

The Museum of Military History/Institute of Military History in Vienna: History, Organisation and Significance

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The Museum of Military History/Institute of Military History in Vienna is today one of the last “traditional” federal museums, which, in terms of its legal form, is still largely based on the Research Organisation Act. It is a subordinate agency of the Federal Ministry of Defence and Sport and is currently divided into four departments (Administration, Collection and Exhibition, Military History Research and Marketing/Visitor Services). There are holdings in the amount of 1.2 million objects, and 2,000 to 4,000 new pieces are added every year. The main building of the museum is located in the Arsenal complex (still partially preserved) in southeast Vienna, which was designed as Vienna’s third “defence barracks” in response to the revolutions of 1848 and 1849. Apart from the traditional military significance of the Arsenal complex, the site was also home to formations of the Royal and Imperial Artillery as well as the production facilities for weapons and ammunition, and a cultural institution was to be added to the sober character of the military functional building, which would reflect Vienna’s importance at the time as the imperial city, royal seat and capital. The magnificent building was supposed to replace the imperial armoury, which had stored not only military equipment, but also trophies and other important historical objects since the times of Maria Theresia, and provide a new home to its historically valuable collections.

The construction of the museum building was the responsibility of a committee under the direction of the Director-General of the Artillery at the time, Feldzeugmeister (Lieutenant General) Baron Vinzenz von Augustin, which commissioned the architects Ludwig Förster and Theophil Hansen to build the museum. After the plans were presented in January 1850, construction began on the building in spring of the same year. Ludwig Förster, however, quickly withdrew from the project, which means that, ultimately, most of the credit for the realisation of the architectural design should go to Theophil Hansen. As the final stone of the entire Arsenal complex was laid in 1856, the exterior of the museum building was nearly finished, but



The "k. k. Artillerie-Arsenal" in Vienna, around 1860 (Lithograph on paper), Anonymous artist, HGM

the interior design as well as questions concerning the exhibition of objects could only be addressed in the years after. As a result, the (imperial) armoury, which had already been cleared in the same year, could not move into the museum building, but had to be temporarily stored in the normal storage rooms of the Arsenal. Only the most important pieces and those of eminent art historical value were subsequently put on display in the first rooms of the museum building that were suitable for use. At the time when these holdings were combined with some other small imperial collections of the so-called court weapons collection, which was subordinate to the Grand Chamberlain's Office, at the end of the 60s of the 19th century, it was decided to include this collection in the new museum building (the *Kunsthistorisches Museum*, or Museum of Art History), which had been built in the meantime on the Ring. The only objects left in the Arsenal were fragments and collection pieces, which were considered to be insignificant at the time.

At the beginning of the 80s, the General Inspector of the Artillery at the time, Archduke Wilhelm, as well as the Director of the Artillery Armoury at the time, *Feldzeugmeister* (Lieutenant General) Baron von Tiller, considered the future of the museum and suggested establishing a new museum based upon the museum building and the still existing holdings, which would be devoted to the history and significance of the Royal and Imperial Army. In 1884, a separate board of trustees was established for this purpose, which was chaired by Count Hans Wilczek and in which Crown Prince Archduke Rudolf, Archduke Albrecht and Archduke Friedrich acted as protectors (in this order). In the following years, this committee was not only responsible for the necessary inventory and preservation of the collections, but

also for beginning a systematic study of the holdings and coming up with ideas for their exhibition. Finally, in May 1891, the museum was ceremoniously opened as part of a visit from the Emperor.

In the years that followed, the collections and the presentation areas were continually expanded, which meant that by the beginning of the 20th century the ground floor could also be used by the museum. The objects were exhibited on the basis of historical and systematic principles, which means that, ultimately, the Royal and Imperial Army Museum could be called the oldest “historic” military museum in the world. Likewise, the Emperor emphasized the importance of the museum, particularly in terms of cultivating tradition and upholding the image of the Royal and Imperial Army. Of course, the international orientation of the most significant traditional site of the military also seemed important. The perfect harmony of architecture and focus has made Vienna’s oldest museum building an impressive Gesamtkunstwerk to this today.

During the First World War, the military use of the Arsenal complex predominated and thus it was decided to close the museum to visitors. The museum’s holdings grew substantially during the war years and the Arsenal not only housed objects of the Royal and Imperial Army, but also trophies and spoils from the battlefields. The end of the Danube Monarchy created great problems both in terms of the focus of the museum as well as the collections themselves. The victorious powers understandably returned objects of foreign provenance and seized numerous Austrian military items and equipment as trophies. The successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy also requested their share of the old Austrian military history in the form of objects.

