



***The Nobility in State and Society:  
Administrative and Public Ways of  
Defining and Conceptualising the  
Nobility in the Late Habsburg Empire  
(1849–1914)***

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## **The Nobility in State and Society: Administrative and Public Ways of Defining and Conceptualising the Nobility in the Late Habsburg Empire (1849–1914)<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** This study deals with the definition of the aristocracy in the late Habsburg Monarchy (1848–1916). It attempts to grasp this phenomenon in the “bourgeois age” from two perspectives: firstly, it is assumed that the state - with the establishment of a centralised administration—also ‘bureaucratised’ membership of the nobility in the nineteenth century. In the Habsburg administrative apparatus, there were therefore structures that regulated entry and advancement in this social class and established categories that defined and standardised the nobility from a state perspective. Social mobility was made primarily dependent on the achievements of the applicants. On the other hand, the social implications of the institutional decisions of the nobility and the policy of ennoblement are analysed. This form of honour was, as it were, worthless—for the applicant as well as for the state—if it did not receive public attention and recognition. It is therefore also necessary to ask from the opposite side how the public identified and defined the nobility and how those wishing to be ennobled tried to assert their claims with the help of official and informal channels.

**Keywords:** Nobility; Habsburg empire; Francisco-Josephinian period; state building; criticism against nobility

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<sup>1</sup> This text combines excerpts and summaries of my PhD thesis: Marion Dotter, “Adelspolitik in der späten Habsburgermonarchie. Kulturen des Entscheidens in der Nobilitierungspraxis während der Regierungszeit Kaiser Franz Joseph I. (1848–1916),” PhD dissertation (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, 2021). This thesis was written as part of the DFG-funded project “The Emperor’s Desk” (2018–2022). I would like to thank the DFG and my supervisor Prof. Dr. Jana Osterkamp as well as Dr. Stefan Auerbeck for their support.

Nobility dwells only in the soul; and there is no true honour but in virtue. The favour of princes may be purchased by vice; rank and title may be bought for money: but these are not true honour. [...] If titles are the rewards of virtue; if he is exalted who serves the fatherland; he who gives out honour has as much glory from it as he who receives it: and this benefits the world. If thou pursue such honour, acquire merit: without it thou shalt be a mockery to the world with the highest titles of honour.<sup>2</sup>

The *Bürger-Bibel* ("citizen's bible") of 1794, which wanted to pave the "way to wisdom and virtue" for its readers, justified ennoblements solely on the basis of self-attained achievements and merits. In contrast, a noble birth and the "dishonourable" acquisition of a title were considered completely worthless for both the sovereign and the ennobled. As early as during the Enlightenment, there were lively discussions in the public opinion and among scholars about the nature of nobility.<sup>3</sup> It was widely held that only a "nobility of the soul" based on charity and virtue could qualify a commoner for raising his status.<sup>4</sup> Such statements reflect a nobility that cannot be determined by means of a title, but rather by means of an inner disposition that becomes visible through certain qualities and is ultimately reflected in a state decoration.

Both the state and the public were addressed in the introductory quotation as a mirror for the nobility of the modern period. In the Habsburg empire of the nineteenth century, both were still interpreted as the safeguard and the linchpin of a very diversified nobility: while the aristocracy, as the traditional elite, was able to secure its exclusivity even after the loss of real political power in the revolutions of 1848, a new group of nobles tried to rise from the bourgeoisie, especially since the eighteenth century. However, this group of the so-called "second society" was very heterogeneous as well and divided into the *Dienstadel* (especially civil servants and military officers) on the one hand, and successful entrepreneurs, artists, and scientists on the other.<sup>5</sup> Both groups, the higher and the lower nobility, relied on the acceptance of the state as well as on the acknowledgement

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<sup>2</sup> *Bürger-Bibel, oder der Weg der Weisheit und Tugend*. [...] (Vienna: Ignaz Alberti, 1794), 110–111. Translated from the original German. All translations from German are by me, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> See the article of Nadir Weber in this Special Issue.

