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## **The Selection and Appointment of Supreme Commanders in 17<sup>th</sup> Century in Austria and Why Miklós Zrínyi was not Chosen**

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Little to nothing is known from scientific research about the selection methods of Supreme Commanders in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> Century. This essay, drawing on available literature on the history of personnel recruitment, attempts to shed more light on this aspect. Based on his knowledge of leadership selection, the author develops an evaluation-matrix for a Supreme Commander in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, assuming that the experts involved in an assessment process at that time also possessed a high level of knowledge and the necessary intuition to make correct decisions. Particular focus is placed on the hypothetical question of how the history of Austria and Hungary would have developed if Miklós Zrínyi had been appointed Supreme Commander of the Imperial Forces of Austria.

**KEYWORDS:** History of Personnel selection, Assessment-Process of Supreme Commanders, Evaluation-matrix for Supreme Commanders, Raimondo Count of Montecuccoli, Miklós Zrínyi, Security and Military situation facing Austria

### ***A főparancsnokok kiválasztása és kinevezése a 17. században Ausztriában Miért nem Zrínyi Miklóst választották?***

*A tudományos kutatások alig vagy egyáltalán nem tudnak semmit a főparancsnokok kiválasztási módszereiről a 17. század közepén. Ez az esszé, a személyi toborzás történetéről szóló elérhető szakirodalomra támaszkodva, megpróbál több fényt deríteni erre a szempontra. A vezetőkiválasztással kapcsolatos ismereteire támaszkodva a szerző egy értékelési mátrixot dolgoz ki egy 17. századi főparancsnok számára, feltételezve, hogy az akkori értékelési folyamatban részt vevő szakértők is magas szintű tudással és a helyes döntések meghozatalához szükséges intuícióval rendelkeztek. Különös hangsúlyt fektet arra a hipotetikus kérdésre, hogy hogyan alakult volna Ausztria és Magyarország története, ha Zrínyi Miklóst nevezték volna ki a császári erők főparancsnokává.*

*KULCSSZAVAK: a főparancsnokok értékelési folyamata, értékelési mátrix. Raimondo gróf Montecuccoli, Zrínyi Miklós, Ausztria biztonsági és katonai helyzete*

### **1. Introduction**

With the author's life experience of almost 70 years, 47 of which was spent as a soldier – having risen to the rank of Major General – he has experienced many things. One thing that has always stuck with him is the fact that it is not always the brightest minds or the best-qualified officers who got the most important jobs. There are many reasons for this, which will not be discussed here. This approach is clearly systematic and flawed personnel policies in filling top positions have their examples in all eras of world history. This was as true in the 17<sup>th</sup> century just as it is true in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There have been enough reasons, firstly, to use all available information to determine who would have been the best qualified for the position of the Supreme Commander of the Austrian Armed Forces around the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup>

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century and, secondly, to investigate the motives why a potentially best qualified person could not have been considered for the position of Supreme Commander at that time.

Researching personnel recruitment in private and public organizations is a significant research topic in business administration, which is, as is well known, part of economics. As a qualified military economist, the author has always been interested in topics related to economics and the military. He has not only researched and published papers on defence systems and their challenges for personnel recruitment, but has also increasingly addressed the questions related to the mechanisms behind the appointment of competent, but often unfortunately underqualified, persons to the highest leadership positions over the past few years in popular scientific military journals. It is therefore high time to write a sound essay about them and to answer the question by whom and how the selection of a Supreme Commander was made.

When the author began his scientific research, he naturally searched for existing scientific literature on this special topic. These investigations were not satisfactory even though the results were extremely interesting, e.g. Malcolm Wanklyn: Parliament's Generals: Supreme Command and Politics During the British Wars 1642-51, Pen and Sword Military, Philadelphia 2019; Barry Strauss: Masters of Command: Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, and the Genius of Leadership (Lessons from Ancient War Leaders), Simon & Schuster, New York 2013; Matthew L. Cavanaugh: On Supreme Command: The Characteristics of Successful American Generals at War, doctoral dissertation at University of Reading, 2018.

After studying the available literature, the author can now claim a new approach to the question by whom and how the selection of a Supreme Commander was made, but he does not claim to have conclusively answered the research question. He is more concerned with using this publication to initiate a discussion process for further fruitful scientific research work on this topic.

## ***2. Personnel selection within history***

Before getting into the specific topic of this essay, the author would like to examine the theoretical approaches to personnel recruitment throughout history and focus on the selection methods – if there were any at all – of generals by the monarch or absolutistic ruler.

