

Tactics, Army (Austria-Hungary)

By [M. Christian Ortner](#)

Summary

The development of Austria-Hungary's combat doctrine started in 1914 at a typical peacetime level, ignoring more or less most of the modern experiences in Africa and Asia in the early 19th century. Even worse, the Imperial and Royal (k.u.k.) Armed Forces had to face two tactically modern armies on the eastern and Balkan fronts. High casualties during the first months of the war made a change of combat doctrine inevitable. The change occurred quite quickly, as old-fashioned officers left the battlefields and new tactical experiences took place. This resulted in the transition to static warfare, with linear (1915-1917) and zonal (1917-1918) performance being part of industrial warfare.

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Introduction

The army that went to battle in August 1914 had neither the equipment nor the strategic or tactical vision that it should have had, given the modern experience of war gained in Asia, Africa and the Balkans in the early 20th century.

In retrospect, top military leaders evaluating the military disasters of campaigns against [Russia](#) and in the Balkans in the summer and autumn of 1914 would cite this decline in the army's methods and equipment, and more importantly in its numbers, as the crucial factors. Over-cautious defence policies were seen as a direct result of the political situation within the [Dual Monarchy](#), and those to blame were the top political figures in power before the war. Though it cannot be denied that political problems within the monarchy, the so-called "dualistic" aspect,¹ were a factor, military leaders certainly used them to disguise the obvious shortcomings of their own outdated combat methods. There was as yet no real battle

doctrine. Neither politics nor the “general situation” could be held responsible for the tactics, leadership and training of the army. This lay in the hands of the military elite itself.

At the beginning of the war, numerous tracts on training regulations and handbooks were used by the Austro-Hungarian Army. The basic theory and guidelines in these books were taught at the various military institutes and in courses to instruct officers and non-commissioned officers and coordinate the training of newly conscripted² recruits. The last set of general rules to be developed and implemented [before the war](#) was the *Exerzierreglement* (training manual), introduced for the [infantry](#) in 1911.

Since attack and defence are two completely different forms of combat, and offensive tactics did not necessarily affect the basic defensive plan or vice versa, a clear definition of the various procedures requires a basic analysis of marching movements, deployments and combat methods. On taking this “general” disposition of forces into account, it is possible to divide the Austro-Hungarian Army’s tactics into three phases:

- 1st phase: War of movement (summer 1914 – spring 1915)
- 2nd phase: “First static war”/linear tactics (May 1915 – autumn 1917)
- 3rd phase: “Second static war”/zonal tactics (autumn 1917 – end of the war)

War of Movement

The Austro-Hungarian Army entered the battles of 1914 with its forces drawn up in the same way as they had been every year for general manoeuvres. The conviction that an offensive was absolutely essential to defeat the enemy in the east before they could fully deploy meant, for the troops, a massive push forward. This was to be either a direct engagement or “an attack on a fortified position”.³ Direct engagement was preferable for practical reasons. For the troops gradually deploying at the beginning of the war this meant that, after leaving their rail transport and being integrated in a brigade or division, they marched off towards the enemy. The infantry apparently took no interest in [reconnaissance](#), except to a limited extent in the immediate vicinity. Reconnaissance was the responsibility of the [cavalry](#), assembled in divisions and employed by higher commands (corps and upwards). In 1914, these cavalry divisions were sent directly to the borders of the empire to screen the Austro-Hungarian Army’s march in the north-east (the [Russian theatre](#)) as much as possible. The infantry regiments therefore took screening and reconnaissance for granted. There were cavalry squadrons attached to infantry brigades and divisional staffs, but they were busy with orderly and messenger duty and hardly had any time for tactical reconnaissance.

Thus, the encounter with the enemy in August 1914 generally took place in a haphazard fashion, although this was something which had been adequately rehearsed in training for direct engagements.⁴ If the vanguard of an advancing regiment came upon enemy forces, whether an advance covering unit or a combat unit prepared for defence, the main column immediately deployed and charged forward. If the enemy was not clearly visible, the attack was launched in the correct general direction. It should be noted that, in order to surround the enemy, the attacking flanks were spread over a wide area so that the skirmish line was considerably "thinned out".⁵ If enemy resistance was minimal, the attack was conducted in manoeuvre fashion, either frontally or by outflanking. If the enemy proved to be stronger, fire was opened and reserves would be brought in from behind the skirmish line. These were to replace losses in the skirmish line or become elements of encirclement. This tactic would usually work if the attacking troops were not outnumbered (at most two to one for the enemy).⁶