<sup>4</sup> Hannes Stekl, "Ambivalenzen von Bürgerlichkeit," in *Adel und Bürgertum in der Habsburgermonarchie. 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert. Hannes Stekl zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Hannes Stekl and Ernst Bruckmüller, Sozial- und Wirtschaftshistorische Studien 31 (Vienna: Böhlau, 2004), 140–156.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview on the noble society in the Habsburg empire in the nineteenth century see: Jan Županič, "Die Nobilitierungspolitik der letzten Habsburger. Der neue Adel im Zeitalter Franz Josephs und Karls," *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 4, no. 106 (2019): 473–518.

of the public to keep their exceptional position in society and to justify their privileges. These had been significantly reduced or even eliminated during the revolution of 1848–49;<sup>6</sup> what remained were no legal or political advantages, but an elevated social status. The hereditary nature of the noble titles remained particularly important to the Austrian authorities—it was a unique feature of the nobility and a significant advantage of this group. Only the old nobility could also claim other real privileges, such as access to certain institutions, e.g. charitable foundations for "poor" noblewomen. The hereditary nature of the title was therefore a unique prerogative of the nobility and should tie whole families over several generations to the Habsburg dynasty. In this aspect of the policies of ennoblement, the Habsburg empire followed a conservative course, while other states that had been influenced more strongly by the Napoleonic system invented a personal nobility of lifetime or abolished the nobility titles altogether.<sup>7</sup>

The state, symbolised through the emperor and his administration, as well as the public, which articulated its opinions and attitudes in newspapers and the parliament, are the focus of this article. Both will be considered and analysed as the central points of reference for the nobility of the late Habsburg empire. They played an important role in defining the class identity of the nobility and were necessary supporters to receive or retain social status. The text asks how state and public actors in the second half of the nineteenth century defined "correct" noble behaviour and thereby shaped the character of this group due to their changing ideas on nobility and society. Discussing the conceptualisation and construction of nobility in the nineteenth century also gives insights on how experts and decision-makers in different fields interpreted the transformations and changes the monarchy faced in various sectors of society, and how these actors defined their own role in these processes.

The first argument of this text is that, notwithstanding the diversity of the Austro-Hungarian nobility, it was a group that held together because of the legitimising effects of state recognition.<sup>8</sup> During the ennoblement process, the social status of an individual was evaluated. At the same time, the conception of nobility was constantly renegotiated and

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview on the literature on ennoblement procedures in the German-speaking area see: Dotter, "Adelspolitik," 9–18.

<sup>7</sup> In France, for example, no new titles were awarded in the Third Republic, but existing ones were retained. In Romania, the nobility was abolished with the constitution, while in some kingdoms, such as Württemberg, nobility was only conferred for life.

<sup>8</sup> On the concept of the modern state see: Stefan Nellen and Thomas Stockinger, "Staat, Verwaltung und Raum im langen 19. Jahrhundert: Einleitung," *Administrativ* 2, no. 1 (2017): 3–28.

enriched, but thereby also systematised. This part of the study will be based on the so-called *Vorträge* (submissions) of the *Kabinettskanzlei* (cabinet office) to the emperor.<sup>9</sup> These were prepared in the ministries (especially in the ministry of the interior) and had to be ratified by the monarch. They represent the protocols of the inner administrative negotiation processes and the basis of the emperor's final decision between the "nobility" and "non-nobility" of the applicants.<sup>10</sup> However, they discuss not only the nobility of individual persons, but also general considerations of nobility in society from the perspective of both state and non-state actors. By examining the arguments that could speak for and against the ennoblement of a certain person, the officials presented a complete picture of the values associated with nobility. These relied predominantly on the merits, the moral behaviour, the loyalty, and the family relations of the petitioner. In this text, only the professional merits of the applicants that justified their ennoblement will be analysed, but also "surreptitious routes" to nobility will be mentioned.