Personnel selection originated in ancient China with civil service examinations<sup>1</sup> and developed into a scientific field with Industrial-Organizational Psychology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, spurred by statistical theory and psychometrics. The Chinese Civil Service Examination system formed a complex of competitions in imperial China from 606 to 1905, which served to select candidates for public positions. The examinations represented the most important path to social advancement and thus a central life goal for members of the educated classes.

If you, as a highly educated reader, read the following names, you will be able to connect most of them with feats of arms. Indeed, this is a highly distinguished selection of the most successful Supreme Commanders and war heroes of all time: Ramses II; Alexander III, the

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<sup>1</sup> Miyazaki 1973.

Great; Hannibal Barca; Publius Cornelius Scipio "Scipio Africanus"; Julius Caesar; Temujin/Genghis Khan, William I "the Conqueror", Matthias Corvinus; Hernan Cortés; Suleyman I.; Tokugawa Ieyasu; Albrecht Wenceslas Eusebius von Wallenstein; Prince Eugene of Savoy; Frederick II "the Great"; George Washington; Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon I); Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington; Horatio Nelson; Alexander Suvorov; Joseph Radetzky von Radetz; Chester William Nimitz; Mao Zedong; Vo Nguyen Giap. When reading the biographies of these persons, one fact runs like a thread through all these fascinating lives: The individual military leaders often learned their job from scratch and were largely loyal to their ruler or leaders. Rulers often rose to power and founded long-lasting dynasties because they were blessed with the Coup d'œil and an entrepreneurial hunch.<sup>2</sup> The necessary quantum of luck always played a certain role as well. Rulers therefore always knew something about recruiting and often made intuitive decisions about vacancies. A consultation with some kind of advisory staff also took place. Only when a ruler got the feeling that a true rival was emerging in the successful Supreme Commander he was banished to insignificance at the earliest opportunity, or in the worst case simply murdered.

The author spares the reader a presentation of personnel recruitment, especially in the military, that extends up to the present day and therefore limits himself to the relevant period of the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. To better understand this time, let us make a look at the security and military situation facing Austria at the time.

### ***3. The security and military situation facing Austria in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century***

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) ended in 1648. It had caused immense devastation and claimed many lives. Furthermore, the life expectancy of soldiers of all ranks during this war was very low. As a result, by 1648, many important and talented generals had died, and many senior commanders (from regimental commanders down) had fallen or been severely wounded and had to live out the rest of their lives with disabilities. The pool of suitable candidates in Austria was therefore limited to a few.

The period from 1650 to 1660 was a rather quiet time, as after the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) in Europe and the Ottoman-Safavid War in the Middle East (1623–1639), the major European powers, including the Ottoman Empire, were financially weak and war-weary<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, many field marshals fell on the battlefield, and many other higher commanders lost their lives<sup>4</sup>. Since building a new, combat-ready army does not happen overnight and requires at least 10 years, the years between 1650 and 1660 were peaceful, except for minor skirmishes near the border. During this time, the three war heroes: Raimondo Montecuccoli (1609–1680), Archduke Leopold Wilhelm (1614–1662) and Miklós Zrínyi (1620–1664) were outstanding figures in Austrian history.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of "hunch" or intuition in decision making in economic activities is a concept, where gut feeling and non-scientific approaches play the important role.

<sup>3</sup> In his discussion, the author draws on: Brauner-Höbel 1966 and Herdt-Kinder-Hilgemann 2011.

<sup>4</sup> The most important generals for Austria and the Empire in the Thirty Years' War were Johann T'Serclaes Count of Tilly (+1632) and Albrecht von Wallenstein (+1634). Other important imperial generals were Karl Bonaventura von Buquoy, (+1621) Leopold Wilhelm of Austria, Melchior von Hatzfeldt (+1658) and Niccolò Piccolomini (+1656).

#### 4. The three war heroes

##### *Raimondo Count of Montecuccoli (1609–1680)<sup>5</sup>*

Montecuccoli was born south of Modena in Italy. After studying languages and doing classical studies, he joined the imperial army as a private in 1625 and learned the art of war literally "from the ground up." During the Thirty Years' War, he fought on various fronts and distinguished himself to such an extent that he was appointed Lieutenant Field Marshal and Court War Councillor in 1644. He subsequently commanded troops in Franconia and Bohemia. In 1646, he was finally appointed Imperial General of the Cavalry. After the Peace of Westphalia, he undertook diplomatic trips to Sweden, Flanders, and Italy. As an imperial envoy, he participated in the Hungarian Diet in 1655 and the Regensburg Reichstag in 1664.

