recognise the weak points of the enemy positions. They had to be very good marksmen, and special emphasis was also put on the effective use of hand grenades. The soldiers had to learn the operation and use of enemy weapons as well.<sup>12</sup>

The bravest and strongest were selected for the assault units. Their appearance (equipment, clothing) differentiated them from the rest of the infantry. The special signs not only had a role in differentiation, but also increased the self-confidence of

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7 Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf was Chief of Staff of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy between 1906 and 1911 and then between 1912 and 1917. He was replaced on 1st July 1917 and became the commander of the Tyrolean army group until the summer of the following year. After that he commanded the imperial and royal bodyguards, but in July 1918 he resigned and retired.

8 However, it is important that before the war – and even during it – the methods were incorrectly measured and applied. This is true not only for the leadership of the Monarchy but also for the military leaders of the Entente. A good example of this is the first day of the Battle of the Somme when the British troops marched in close, dense straight lines towards the German positions, thus providing an easy target for the German machine guns. (Martin Middlebrook has dedicated a book to July 1, 1916. – The first day of the Battle of the Somme. July 1, 1916.)

9 Balla 2014, 636, 639.; Watson 2016, 129.

10 He was the commander of the Pioneer Battalion No. 18.

11 Baczoni et. al. 2006, 9–10.

12 This is a general phenomenon, in Hungarian-related sources, soldiers also recall that they had to know the enemy’s weapons at a high degree. For example, Béla Palásthy writes about this in his letters. *HL. VII. Personalia*, 297. For the training of Hungarian assault teams, see this reference: *HL. VII. Tgy. 2877. Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Stoßtrupps. 1917.* <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/> (Last download: 22. 11. 2022.)

the team members. It has already been described here that the training of assault troops was not for making the rest of the infantry feel that they were of secondary significance, or having assault troops be conditioned to be superior. They were made aware that even though they initiate the attack, victory could only be achieved together with the infantry as a whole. This phenomenon was also described in Austro-Hungarian context emphasizing that this was important during training, because the morale of the rest of the infantry could easily deteriorate if they felt that they were not important in combat. It needs to be noted here that there were problems with this issue in the Monarchy's army, and the rest of the infantry also had to be made aware that the stormtroopers 'merely help to start the attack', but victory will be achieved together.<sup>13</sup>

The effectiveness of the German assault troops did not go unnoticed, the news reached the Austro-Hungarian Army High Command (Armeeoberkommando – AOK). After the permits were granted, on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1916 ten Austrian officers were transferred to take part in German training. The name of the assault soldier of the German Army became "grenadier" in 1917, and his equipment<sup>14</sup> was as light as possible: a repeating carbine with a detachable bayonet, he carried his ammunition in his pockets, and wore a steel assault helmet. He carried 8-10 stick hand grenades and 16-20 egg grenades in two sandbags over his shoulder. This was supplemented by a sharpened trench knife, bread bag, two water bottles, gas mask, and pistol. Joint exercises with tanks were implemented in the training from the end of January 1918. The combat tactics of the First World War stormtroopers appeared in many forms during the Second World War and also on World War II battlefields (for example: overcoming field fortifications, close quarter combat, etc.).<sup>15</sup>

### *The establishment of the Austro-Hungarian assault troops*

The dual empire was also forced to adapt to the changing warfare. The Italian Army quickly set up their own assault units<sup>16</sup>, so the Monarchy also had to act in order to ensure that fortunes of war rather turn to the dual empire. In additions, experience had shown that changes were necessary, otherwise the war would have been lost soon.<sup>17</sup> This experience was nothing more than the fact that after the troops quickly reached assault range, their attack stalled there, and the soldiers often retreated. The reasons are as follows:

1. Pessimism: A leader who sees that the impossible is being asked of him is doomed from the start. Fortitude and a strong belief in one's own weapons are necessary to help the commander and the team through all difficulties.

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13 Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Stoßtrupps. 1917. <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/> (Last download: 22. 11. 2022.) and see more details about their training: Kloska 2015, 53–54. Regarding the Austro-Hungarian assault troops: HL. VII. Tgy. 485.