The second part of the article concentrates on the societal implications of the institutional decisions on ennoblement. After all, a decoration was worthless—for the applicant as well as for the state—if it did not receive public attention and confirmation.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore also necessary to ask from the outside how the public defined and described the nobility, and how the rise of bourgeois moral concepts in justifying ennoblements ultimately threatened the institution of nobility itself. The second argument of this paper thus assumes that while the nobility was strongly differentiated internally, the external criticism of this class was affected by a consistent narrative with focus on their lack of

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<sup>9</sup> The submissions of the cabinet office can be found under the archival number AT-OeStA/HHSTA KA KK Vorträge MRZL., MCZL. and KZL in the Austrian Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna.

<sup>10</sup> On these sources as well as on the cabinet office see: Fritz Reinöhl, *Geschichte der k. u. k. Kabinettskanzlei* (Vienna: Ferdinand Berger, 1963). On the political processes that took place between the emperor and the ministries see: Peter Becker and Jana Osterkamp, "Der Kaiser und seine Kanzlei. Überlegungen zum Herrschaftssystem der Habsburgermonarchie," in *Politik- und Kulturgeschichtliche Betrachtungen. Quellen - Ideen - Räume - Netzwerke. Festschrift für Reinhard Stauber zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Ulfried Burz, Werner Drobisch, and Elisabeth Lobenwein (Klagenfurt, Vienna, Ljubljana: Hermagoras Verein/Mohorjeva družba, 2020), 841–857.

<sup>11</sup> On the political public in the late Habsburg empire see: Jana Osterkamp, *Vielfalt ordnen. Das föderale Europa der Habsburgermonarchie (Vormärz bis 1918)*, Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum 141 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020); Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Helmut Rumpler, "Einleitung. Von der 'bürgerlichen Öffentlichkeit' zur Massendemokratie. Zivilgesellschaft und politische Partizipation im Vielvölkerstaat der Habsburgermonarchie," in *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, ed. Helmut Rumpler and Peter Urbanitsch, vol. 8, *Politische Öffentlichkeit und Zivilgesellschaft* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2006), 1–14.

merits and virtues. This narrative also influenced the perception of nobility in the late Habsburg empire and finally led to the abolishment of nobility in several of its successor states after the First World War. In this article, the public discourses on nobility will be examined with regard to two aspects concerning the criticism against the nobility: on the one hand, it will look at the parliamentary debates on the aristocracy after the revolution of 1848 in the so-called Reichstag of Kremsier, in which the abolition of all titles and privileges was debated; on the other hand, it will present the discussions in parliament, press, and expert circles after several ennoblement and re-ennoblement scandals at the beginning of the twentieth century. Both cases exemplify how a small but influential class of public actors reacted to state decisions on nobility and how they thereby changed the perception of and attitude towards nobility in the late Habsburg empire.

The interest on the Habsburg practices of ennoblement is not new: historians such as Hanns Jäger-Sunstenau,<sup>12</sup> Jan Županič,<sup>13</sup> and Rudolf Kučera<sup>14</sup> have worked intensively on this field and have interpreted these decorations as an instrument of the state to intensify control over its people, but also as an integral part of administrative history. It helps to reveal legislative and executive processes in the monarchy but also gives insights in its symbolic policy and its soft power. This text will use these studies as a framework to ask how the state used the practices of ennoblement as a traditional and contested form of social distinction, and how this societal mechanism was reshaped in the nineteenth century by new political agents.

### **The State's View on Nobility: Ennoblement Practices in the Late Habsburg Empire**

The ennoblement practices in the late Habsburg empire were still a prerogative of the monarch: until his death in 1916, Franz Joseph (r. 1848–1916) never gave up the privilege to decide over the nobility of his subjects.<sup>15</sup> However, just like in other matters of

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<sup>12</sup> Hanns Jäger-Sunstenau, "Statistik der Nobilitierungen in Österreich 1701–1918," in *Österreichisches Familienarchiv. Ein Genealogisches Sammelwerk*, ed. Gerhard Geßner, vol. 1 (Neustadt an der Aisch: Degener, 1963), 3–16.