In 1657, he supported the Polish King John II Casimir against Rákóczi and the Swedes, forcing Rákóczi to make peace with Poland. After the Treaty of Oliva in 1660, he became Governor of Raab. To provide relief against the Ottoman invasion of the Principality of Transylvania, where Oradea had fallen to the Ottomans in 1660 after a long siege, Montecuccoli was supposed to attack the Ottoman fortresses of Esztergom and Buda the following year. He was carefully organizing weapons, supply routes, and a pontoon bridge over the Danube for his army when the Habsburg court instead ordered him to move via Upper Hungary to Transylvania to support the Habsburg prince candidate, John Kemény. Montecuccoli obeyed the order despite his irritation at the wasted preparations and the difficulties of supplying the army in the impassable and sparsely populated territory. His 15,000 men were soon suffering from hunger and disease; he therefore avoided the four-fold superior Ottoman army, disrupted its operations, reinforced garrisons and helped Kemény establish a presence in the principality.

In 1662, Montecuccoli travelled to the Hungarian Diet in Pressburg to discuss further action; in the meantime, Kemény fell in battle. Montecuccoli engaged in a war of words with the Croatian-Hungarian general Miklós Zrínyi in public pamphlets. Montecuccoli accused the Hungarian magnates of a lack of support and experience with large-scale military operations, while Zrínyi criticized Montecuccoli for his lack of success. During the Turkish War of 1663/1664, Montecuccoli delayed the enemy army's advance until the Bavarian, Brandenburg, French, and Saxon allied troops had joined him. On 1 August 1664, at the Battle of Mogersdorf on the Raab River, this secured his victory over a large Turkish army under Ahmed Köprülü, which was marching on Vienna. Until then, the Ottomans had been considered invincible. As a reward, Montecuccoli was promoted to lieutenant general, the highest military rank at the time, unless a generalissimo was in office. In 1668, Montecuccoli was appointed president of the Imperial War Council. Montecuccoli was also an early military scientist who wrote many works.

##### *Leopold Wilhelm of Austria, from the House of Habsburg (1614–1662)<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Kaufmann 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Wurzbach 1860, 444–446.

Leopold Wilhelm of Austria, from the House of Habsburg, was the youngest son of Emperor Ferdinand II and thus a brother of the later Emperor Ferdinand III. As the younger son, his father predestined him for a classic career as a prince of the church, which also corresponded to his personal inclinations. In 1626, he succeeded his retired uncle Leopold as Bishop of Passau and Strasbourg and Prince Abbot of Murbach Abbey. Leopold Wilhelm was considered a responsible and personally extremely pious bishop, but spent the majority of his career in diplomatic and, above all, military service for both lines of the Habsburg dynasty. His education left him less prepared for a career as a general, and some sources even consider him unsuitable for it. Many paintings and busts depict Leopold Wilhelm in armour and with a marshal's baton. In the final phase of the Thirty Years' War, his brother Ferdinand twice gave him supreme-command of the imperial army.

During his first term in office, supported by the experienced officer Ottavio Piccolomini, he succeeded in pushing back the Swedes who had invaded Bohemia in 1639, capturing positions on the Weser in 1640, and launching an effective counterattack after the Swedish attack on the Regensburg Diet under Field Marshal Johan Banér in 1641. However, the pushing back of the Swedes from Silesia following a particularly devastating offensive by Torstensson in 1642 was followed by a severe defeat in the Second Battle of Breitenfeld, which was launched against Piccolomini's advice. This led to disputes about the circumstances of the defeat and culminated in the execution of several officers from the respective wing of the army whom Leopold held responsible for the defeat. As a result of the battle, both Leopold Wilhelm and Piccolomini resigned their commands in quick succession. The Archduke assumed Supreme-Command for a second time in May 1645, after the Swedes had threatened both Vienna and Prague due to the extensive losses of the Imperial army under Matthias Gallas at the end of 1644 and the defeat at Jankau in March 1645. Leopold Wilhelm organized a successful defence on the Danube and, among other things, was able to stop a Swedish vanguard in Brüggenau at the end of May 1645. Even in a second attempt in August, the Swedes failed to cross the Danube and withdrew from Lower Austria. In Moravia, the Imperial forces succeeded in defending Brno, and the Archduke sent support to the Bavarians against the French after their defeat at Alerheim. His predecessor, Gallas, served as his advisor during this time until Leopold Wilhelm ousted him at the end of the year when courtiers and officers began to undermine the Archduke's authority and wanted Gallas back as commander-in-chief.