During the first battles of 1914 there was absolutely no tactical coordination between the three main branches, infantry, cavalry and [artillery](#). There could be no overall plan as each branch assessed the situation and terrain according to its own criteria. Senior commanders reacted to these obvious shortcomings in their own combat methods by attempting to transmit the military leaders' desire for victory and destruction to the fighting troops and staffs. During the final years before the war, the dominant idea of the "offensive at all costs" had resulted in an overemphasis on the "will of the commander", which then acquired too much significance during battle. The "iron will" of the commanding officers was later demonstrated in macabre fashion on the battlefields in the northeast, where dead troops lay as they had fallen, lined up in parade-ground formation; their officers, sabres in hand, lay a few paces ahead.⁷

Although combat methods in 1914 were largely based on the offensive and on mobility, the tactical situation in some places required a temporary transfer to the defensive. Even the existing manual allowed for the use "of the spade".⁸ According to the manual, the basic idea of defence was to save forces or to recuperate for the next attack. By the winter of 1914, this was no longer an option,⁹ as the troops were too exhausted to be of any use in an attack. It was now a question of keeping the troops and their equipment in one piece and not losing the ground they had already gained.

The permanent fear of being surrounded or outflanked by the enemy, particularly in the Russian theatre, led to both sides instinctively constructing a continuous, evenly manned line or "permanent position" that they constantly expanded in any way they could. The reserves

behind the line were to be used for counterattack, as prescribed in the manual.¹⁰ The Austrian reserves numbered too few for this undertaking, so their function was reduced to that of a barrier. Action took the form of a battle for this line, to be held at all costs and using any means available. During these battles, the beginnings of a tactical doctrine [developed](#), as standard methods and coordinated combat operations were laid down for the infantry and the artillery (e.g. the combination of infantry and artillery fire to ward off an assault).¹¹

First Static War

This “one line” tactic, although less strenuous than a war of movement, was not the ideal solution, as commanding officers soon realized. While the main objective during the phase of movement had been to attack or surround the enemy, the danger now was that whole sections of the front might have to be pulled back in the event of even the slightest breakthrough through a line that could only be defended to the front. The clearly visible line was also an easy target for artillery and trench mortars. Despite dugouts, the infantry crowded in the trenches suffered considerable losses due to surprise and nuisance fire.¹²

The changeover to static [warfare](#) required a shift in the existing doctrine of attack, and after the spring of 1915 this could also be observed within the Austro-Hungarian Army. When German troops were transferred to the east, this therefore had a very positive effect on [morale](#) within the army. The German troops represented not only a reinforcement of equipment and manpower, they also brought with them new tactics, based on their experience in the west. Put simply, the new method of attack was split into two phases: artillery preparation followed by infantry assault. After working with the German army to plan the successful breakthrough near [Gorlice](#) in May 1915, the Austro-Hungarian generals realized the need to adapt their own combat methods to the model of German operations on the [Western Front](#). “Linear tactics” were already beginning to appear in spring 1915, but were not laid down and incorporated into regulations until the autumn of 1915. They required a complete reorganization of combat methods, which meant that both officers and men had to adjust considerably. The aim of linear tactics was the same as that in the old manual, namely to hold on to every piece of hard-won ground at all costs. The infantry, trapped in enemy fire, were to dig in on the spot and construct dugouts to protect themselves against shells. A second line was to be set up a hundred paces behind the first and a third, a hundred paces further back. These three lines (all built to the same technical design) formed the first position. The lines were connected by [communication](#) trenches, and the dugouts were to include quarters for all the trench soldiers.¹³ In November 1915, the Army Supreme Command called on armies to place second and third positions two to three kilometres apart so that they could block any break in the front line. This deployment of men, which was already well

established on the German Western Front, had many advantages for the Austro-Hungarian Army. The enemy artillery could not bombard two positions at the same time, and only very long-range guns could reach the second position. The defending batteries, massed behind the second position, were able to cover both positions with a barrage and without moving. The enemy would have to break through at least four to six kilometres (second and third positions) for an attack to be effective at all. This meant not only surmounting around 350 paces of trench system reinforced with all kinds of obstacles, but also overcoming small strong points set up between the main trenches for all-round defence.¹⁴ Trench construction varied according to differing experiences and assessments within the army. Some trenches were completely roofed over against artillery fire, whilst others had only light shrapnel protection or were left open altogether. Covered trenches were very popular with the troops as they afforded protection not only against enemy fire, but also against the elements. Tactically, this kind of trench had the disadvantage of limiting the range of friendly fire, and it was possible for the enemy to overrun it. Initially, a shrapnel-proof roof that could quickly be discarded for close combat was chosen as a compromise, but the fundamental rule was “effect before protection”.