14 For more details on equipment and clothing of the Austro-Hungarian assault troops see more: Kloska 2015, 65–59.

15 Baczoni et. al. 2006, 11–13.

16 They started their formation in the summer of 1917, following the same tactics as the Germans.

17 HL. VII. Tgy. 485.

2. A bayonet fight must be launched as soon as possible, and the enemy must be forced into cover with proper fire control. Technique must be combined with virtues in such a way as to inspire one's own troops (for example: officers by example) and to shock and demoralize the enemy (part of this is to make a great noise so that the enemy believed that the attackers had overwhelming numerical superiority).
3. A) Fresh forces must be deployed gradually, not all reserves must be used immediately.  
B) Artillery should be left to do its job as long as possible.  
C) You must stop running 200 paces towards the enemy, and approach them by crawling until the attack is launched.  
D) In the case of personal control during the attack, when the leader breaks from the platoon line, whoever is able to should join him while the rest of the team must provide covering fire.<sup>18</sup>

Even before the German assault troops entered service, similarly trained soldiers had already existed in the Monarchy. During the winter of 1914-15 in the Carpathian mountains, based on Russian model, the Austro-Hungarian Army began to train light infantry detachments with the primary task of scouting and continuous harassment of enemy troops. When the creation of assault troops arose, these fighting units were integrated into assault formations. As mentioned before, officers of the Austro-Hungarian Army travelled to Germany to study assault tactics in October 1916, which they continued the following year. Soldiers who learned 'assault practices' in the German Empire passed on their acquired knowledge in lectures.<sup>19</sup>

In the middle of 1917, the AOK put the issue of assault structures on its agenda, and the final decree in Hungarian was issued by Minister of National Defence Sándor Szurmay on 5<sup>th</sup> March 1918.<sup>20</sup>

### *The training of the Monarchy's assault troops*

A proposal was made to select future stormtroopers from special formations (for example: mountain troops), and the long-term goal was to set up at least one assault battalion from every nationality to represent their own nation.<sup>21</sup> (These special assault units are not only traditionally trained, but, for example, in the case of mountain troops, they were specially trained in the forms of movement necessary for fighting in the mountains. e. g.: rappelling, skiing, etc.<sup>22</sup>) So, the soldiers also learned the specific generalities of different terrains. The trainees were selected from volunteers. Only after completing their training they became members of the assault troops. During the training, great emphasis was placed on the description and use of

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18 HL. VII. Tgy. 1726.

19 Kloska 2015, 61.

20 Kloska 2015, 62–63.

21 HL. VII. Tgy. 485.

22 Baczoni et. al. 2006, 74.

different types of hand grenades. The trainees were exercised in accomplishing special tasks, such as destruction of tanks in close combat with explosives. Different training tracks were available for different special tasks. Each prospective stormtrooper was assessed how far he could throw a hand grenade from different positions (lying, kneeling, and standing). Throwing practice was an important element of the drill.<sup>23</sup>

The organisation was also based on the German model<sup>24</sup> and, just like there, the use of machine guns (the tripod was dismantled, so the weapon became more mobile), the use of infantry cannons and mortars, and the use of flamethrowers also played an important role.<sup>25</sup>

Basically, anyone could apply to the assault training. If possible, young, strong, skilful, combat-proven people were selected for the assault patrols (the smallest – squad-level – unit of the assault units, approximately 8-10 people). For the first line troops the officers of the assault units carried out the training and later conducted physical exercises to keep the physical and mental skills up to date. The purpose of their training was: *'To educate the officers and the personnel how to become modern infantry in terms of spirit and body, as well as to familiarize them with these special combat tools, their effect and their application in the most through way.'*<sup>26</sup>

The assignments of the assault troops were particularly dangerous, so the men were treated differently. They were exempted from trench service, they received better care and better clothing, which was reinforced at the knees and elbows. Due to their special skills, they were necessary for combat. In exchange for these benefits, stormtroopers were expected to have a heavy involvement in combat.<sup>27</sup>

The modern approach also included training in close quarter combat – as part of preparing a modern infantryman.<sup>28</sup> Regular infantrymen often ran away before hand-to-hand combat, causing the attack stall. These elite units, well trained in hand-to-hand combat, could serve as an example for the rest of the infantry, which gave them self-confidence to boldly engage in this type of combat as well – and this may have led to what the officers said: together they win the victory.

Both the machine gunners and flamethrower teams were selected from experienced soldiers, because due to their missions both had to have great routine in order to be used efficiently and consistently.<sup>29</sup> Although the stormtroopers did not have to serve in the trenches, their secondary task was to train fresh troops instead.<sup>30</sup>

The stormtroopers were specially trained also to fight against tanks. For this a compressed charge (Gebalte Ladung in German) was used (see Figure 4. in the next

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23 HL. VII. Tgy. 485.