In 1646, Leopold Wilhelm led an ill-fated campaign from Bohemia to Hesse, but was forced to retreat due to supply difficulties and was outmanoeuvred by the Swedes and French, who devastated Bavarian Swabia. At the end of 1646, Philip IV of Spain granted Archduke Leopold William the governorship of the Spanish Netherlands in order to bind his Austrian relatives more closely to him. As stadtholder, he was initially able to conclude peace with the United Netherlands, allowing him to concentrate on the fight against France. Leopold Wilhelm initially achieved military successes against the French, but in August 1648, he lost large parts of his army in an offensive at the Battle of Lens against the French general Louis II of Bourbon-Condé. The internal revolts of the Fronde in France nevertheless enabled further

Spanish successes and the regaining of strongholds until 1653, which were lost again in the following years until Leopold William relinquished the stadholdership in 1656.

*Miklós Zrínyi (1620–1664)<sup>7</sup>*

Miklós Zrínyi was a son of a respected noble family that owned lands in southwest Hungary and Croatia for generations. To broaden his horizons, young Zrínyi was sent to study at the Jesuit college in Graz in 1634, and later to Vienna and Nagyszombat (present-day Trnava, Slovakia), the largest Hungarian university at the time. His studies continued at several locations in Italy from 1635 to 1637. In Rome, Zrínyi was even received in audience by Pope Urban VIII. In Italy, Zrínyi became acquainted with the great works of the Renaissance, such as those of Niccolò Machiavelli. This laid the foundation for his political thinking in the decades to come. Through his extensive studies, young Zrínyi became an educated man, fluent in Hungarian, Croatian, Italian, French, German, Latin, later in Turkish and also skilled in writing. After his return from Italy, he took over the administration of the lands in Muraköz and honed his military skills in practice by defending the borders of his estates. The Zrínyi lands were a border province to the Ottoman possessions; less than 25 miles from his ancestral castle of Csáktornya lay the great Ottoman fortress of Kanizsa, which was easily conquered by the Ottomans in 1600, as Austria was unwilling to offer much resistance. Kanizsa thus became the starting point for many Ottoman raids into the Habsburg lands.

The land of the Zrínyis was not very fertile but of great strategic importance as it lay between Styria and the lands controlled by the Ottomans. It was thus the only connecting corridor between the Adriatic Sea, Croatia, and the parts of Hungary not yet occupied by the Ottomans. The court in Vienna therefore closely monitored every activity of the Zrínyis in their country and was therefore not very understanding when Miklós Zrínyi, without regard for customs duties, exported cattle to Venice via the Croatian port of Bakar — near present-day Rijeka. The court in Vienna may have feared that this export would provoke a strong reaction from the Ottomans. Zrínyi justified the export of animals by citing the need to raise money for the necessary expansion of his border, which he had not yet received despite frequent urging from the court. In his estimation, the Ottomans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were weaker than they were in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This led him to conclude that if the Christian West acted as one, the Ottomans could easily be driven out from Hungary. By 1645 – at the age of 25 – Miklós Zrínyi was already an experienced general. This prompted the court in Vienna to issue him orders for his troops to march against the approaching Swedes in 1645. Zrínyi then equipped an army corps at his own expense and fought against the Swedes in Moravia. During this campaign, he took approximately 2,000 prisoners.

Towards the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1647, he rescued the Emperor in Cheb from the attacks of Swedish general Wrangel and then marched against the army of György Rákóczi I on the upper Tisza. On 27 December 1647, he was appointed "Ban and General of Croatia" for his services. In this capacity, he headed the Croatian Parliament. When he took up this position in 1649, he found the Croatian people largely discouraged. This meant a great

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<sup>7</sup> Padányi 2021.

deal of persuasion lay ahead of him. Towards the end of the Thirty Years' War, Miklós Zrínyi was at the height of his popularity among his countrymen and also at the court in Vienna. He was therefore a welcome guest at major court events, for example the coronation of Emperor Ferdinand IV, at which Zrínyi carried the sword of the empire. However, as he increasingly concerned himself with enforcing the rights of Hungarians and Croats, he came into increasing conflict with the court in Vienna. He vehemently advocated the position that both Hungary and Croatia should not be viewed as "partes annexae" within the overall structure of the Habsburg state, but as a "regnum". Zrínyi felt the wrath of the court in Vienna again when he resumed the cattle trade with Venice. This time the court in Vienna even tried to prevent the trade by using military force. Zrínyi then travelled to Vienna and tried to explain to the court that he was only exporting the cattle to raise enough money for his defensive measures against the Ottomans and that ultimately the entire empire would benefit from his defensive measures. But it was not just the cattle transports to Venice that displeased the court; the court in Vienna also disapproved of Zrínyi's de facto constant war against the Ottomans from 1650 onward.