<sup>13</sup> See one of his most recent publications on his wide-ranging oeuvre (with further literature references): Jan Županič, "Briefe, Vorträge, Suppliken. Nobilitierungen in der Donaumonarchie," in *"Allerunterthänigst unterfertigte Bitte." Bittschriften und Petitionen im langen 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Marion Dotter and Ulrike Marlow, DigiOst 18 (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2023), 161–196.

<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Kučera, *Adel Und Elitenwandel. Die Adelsverleihung in Schlesien und Böhmen. 1806–1871 im Vergleich*, Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft 205 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> On the role of Emperor Franz Joseph in the system of ennoblement see with further literature: Marion Dotter, "Gnade, Anspruch oder Kalkül? Die Habsburgische Nobilitierungspraxis als ein Politikfeld des

government and administration, the institutions of the modern state increasingly expanded their influence on the practices of ennoblement. Since the early modern period, the ennoblement process was integrated in a complex administrative procedure in which different agents, such as ministers, governors, and the officials of the cabinet office were engaged with their sometimes competing ideas about the nobility of the applicants.<sup>16</sup>

The process normally started with a petition from the applicant to the cabinet office, a practice that was common in the Holy Roman Empire since the early modern period and—since 1804—in the Habsburg monarchy. In the cabinet office, a first selection on the importance and prospects of all applications took place. Promising requests were sent to the ministry of the interior, where the ennoblement department was located, to edit the individual cases and to provide an adequate suggestion for the imperial decision. This department had its roots in the office of a *Wappenzensor*, an examiner of coats of arms, who worked since 1707 in the *Reichs- and Hofkanzlei*, a predecessor of the ministry of the interior. In the *Vormärz*, this position was more and more institutionalised and integrated the archival records of older ennoblement processes into its work. These documents were essential to prove the requests and demands of the applicants.<sup>17</sup> It was not until the administrative reform of 1848 that nobility issues were given their own department in the newly founded ministry of the interior, but the bureaucracy treated them in a similar way like the other award procedures, which were also processed and submitted by the ministries.<sup>18</sup>

The officials collected evidence and information on the life, achievements, and commitments of the petitioner to establish his or her loyal and patriotic position.<sup>19</sup> In the

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Kaisers," in *Im Büro des Herrschers. Neue Perspektiven der Historischen Politikfeldanalyse*, ed. Clemens Ableidinger et al., Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum 145 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), 54–68.

<sup>16</sup> On the ennoblement process see with further literature: Marion Dotter, "Der Adel auf dem Schreibtisch des Kaisers," in *Methodenvielfalt in der Geschichtswissenschaft. Tagungsband zur 8. internationalen Doktorandentagung des Doktoratskollegs für mitteleuropäische Geschichte an der Andrassy Universität Budapest*, ed. Tomaž Mesarič et al. (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2022), 41–65.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Goldinger, "Das ehemalige Adelsarchiv," *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs* 13 (1960): 486–502.

<sup>18</sup> Kučera, *Adel*, 56–59.

<sup>19</sup> On the ennoblement as an administrative act see: Jan Županič, "Wege zum Aufstieg. Die Verleihung von Adelstiteln in der Habsburgermonarchie und die Frage des 'Ordensadels'," in *Habsburgischer Adel. Zwischen Nation – Nationalismus – Nationalsozialismus (1870–1938/1945)*, ed. Maria Wakounig, Václav Horčíčka, and Jan Županič (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2021), 71–88.; Peter Wiesflecker, "Nobilitierungen Kaiser Karls I. von Österreich. Studien zum Österreichischen Adel am Ende der Donaumonarchie" (PhD diss., Universität Wien, 1992).

submissions to the monarch, the ministry summarised its findings and presented arguments for or against an approval. In the period analysed, about 70 per cent of all applications concerning nobility matters were supported by the ministry. The ministry then sent the documents to the cabinet office, and the office presented them to the emperor, who of course could have withheld his agreement and decided differently, though in fact this rarely happened. In more than 90 per cent of all cases concerning nobility matters, Franz Joseph accepted the proposals of his ministry.<sup>20</sup>