24 See more: Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Stoßtrupps. 1917. <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/> (22. 11. 2022.)

25 HL. VII. Tgy. 2877.

26 Baczoni et. al. 2006, 71–72.

27 HL. VII. Tgy. 485. and 2877. These were based on the German model. See more: Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Stoßtrupps. 1917. <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/> (Last download: 22. 11. 2022.)

28 HL. VII. Tgy. 2877.

29 Baczoni et. al. 2006, 74.

30 HL. VII. Tgy. 2877.

section). This had to be thrown under the tracks of the approaching tank, to immobilize the vehicle. This required a particularly strong composure, but there were always plenty of volunteers. The theoretical training was so detailed that the tanks were even separated by gender, so the ones equipped with cannons were labelled male and the ones equipped with machine guns were female.<sup>31</sup>

There happened some conflicts between the assault soldiers and the rest of the infantry, but overall, according to the sources, that was rather atypical. Among the soldiers to be selected and trained as assault troops, however, there was a real competition.<sup>32</sup>

### *Grenade use*

Great attention was paid to the use of grenades. It had already been decided in the German storm troops that due to the usual shortage of hand grenades, only the best troopers should throw them while the others would rather have a support role. Even in the Monarchy soldiers were instructed to use grenades only in the case of enemy resistance. If there was no enemy activity and a grenade was thrown randomly, it was considered a waste of ammunition and the culprits were to be severely punished.<sup>33</sup> There was also a kind of 'assault virtue' in the use of hand grenades, when the grenade was thrown from a standing position in such a way that it exploded midair while the charge continued. Another option was to make a throw in a way that the grenade exploded over the enemy. This technique was nicknamed shrapnel throw.<sup>34</sup>

The purpose of the use of hand grenades was not only to inflict damage to men, but also to eliminate barbed wire, other obstacles, or other field fortifications.<sup>35</sup> In the figure below, five grenades are attached to a wooden plank with only the last one to have a handle and detonator. A string was attached to the safety pin of the last one.<sup>36</sup>

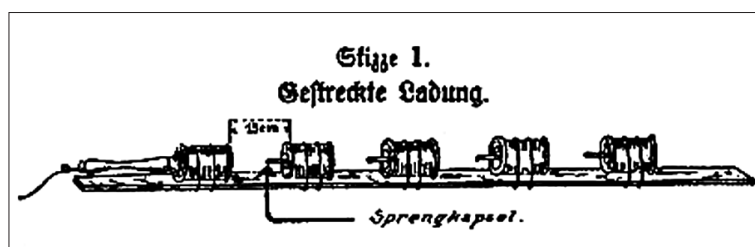


Fig. 1.

*Elongated charge/Gestreckte Ladung / Hosszú töltet*

(Source: <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/> (Downloaded: 22. 11. 2022.))

31 HL. VII. Tgy. 2877.

32 In that era the Hungarians called them 'rohamista' which means member of assault troops.

33 *Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Stoßtrupps.* 1917. <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/> (Last download: 22. 11. 2022.); Baczoni et. al. 2006, 77.

34 HL. VII. Tgy. 2877.

35 They followed the German model here too. The source of the pictures: *Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Stoßtrupps.* <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/> (Last download: 22. 11. 2022.), Halálfejes katonák... a 2006, 77.

36 Baczoni et. al. 2006, 83–84.

In order to have a stronger explosive effect, instead of gaps, the grenades were positioned close to each other in the following way:<sup>37</sup>



Fig. 2.  
*Elongated charge with closed grenades*

(Source: <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/> (Downloaded: 22. 11. 2022.))

Another method included attaching fishing hooks to the grenade, so when it has thrown on the barbed wire, it got caught on it, thus destroying the enemy defences.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, 'bundled' grenades were also used, which could be used to hit one large or several smaller gaps in the wire obstacles, which served as break-in points.<sup>39</sup>

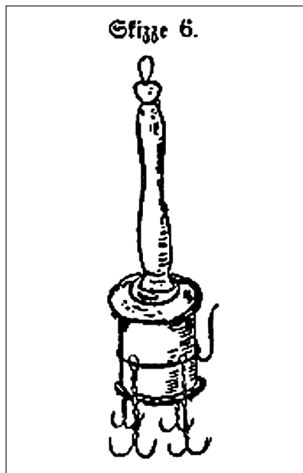


Fig. 3.  
*Grenade with fishing hooks*

(Source: <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/> (Downloaded: 22. 11. 2022.))