Miklós Zrínyi and his younger brother Péter were able to rely on a well-established business network in the upper Adriatic<sup>8</sup>. According to a 1671 census by the Zagreb Chamber of Commerce, the Zrínyi brothers' assets, including property, real estate, and trading proceeds, amounted to 1,714,689 guilders. Their possessions encompassed no fewer than five provinces, from the port of Buccari (present-day Bakar, Croatia) to an estate at the confluence of the Drava and Mura rivers (about 160–170 km northeast), and no fewer than five seaports, from Buccari itself, which belonged to Péter, to Buccarizza (Bakarac), Porto Re (Kraljevica), Cirquenizza (Crikvenica), and Selce, which belonged to Zrínyi. Trade centred primarily on Hungarian livestock, whose meat was in high demand on Venetian tables, but also on salt, timber, and grain. Pannus latus, a cheap cloth for miners and furnace workers, was also traded from the smaller ports, while iron from the Čabar mine arrived in the form of ingots and other industrial products such as nails, horseshoes, mortars, cannonballs, and shell casings at the large port of Buccari and was sold not only to Venice but also to other Italian cities such as Ancona and Senigallia, which at that time were already under the rule of the Papal States.<sup>9</sup>

These hostilities increasingly worried Vienna as it was believed that Miklós Zrínyi's rash actions were provoking the Ottomans into a major attack on Vienna. Zrínyi's constant attacks on Ottoman strongholds also worried the Ottoman general Suleiman, forcing him to focus his defensive efforts on the Zrínyi lands. Miklós Zrínyi's 1651 campaign against the Ottomans in Bosnia was particularly notable. During these battles, he intercepted a letter from the Grand Vizier intended for the commander of the Kanizsa fortress. In this letter, the Grand Duke demanded that the fortress commander participate more actively in the fighting, or face the death penalty for continued inaction. This was a valuable indication that the Ottoman troops were not in the best condition and that the general situation was therefore favourable for a major attack by the Christian West against the Ottomans.

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<sup>8</sup> Simona 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Ondrék et al. 2022.

After the campaign in Bosnia, in which Zrínyi achieved some success, the court forbade him from any fighting against the Ottomans. This further soured the atmosphere between the Zrínyi family and the court in Vienna. Miklós Zrínyi advocated for a strong king in Hungary, one who was also Hungarian. He therefore proposed an election. To further emphasize his demand, he wrote the epic poem "Mátyás király életéről való elmélkedések (Reflections on the Life of King Matthias). With this work, he wanted to present to the Hungarian people the ideal ruler he saw in the person of King Mátyás, who ruled all of Hungary and also large parts of Eastern Austria. After this secret call for unity among the Hungarian people and liberation from Habsburg rule, Zrínyi lost all trust at the court in Vienna.

Zrínyi spent the last years of his life fortifying his lands and publishing further literary and military works. When it became clear to him in early 1663 that the Ottomans were planning a major campaign, he attempted to propose the best possible defensive measures to the court. However, he was given little attention and was forbidden to continue taking his defensive measures. In the face of the Spanish succession dispute, the court in Vienna attempted to play for time; in negotiations with the Ottomans, the surrender of Zrínyi's new castle was even discussed. But the Ottomans were also playing for time, as they were undertaking large troop movements and wanted to reinforce their forces on the border with Austria. After Zrínyi's intervention at the court in Vienna in May 1663, the Emperor had the Styrian border reinforced with 6,000 troops as his sole defensive measure.

Left to his own devices and surrounded by increasingly strong Ottoman troops, the situation around Zrínyi-Újvár became increasingly similar to the situation his great-grandfather found himself in during the defence of Szigetvár in 1566. Zrínyi had already gathered a force of around 20,000 men around him and could not hope for further help. In this situation, he received a serious warning from the Pasha of Kanizsa, who made it clear to him that the entire Ottoman army would attack the castle. Zrínyi was initially spared this worst-case scenario, as the Ottomans marched against the Hungarians in the north and defeated a Hungarian army at Érsekújvár (present-day Nové Zamky, Slovakia).

However, Zrínyi could not rely on the Ottomans not attacking his castle. The situation for Zrínyi, however, improved again when the court in Vienna received news of an advancing Ottoman army from Belgrade. Zrínyi was subsequently allowed to advance against the Ottomans again. When Zrínyi defeated an Ottoman army of approximately 6,000 men that attacked his castle, he was appointed "totius nationis Hungariae dux" (Leader of the Hungarian Nation) and given command over Hungarian troops, independent of Montecuccoli, thus granting him an authority equivalent to that of the "nádor." In the face of the threat, the court in Vienna suddenly changed its mind about Miklós Zrínyi's loyalty, and suddenly they once again saw him as the hoped-for saviour from the Ottoman threat. Zrínyi took on a difficult position, as the Hungarians had been defeated at Érsekújvár and he had only about 15,000 men under his command. Nevertheless, he made every effort and reorganized his army in October and November 1663. Discipline was improved, and the troops were granted complete religious freedom; for example, Protestant units received their own Protestant pastors.