Standard instructions for the construction of gun positions in all theatres of the war, from a foxhole to shell-proof dugouts and caverns, were finally issued in the autumn 1915 manual *Anhaltspunkte für die Anlage von Kampfstellungen* (*Guide to the Construction of Battle Positions*). Trenches were to be built to allow the widest range of fire as well as provide flank protection. [Machine guns](#) were then positioned in so-called “enfilade trenches”, which extended forward so that the guns could be fired parallel to the main trench.¹⁵ A field of obstacles was set up about fifty to eighty paces ahead of the trench to make an approach to the position more difficult. These zones could be up to eighty metres deep, depending on the materials and time available, and were filled with [barbed wire](#), trip-wires, pitfalls, branches, and booby traps improvised from [hand grenades](#).¹⁶ There are no existing regulations or handbooks on the tactics or the type of combat that formed the basis of this linear system. Basically, the methods developed through experience became standard procedure. After the opening artillery barrage, an assault was mounted by the enemy against the first line of the first position, and this was usually taken. The reserves in the second and third lines were either to launch a counterattack and retake the first line, or seal off the enemy incursion. As the reserves were too few in number to mount an effective counterattack, they could usually only prevent the enemy from advancing further. The defending artillery would then fire a barrage forwards to stop further enemy troops from advancing to join the attack. The attacking infantry, unable to move to either side and so closely engaged with their antagonists that artillery support was impossible, could usually be thrown back by reserves from the second and third positions.

Unless a number of the attacking artillery batteries had been moved forward, especially for the assault on the second position, the attacking infantry, had they been successful in taking the entire first position, would then have to wait for their artillery to move forward before they could advance on the second position. If artillery batteries were moved forward in advance, they could not open fire until the first position had been taken, or they would be seen by the defending artillery's observers. The time it took the assailants to regroup was generally sufficient for the defending troops to plan and mount a counterattack. In this case, the attacking troops, decimated after the battle for the first position, were unable to hold the trench and it was retaken and put back into operation by the defenders. If the counterattack was unsuccessful, the second position was expanded to become the first, the third became the second, and behind that a new third position was constructed. Apart from numbers, the battle depended largely on two factors: whether the artillery observers recognized the moment that their assailant's opening artillery barrage had been moved ahead and informed the troops that they could open fire,¹⁷ and whether the trench troops could leave their dugouts fast enough to reach the parapets before the enemy infantry arrived.¹⁸

Second Static War

Interestingly, the change from linear to zonal tactics was a very fast and radical one. This probably had much to do with the fact that Austro-Hungarian and German military headquarters were now working closely together, particularly regarding training courses and sending high-ranking commanders to observe the action in different theatres. Another important factor was the similarity between the terrain on the [Piave front](#) and that on the Western Front.¹⁹ In actual fact, the change from linear to zonal tactics was not significant. Basically, it involved extending the trench system even further backwards. This was made possible by advancing the front from the [Isonzo](#) to the Piave so that troops were able to move out of the mountainous Karst region. This shortened this sector of the front, leaving the same number of troops to be echeloned in depth. Instead of the first, second and third positions, there were now zones with different functions.

The "forward zone" was basically the same as the first position, except that the three lines were now separated by up to 400 meters, making this zone about 800 meters deep. An outpost line remained ahead of this and had the function of warding off enemy patrols, and in case of an attack, masking the actual trench position and confusing the assault units. Despite having a limited number of men and machine guns, this line and the forward zone, in conjunction with an artillery barrage, could withstand minor attacks.²⁰ The real strength was in the "core position" about 2,000 to 2,200 meters behind the outposts, out of range of the enemy's light and medium trench mortars. The core position, which corresponded to the old

second position, consisted of two lines about 150 meters apart, each with its own obstacle belt. Like the second position in the linear system, the core position held plenty of reserves ready for a counterattack and had the added benefit of protecting the artillery, which was, for the most part, set up behind it. Unlike the linear system, the technical design of the terrain between the third line of the forward zone and the first line of the core position was of extreme importance. In linear tactics, the terrain had been fortified with lines and strong points, but these became even more important in zonal warfare as they not only stopped troops from rushing forwards, but also from regrouping after taking the forward zone and bringing the artillery up behind them.