As a traditional site of the Austrian, Austro-Hungarian or Habsburg Army, there were initially no plans to integrate the museum into the new Republic of Austria, but the circle of war veterans, in particular, were very interested in its continued existence. The museum was finally reopened in 1921 and expanded two years later to include a new gallery featuring images of war.

After Austria’s Anschluss to the German Reich in 1938, the Austrian Army Museum was put under the control of the “Head of the Army Museums” in Berlin and starting in 1940 was misused for propaganda purposes in support of current military campaigns and wars.

Under the threat of the allied bombing of Vienna, the Army Museum was also confronted with the necessity of storing holdings and collection objects in a safe location. Both the main building of the museum as well as the museum depot were hit and heavily damaged during air raids in September and December 1944/January 1945. Furthermore, the Arsenal was the scene of heavy ground fighting during the Battle of Vienna in April 1945, which resulted in further damage to the buildings and holdings. After the end of the fighting, the Arsenal as well as the museum housed within, including its depots, was reduced to a pile of ruins, in which anything valuable or useful was looted by soldiers as well as civilians. There were also acts of



Trough bombs and heavy ground fighting destroyed wing of the museum building, around 1945/46, HGM

significant devastation and wanton destruction. In June 1945, a Soviet battalion on the hunt for trophies claimed and seized part of the holdings that had “survived” so far. This mainly included the melee weapons and firearms holdings, of which 16,000 to 18,000 exhibits were carried off and are still considered to be missing to this day.

Besides substantial losses due to the looting of occupation troops and the local population, the collection of historic artillery barrels and guns, in particular, suffered significant damage, because the British occupying power used explosives to render the weapons inoperable. It didn’t make any difference that most of the weapons were historic pieces, which were no longer usable anyway. The museum staff was further disillusioned by the fact that they could not bring back as many of the museum objects that had been stored in a safe location to protect them from the Allied bombing as they would have liked. The safe storage locations had also been looted and devastated. The fate of the naval collection, which came in part from the Museum of the Royal and Imperial Navy that had existed in Pula until 1918, was particularly tragic. These objects, which also included numerous ethnographic exhibits, had been stored in Valtice, which was now located on Czechoslovakian territory and was thus no longer accessible. It was not until 1948 that a staff member of the museum was able to inspect the storage location. It was found that most of the objects had “disappeared” in the meantime.

All in all, the museum was in a disastrous state in the early post-war years both in terms of structural conditions as well as the collections. Naturally, the important question to be answered, like after the First World War, was whether the reconstruction of a military or army museum was really warranted in the face of the enormous human and material losses of the Second World War. Unlike the situation at the

beginning of the First Republic, the occupying powers as well as the provisional Austrian Federal Government were very interested in rebuilding the museum, because it could play an important role in the on-going efforts toward re-Austrification. Although the government offices and the occupying powers were quite generous with their assistance during the reconstruction effort, the museum had to shoulder a remarkably large share of the reconstruction effort on its own in comparison with other federal museums. This once again concerned the collections and the museum's holdings, which were now appraised with an eye towards possibly selling them. In this respect, the collection of bronze artillery barrels once again played a key role, because the Austrian bell founders had just signalled their great need of this raw material to repair the losses suffered during the war. At the same time, other large equipment such as gun carriages, wagons, carts and other metal accessories were also interesting sources of revenue. Besides, many of the pieces had been damaged during the air raids and ground fighting and were considered at the time to be merely "junk"; the uniqueness of some other objects, however, was not recognised and these together with other pieces of the collection, such as brass fuses or artillery shells, were sold as scrap metal. This further reduction of the technical pieces of the collection as a result of these sales was enormous. Ultimately, the museum was reopened again on 24 June 1955 under the name of the Museum of Military History, which included the history of the Royal and Imperial Navy.

Today, the Museum of Military History in Vienna, which also serves as the Institute of Military History for the Ministry of Defence, is one of the most beautiful museums in Austria. The permanent exhibition, of course, focuses on the history of the Austrian/Austro-Hungarian armed forces from the 16th century up to the 20th/21st centuries. Contrary to the intention of the founders of the former Royal and Imperial Army Museum, Austria's military history is today considered in a wider perspective as an integrative branch of "general" history, social history, the history of technology as well as contemporary history. The interaction between society and the military as well as the traditional international character of the museum also make it a place for portraying Central European history.

Translated by Mark Miscovich