Towards the end of November, this army won a victory against an Ottoman army. Due to resentment at the court in Vienna, Zrínyi was again relieved of his command, and thus his plan for a surprise attack along the Drava to the Danube, designed to prevent the Ottomans from crossing the Danube, could no longer be implemented. It would undoubtedly have been interesting if this plan had been put into practice, since Zrínyi knew from his observations that the Ottomans abhorred winter warfare. Left to his own devices once again, Zrínyi achieved several successes against the Ottomans so that the court in Vienna could not completely forgo his skills in times of need.

The imperial army was therefore divided into three parts. The Emperor entrusted one part to Count Jean-Louis Raduit de Souches, who was to conduct operations in Upper Hungary. The largest part of the army was deployed under the command of Montecuccoli against the Ottomans along the Danube, with the aim of attacking Buda. The third part of the army was placed under Zrínyi's command; he was to attack the Ottomans along the Drava with around 30,000 men. His attacks against the Ottomans confirmed his assumption of the Ottomans' aversion to operations in winter. In February 1664, he and his troops succeeded in burning the heavily fortified bridge over the Drava near Eszék (present-day Osijek, Croatia). This delayed the Ottoman army's attempt to cross the river for months. Undoubtedly a major operational success, which laid the foundation for Montecuccoli's victory at Mogersdorf/Szentgotthárd. After his victory at the Eszék Bridge, Zrínyi began the siege of Kanizsa, but, due to a lack of support from Montecuccoli, he was forced to abandon it in June 1664. The Ottoman relief army then attacked and destroyed Zrínyi-Újvár.<sup>10</sup> After the castle's destruction, Zrínyi is said to have said: "I built the castle in the wrong place; I knew it was indefensible." This story may be correct. From today's perspective, the castle was correctly located and served as a bridgehead. Zrínyi was then forced to retreat with his troops to the Styrian border.

### ***5. What does a Supreme Commander need to bring to his role?***

A Supreme Commander is, as the name clearly suggests, the highest-ranking soldier and thus has command over all soldiers, unless the Emperor personally exempts certain groups of soldiers, such as the Imperial Guard. To better understand the function of the Supreme Commander, we must examine the soldier's profession itself. Soldiers are bound by their service to their homeland and to the Emperor. Service to the fatherland and the associated protection of the homeland are central aspects of many soldiers' identities.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there were many soldiers who were not born in the country to which they ultimately offered their services as soldiers. These soldiers, or as we technically call them, mercenaries, entered the service of their new homeland primarily to secure personal gain or reward through combat, since they are paid for their service and do not fight out of conviction or patriotism. Their main motivation is money and they are often not tied to the political or territorial interests of a state, which gives them flexibility in conflicts. Due to the lack of Austrian soldiers, mercenaries were ubiquitous in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, serving as short-term reinforcements for armies when regular troops were insufficient.

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<sup>10</sup> Padányi 2015.

Perhaps one of the most significant examples of a mercenary was *Prince Eugene of Savoy*; he became an Austrian by enlisting in the Habsburg service as a young man after being denied a military career in France. Through his military merits, he quickly rose through the imperial ranks, became a prominent general of the Habsburg Empire, and spent most of his career in Austrian service, making him a central figure in Austrian history. It is not known whether he developed a strong emotional attachment to Austria, which could be described as patriotism, or whether he still considered France his true homeland.

Prince Eugene had what we today consider the Coup d'œil. "Coup de «œil»" is a French expression meaning a quick, brief glance, often to observe or check something quickly. The expression can also refer to the quality of quick discernment, as in the expression "avoir le coup d'œil," which describes the ability to quickly perceive the important elements of a situation<sup>11</sup>. The second significant mercenary was *Raimondo Montecuccoli*; he became an Austrian because, as an Italian by birth, he devoted his military career entirely to the service of the Austrian Emperors. He stood unconditionally behind the House of Habsburg. Whether he developed a passionate love for his new homeland, Austria, is unknown. Nor is it known whether he still maintained a strong bond with his native Italy. However, he may have thought Italian throughout his life, as he even wrote his military-scientific works in Italian.