This fortified ground and the core position made up the *Großkampfszone*, or main battle zone, which was up to two kilometres deep in places and ensured a mobile battle.²¹ Trenches and dugouts were constructed at the same time so that a defence zone with a depth of three kilometres, comprised of an outpost line, forward line and the main battle zone, was created with the concentration of machine guns and trench mortars increasing towards the rear. Behind the artillery line, at a depth of less than two kilometres, a second battle zone was set up, but not manned.

In some cases, the troops, having little fighting to do, constructed trench systems so complicated that only the men on duty there could find their way about without a guide.²² This system of scattered and [camouflaged](#) positions was advantageous to the new form of combat, known as *Abwehrschlacht* (defensive battle), in which defence had finally become more important than attack.²³ One advantage was that, as the artillery could only fire on known targets, the impact of enemy artillery fire was dispersed over a large area. Firing on supposed positions at a range of more than three kilometres (not including the artillery deployment area) was ineffective, but it was this very distance that had to be bridged to reach the artillery behind if an attack was to be successful. To break through an area this large, the assailant would need far more men and equipment than in the past, and the troops would have to cross complicated terrain and dodge crossfire from hidden trenches to have even a chance of crossing the forward zone in some kind of order.²⁴ If the defending troops were able to survive the opening artillery fire relatively intact and if some men held their positions in the trenches overrun by the enemy, a breakthrough like this could usually be reversed by an organized counterattack.²⁵

The “operative breakthrough” or “breakthrough battle” (*Durchbruchsschlacht*), resulting from a break into the forward zone, was conceived of as the transition to a war of movement. This was not the war of movement of the first months of the war, but the pursuit of a beaten

enemy, as practiced during the battles after the breakthrough at [Caporetto](#) in October 1917. Speed was a crucial factor in this kind of attack. It was essential to take out or capture the artillery area behind the core position in order to bring in reserves and regroup. This objective had to be reached, no matter how many [losses](#) it entailed.^{[26](#)}

For the artillery alone, this meant a huge amount of guns and ammunition. It took a battery of field howitzers (10 cm calibre) with 800 shells, or a battery of heavy field howitzers (15 cm calibre) with 500 shells three hours to destroy a 100-metre stretch of enemy trench. To destroy a 200-metre area of staggered trenches, a 30.5 cm mortar battery (with two mortars) would need about the same time. Counter-battery fire was more difficult, taking 300 15 cm or 100 30.5 cm shells per enemy battery, as well as [gas](#) shells. The number of trench mortars was calculated as one heavy (20 cm calibre) or two medium (12-15 cm calibre) mortars for every meter of trench.^{[27](#)} If the average divisional sector was two kilometres wide, there were 6,000 to 7,000 metres of enemy trenches plus dugouts with machine guns and infantry guns to tackle in the forward zone alone.

When artillery fire was adjusted forward to reach the furthest enemy positions, the first wave, led by [storm troops](#), was to overrun the outpost line and break into the first line. This first wave was very dense so as to withstand the enemy barrage. Then the infantry began to “gnaw” their way through the enemy trenches. To save time, the assault battalions were not relieved. Instead, ammunition was sent forward, the wounded transported back and replaced individually.

Taking all these factors into consideration made an attack a very complex operation requiring precise planning and consistent action. Only one attack was actually carried out on an Austro-Hungarian front as part of zonal warfare, following this plan: the Piave Offensive of June 1918. During this battle both sides fought using the methods of defence and attack described.^{[28](#)}

Conclusion

The change in warfare doctrine within the Habsburg army occurred quite dramatically within the first months of the war. The enormous casualties among officers and non-commissioned officers during the first battles of the war showed – in a literally bloody way – that the operations and tactics that had been trained intensively and over a long period during peacetime were totally outdated. Although no new regulations and manuals were available until early 1915, the experiences of German troops on the Western Front found their way quite quickly into the Habsburg army, simply through imitation. As a result, the first period of static (trench) warfare was established quite effectively in 1915. The new doctrine brought

the supremacy of artillery fire instead of movement. This reduced the number of big battle actions due to the lack of an overwhelming number of artillery guns and ammunition. The Battle of Caporetto in October 1917 is an example of a successfully led offensive operation during the period of linear trench warfare. However, it affected the change to the second static war dramatically. Instead of single lines, zones of defence were established, making a successful offensive operation based on infantry and artillery almost impossible. It would be a new weapon that brought operational capability back: the [tank](#).