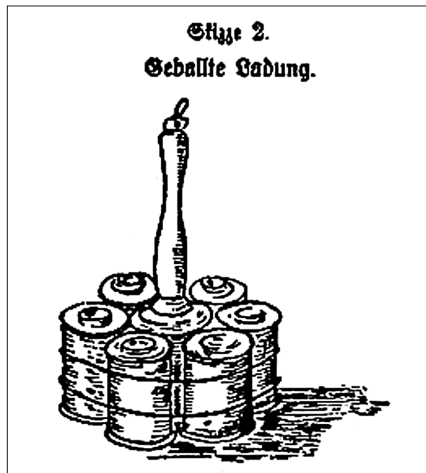


Fig. 4.  
*'Bundled' grenade/Geballte Ladung  
'Tömortötet'  
Combat tasks of the assault troops*

37 Baczoni et. al. 2006, 84.

38 The German model was followed here too. The source of the pictures: Anleitung zur Ausbildung der Stoßtrupps. <http://www.erster-weltkrieg.net/deutschland/heer/> (Last download: 22. 11. 2022.)

39 Baczoni et. al. 2006, 83–84.



An important task of the assault patrol was the capture of enemy soldiers. Both tactical information and the information provided by the prisoners of war were evaluated before an actual attack. Another task was to occupy the enemy's advanced positions to create unrest and confusion.<sup>40</sup> Assaults were always planned with thorough preparation. This included mapping enemy positions, specifying break-in points, and coordinating the cooperation between the artillery and infantry units. Based on the German tactical pattern, the assault patrols initiated the attack, opening breaching points and neutralizing the machine gun emplacements.<sup>41</sup>

The battle plan was to detonate a rampart with a so-called elongated charge (see Figures 1 and 2 in Grenade use). The commander designated those who would detonate the ramparts, and while they were working on this, the other team members attacked the trench system with grenades. At night wire cutters were used, with handles covered with rubber (if it was possible) to provide protection against electric shocks.<sup>42</sup>

The implementation took place in accordance with the following scheme:

- 1) The squad secured a route for attack with a salvo of hand grenades.
- 2) Then there was another general throw, followed by the break-in.
- 3) The commander broke to the front of the parapet and, as with the Germans, the best throwers were the ones able to produce precisely aimed throws. The first trooper threw the grenades at the end of the parapet of the attacked trench, and the second one attacked the front. The others supplied grenades to the throwers from their own supplies if necessary. Finally, on the top of the parapet the observer with his back to the squad secured his teammates.<sup>43</sup>

The foxholes<sup>44</sup> were usually cleared with flamethrowers, while the approach and communication trenches<sup>45</sup> were blown in so that the troops there would not be surprised from the sides. After the assault patrols the first assault column attacked in wedge formation, which left sufficient number of securing force in the first trench line, and then the advance continued. The attack of the second and third lines was executed, followed by the advance of the rest of the infantry. The best throwers were placed in the first column, followed in the second column by skilled shooters, machine gunners, and those who excelled in close quarter combat. Finally, the flamethrowers closed the line.<sup>46</sup>

### *Summary*

As the mobile warfare of the first year of the conflict ended, and trench warfare took over, it became obvious that the concepts of tactics had to be changed. The German army formed assault troops, whose procedures and training were soon followed by

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40 HL. VII. Tgy. 2877.

41 Kloska 2015, 70.

42 HL. VII. Tgy. 2877.

43 HL. VII. Tgy. 2877.

44 A hole in the earth used by a soldier as a small fort, from whose safety troops are protected to some degree against enemy fire.

45 These systems connected each part of the trench.

46 HL. VII. Tgy. 2877.; Kloska 2015, 70.

the Austro-Hungarian army. Although the soldiers could apply on a voluntary basis, the picked ones were still rigorously selected. As an elite force, great emphasis was put on proper training, the execution of special tasks, and the neutralization of new armament (tanks). Special attention was paid to excelling in hand-to-hand combat and the use of hand grenades during their training. In the latter, even among the good ones, only the bests could be short and long throwers. The stormtroopers of the Monarchy later became soldiers of serious combat value, with whom any Entente unit had to seriously reckon with.

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