When assessing his patriotism, let's turn to *Miklós Zrínyi*. Miklós Zrínyi was undoubtedly a passionate Hungarian, whose heart also burned for Croatia. The respect he showed for Austria in his early years was merely a means to an end to achieve his true goal: "The liberation of Hungary from the Ottoman yoke". Therefore, with regard to Miklós Zrínyi's subsequent life, it is quite legitimate to ask what would have happened if, as the Supreme Commander, he had decisively defeated the Ottomans and thus liberated Hungary. Would he have marched against the Emperor in Vienna as his next step to enforce Hungary's independence from Austria? We'll never know, because it did not happen; but I think the court in Vienna played along similar lines and incorporated the results into the appointment of Montecuccoli as the Supreme Commander.

## ***6. How was a suitable officer selected as Supreme Commander?***

There are no precise records of this in the history books. However, one can surmise the process between the lines. Back then, the objectivity methods that exist today certainly did not exist in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Today, before a Chief of the General Staff is appointed, there is a call for application, in which suitable candidates can participate and submit their application by a deadline. This is followed by an evaluation process conducted by an independent commission.

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<sup>11</sup> In the Battle of Zenta, imperial troops under the command of Prince Eugene of Savoy won a significant victory over the Ottomans at Zenta on the Tisza River on 11 September 1697. This victory was achieved primarily because Prince Eugene, enlightened by the Coup d'œil, chose an offensive operation that the general had not expected: Eugene's troops launched the attack directly from the movement, advancing in a crescent shape against the Ottoman defensive position. When sandbanks became visible in the river just north of the pontoon bridge, Eugene immediately seized this opportunity and had them occupied, thus bombarding the Turkish defensive position from behind as well. After intense artillery fire, the assault followed, in which the infantry, dismounted cavalry, and Prince Eugene himself, at the head of a dragoon regiment, participated. The entrenchments were finally overcome, the Turks were driven into the river, and the bridge was taken under fire. Source: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Zenta>

This commission then proposes the top-ranked candidates to the decisionmaker (today, the Minister of Defence). In the past, such a decision was made by the Emperor himself. The Emperor could adhere to the recommendations but was not required to do so in the absolutist system of the time.

The author himself was often a member of evaluation commissions and also applied himself for top positions. He is therefore very familiar with today's system and, with today's knowledge, attempts to recreate a situation that might have existed around 1650.

At that time, there was no established selection process with an application procedure, but there was certainly a non-textualized requirement profile for a future Supreme Commander. Based on a possible requirement profile, the author has created an evaluation matrix, similar to the one an evaluation commission would have to use today, in order to make the opinion-forming process visible and understandable. In our specific case, the Emperor in the 17<sup>th</sup> century certainly set important criteria when defining the requirements profile, which primarily concerned loyalty to the Habsburgs and the Catholic Church. An evaluation matrix might have looked something like this after the entire process:

*A fictitious evaluation matrix for a new Supreme Commander created by the Aulic War Council on behalf of the Emperor*

|   | <i>Wilhelm</i> | <i>Monte-cuccoli</i> | <i>Zrínyi</i> |
|---|----------------|----------------------|---------------|
| <b><i>Part I: General Criteria</i></b>  |                |                      |               |
| <b>Age</b><br>Points were awarded based on life expectancy (the average life expectancy after reaching adulthood was around 60 years; this meant that a suitable person should have reached at least 40 years of age): Best age 3, then 2 points less for every 10 years of life. | 36/2           | 41/3                 | 30/1          |
| <b>Military Successes up to 1650</b><br>{assessed based on a ranking from 1-5 (best value)}   | 3              | 5                    | 4             |
| <b>Experience in combat against the Ottomans</b><br>(rating from 1 to 5 (best value))   | 0              | 3                    | 5             |
| <b>Assessment by the Imperial War Council regarding the presence of the "Coup d'œil"</b> (Yes corresponds to 5; No to 1)  | 1              | 5                    | 5             |
| <b>Military Scientific Works</b>  | -              | 5                    | 5             |
| <b>Organizational Talent</b>  | 2              | 4                    | 5             |
| <b>Management Qualities as Head of Businesses, i. e.</b><br>Raising Funds for Military Purposes   | 2              | -                    | 5             |
| <b>Catholic (1 point); Protestant (0 point)</b>   | 1              | 1                    | 1             |
| <b>Knowledge of French and Turkish (1 point each)</b>   | 1              | 1                    | 2             |

|  |           |           |           |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| <b><i>Subtotal of Part I</i></b>   | 12        | 27        | 33        |
| <b><i>Part II: Criteria Formulated by the Emperor Himself</i></b>  |           |           |           |
| <b>Rootedness in the Austrian Nobility</b>   | 3         | 3         | 0         |
| <b>Absolute Loyalty to the House of Habsburg</b><br>{0, 1 (with reservations), 2 (loyal without "ifs" and "buts")} | 2         | 2         | 0         |
| <b>Status at Court</b><br>{0 (considered unreliable) -3}   | 3         | 3         | 0         |
| <b>Prince of the Church</b> {(1 point yes; 0 points (no)}  | 1         | 0         | 0         |
| <b>Marriage of equal status</b> {(1 point yes; 0 points (no)}  | -         | 1         | 1         |
| <b><i>Subtotal of Part II</i></b>  | 9         | 9         | 1         |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>21</b> | <b>36</b> | <b>34</b> |