M. Christian Ortner, Heeresgeschichtliches Museum

Notes

1. Because of the Austro-Hungarian compromise of 1867, which divided the empire into two more or less independent halves, the consent of the Hungarian government had to be obtained for the army budget and amendments to army law. The Hungarian government often used its veto right to assert its political demands. In the last ten years before the Great War, the Austro-Hungarian armaments industry often suffered from these domestic political problems, called "dualistic" in Austrian jargon. ↑
2. In principle, every male citizen in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was obliged to perform military service. Fitness for military duty was established at the so-called "muster" by a commission after medical examination. The decisions could be "fit", "less fit", "deferred", "unfit" or "to be omitted". So "fit" meant integration in the armed forces. ↑
3. Pitreich, August von: Die Entwicklung unseres Kampfverfahrens von Kriegsbeginn bis zur Gegenwart, in: Österreichisches Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung (ed.): Militärwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen, volume 6, Vienna 1935, pp. 401-416; Pitreich, August von: Die Entwicklung unseres Kampfverfahrens von Kriegsbeginn bis zur Gegenwart (Fortsetzung), in: Österreichisches Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung (ed.): Militärwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen, volume 7, Vienna 1935, pp. 485-510; Pitreich, August von: Die Entwicklung unseres Kampfverfahrens von Kriegsbeginn bis zur Gegenwart (Fortsetzung), in: Österreichisches Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung (ed.): Militärwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen, volume 8, Vienna 1935, pp. 577-594; Pitreich, August von: Die Entwicklung unseres Kampfverfahrens von Kriegsbeginn bis zur Gegenwart (Fortsetzung), in: Österreichisches Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung (ed.): Militärwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen, volume 9, Vienna 1935, pp. 681-697; Pitreich, August von: Die Entwicklung unseres Kampfverfahrens von Kriegsbeginn bis zur Gegenwart (Fortsetzung und Schluß), in: Österreichisches Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung (ed.): Militärwissenschaftliche Mitteilungen,

volume 10, Vienna 1935, pp. 757-774. [↑](#)

4. See Mast, Heinrich: Die Aufklärungstätigkeit der österr.-ung. Kavallerie bei Kriegsbeginn 1914, in: Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift 6 (1968), pp. 388-395. [↑](#)
5. Pitreich, Maximilian: Lemberg 1914. Grundprobleme des Krieges, Vienna 1929, pp. 127, 130-132. [↑](#)
6. Pitreich, Entwicklung 1935, pp. 410-411. [↑](#)
7. Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Vienna, KA NA B/800 n. 42, Kiszling, Rudolf: Wandlungen im Angriffsverfahren österr.-ung. Fußtruppen 1914-1918, p. 8. [↑](#)
8. Exerzierreglement für die k.u.k. Fußtruppen, Vienna 1911, pp. 215-216. [↑](#)
9. Ibid. [↑](#)
10. Ibid., p. 224. [↑](#)
11. Pitreich, Entwicklung 1935, p. 502. [↑](#)
12. Ibid., p. 505. [↑](#)
13. Ibid. [↑](#)
14. Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung / Kriegsarchiv (eds.): Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg. Das Kriegsjahr 1916, volume 4, Vienna 1933, pp. 134-135. [↑](#)
15. Anhaltspunkte für die Anlage von Kampfstellungen, Vienna 1915, p. 3. [↑](#)
16. Ibid., p. 8. [↑](#)
17. Pitreich, Entwicklung 1935, p. 508. [↑](#)
18. Keegan, John: Das Antlitz des Krieges. Die Schlachten von Azincourt 1415, Waterloo 1815 und an der Somme 1916, Frankfurt 1991, pp. 277-278. [↑](#)
19. Pitreich, Entwicklung 1935, p. 577. [↑](#)
20. Ibid., p. 581. [↑](#)
21. Ibid., p. 581. [↑](#)
22. Ibid., p. 582. [↑](#)
23. Leeb, Wilhelm: Die Abwehr, Berlin 1938, p. 60. [↑](#)
24. Ibid., p. 64. [↑](#)
25. Ibid., p. 62. [↑](#)
26. Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung / Kriegsarchiv (eds.): Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg. Das Kriegsjahr 1918, volume 7, Vienna 1938 p. 92. [↑](#)
27. K. u. K. Armeeoberkommando: Abschnitte aus der Gefechtslehre. Der Angriff, volume 12, Vienna 1918, p. 47. [↑](#)
28. Fiala, Peter: Die letzte Offensive gegen Italien, in: Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift 6 (1968), pp. 396-404. [↑](#)

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