Notes: The numbers in the evaluation matrix were taken from the school grading system. 0 represents the worst rating and 5 the best.

*Evaluation of the results of the evaluation matrix:* Taking the selected criteria into account, Montecuccoli and Zrínyi performed nearly equally. Since it was the Emperor's responsibility to appoint the Supreme Commander of his entire forces, the sole criterion for favouring Montecuccoli was the loyalty to the House of Habsburg. As we now know from history books, Montecuccoli was appointed to Supreme Commander of the forces of Habsburg Empire<sup>12</sup>.

But what would have happened if the decision had been in favour of Miklós Zrínyi? The author attempts to address this question in the next chapter. Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria, from the House of Habsburg, will not be discussed further in the remainder of this essay, as the Emperor had other plans for him anyway.

## 7. *What would have happened if Miklós Zrínyi had become the Supreme Commander – A fictitious answer*

It can be assumed that Miklós Zrínyi, with his focus on liberating all of Hungary from the Ottoman yoke, would have devised a different strategic model for the Habsburg Monarchy. Based on a broad freedom of action for operations against the Ottomans, this would have meant that Austria could not have antagonized France and, for its further action against the Ottoman empire, would have had to actively enlist Poland, Venice, the Safavid Empire, and Russia. Based on this strategy, Miklós Zrínyi would have, as was his custom, exhausted every possibility of assembling armed forces of between 100,000 and 200,000 men in order to have sufficient forces at his disposal for a large-scale operation in the Ottoman-occupied part of Hungary. Similar to what he did around 14 years later in 1664, he could have launched a large-scale winter campaign against the Ottomans as early as the late 1650s. Given the

<sup>12</sup> Sutherland 2022, 115–140.

Ottomans' reluctance to fight in winter, this campaign might well have offered prospects of success and an operational breakthrough as far as Belgrade. The troops' provisions could have come from the well-stocked stores of the castles occupied by the Ottomans.

A victory against the Ottomans more than 30 years before the destruction of the occupying army outside Vienna in 1683 would have meant an earlier liberation of Hungary from the Ottoman yoke, but whether the Emperor in Vienna would have tolerated Miklós Zrínyi becoming a powerful opponent of Habsburg interests in Hungary is doubtful. In such a scenario, Miklós Zrínyi's life was likely in more serious danger than it had been in 1664, when Montecuccoli held supreme-command. Had Miklós Zrínyi's behaviour made it clear to the Emperor in Vienna that he now wished to continue the struggle for a truly independent Hungary, the Emperor would have used his extensive powers to seek Miklós Zrínyi's life and have him murdered. The gratitude of monarchs is often complex and unfathomable. Immortal, as he has now become through his deeds even without supreme-command, Miklós Zrínyi would also have become as Supreme Commander a similar martyr for Hungary, such as Francis II Rákóczi (1676-1735) or Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894). However, he would have served the Habsburg monarchy well overall if the Ottomans had been defeated earlier and more effectively; and who knows, perhaps a reconquest of Constantinople for Christianity would have been achieved.

### **8. Summary**

Personnel selection originated in ancient China with civil service examinations and developed into a scientific field with Industrial-Organizational Psychology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was spurred by statistical theory and psychometrics. Little to no information is known about whether the Habsburg Monarchy appointed its military leaders in the 17<sup>th</sup> century using scientifically based assessment procedures. Military reality offered the Habsburg monarchy few options, as there was simply a lack of outstanding military leaders in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The author identified three high-ranking military officers in the Habsburg monarchy suitable for the position of a Supreme Commander, Raimondo Montecuccoli, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm and Miklós Zrínyi. Based on his knowledge, acquired through his work at the Federal Ministry of Defence and courses at consulting firms, he created a hypothetical evaluation-matrix which yielded the most suitable commander, one whom the Emperor could also accept, as he was responsible for appointing him. Finally, the author explores what Miklós Zrínyi would have done differently if he had been appointed to Supreme Commander, and why he was not the first choice as Supreme Commander at the court in Vienna.

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