When looking more closely at the approximately 8,000 submissions that passed the cabinet office during the reign of Emperor Franz Joseph, it becomes clear that the admission to the nobility (the *Adelung*) was the most important type of application in the Habsburg empire of the nineteenth century, but not the only request of the petitioners: one could, for example, also apply for an advancement in the aristocratic hierarchy by asking to be admitted to the *Ritterstand*, the *Freiherrenstand*, the *Grafenstand*, and finally the *Fürstenstand*.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, noblemen without direct male descendants petitioned to pass on their title to a relative, for example a son-in-law, a nephew, or a stepson—the so-called *Übertragung*. People also applied for the confirmation of an old title that had been held by their ancestors but not been in use for some time, the *Bestätigung*; for the recognition of a foreign title in the Habsburg monarchy; or for a change to their coat of arms.<sup>22</sup> In order to be able to evaluate these different types of petitions for nobility, a fixed nobility law (*Adelsrecht*) was created by the monarchy and its institutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In principle, the law defined clear rules and a repertoire of "noble" characteristics and qualities. In practice, however, much room was left for the imperial grace.<sup>23</sup> How information on the applicants was weighed and judged proved to be a matter

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<sup>20</sup> These figures are based on the statistical analysis of all submissions on the subject of nobility recorded in the *Protokollbücher* of the cabinet office, which I conducted in the course of my dissertation project. However, this list only includes those cases that were actually decided by the emperor. The number of unreported cases of applications for nobility that were already rejected by the ministries must have been much higher, but it is not possible to ascertain it from the sources.

<sup>21</sup> Roughly equivalent to baronet, baron, count, and duke.

<sup>22</sup> For further information and explanations see: Dotter, "Adelspolitik," 338–348. See also: Berthold Waldstein-Wartenberg, "Österreichisches Adelsrecht 1804–1918," *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs* 17/18 (1964/65): 109–146.

<sup>23</sup> For the *Adelsrecht* see: Karl Megner, "Zisleithanische Adels- und Ritterstandserwerber. 1868–1884" (Coursework, Universität Wien, 1974); Reinhard Binder-Kriegelstein, *Österreichisches Adelsrecht 1868–1918/19: Von der Ausgestaltung des Adelsrechts der cisleithanischen Reichshälfte bis zum Adelsaufhebungsgesetz der Republik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des adeligen Namensrechts*, Rechtshistorische Reihe 216 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2000).



of interpretation and negotiation between different state agents. As the majority of the bureaucracy was recruited from non-noble candidates, the catalogue of virtues cultivated by the self-confident bourgeoisie since the Enlightenment was thereby intertwined with the traditional qualities of the aristocracy<sup>24</sup> in the applications to the *Allerhöchste Majestät*.<sup>25</sup>

As diverse as the types of applications were the applicants, both their regional and their professional diversity influenced and broadened the concept of nobility. The multi-ethnicity and multi-confessionalism of the Habsburg monarchy was exceptional for the nationally homogenising Europe of the nineteenth century. Although a particularly large number of requests for nobility came from Vienna and Lower Austria, the diversity of the monarchy was also reflected in the applications for nobility. The confirmations in particular, which will be discussed in more detail later, point to the eventful history of the monarchy. The nobility law and the nobility system had to be adapted again and again to the territorial acquisitions since the sixteenth century.<sup>26</sup> But not only the origin, also the profession of an applicant had an impact on the noble image created of him or her in the officials' submissions to the emperor. Especially in the area of merit, the job profile and the position in society of the applicant could be crucial—just as it had been since the eighteenth century.<sup>27</sup> In the terms of Enlightenment thought, those who incorporated such qualities belonged to a "new aristocracy" and possessed an "inner nobility."<sup>28</sup> The idea that a nobility protected by the state should serve the common good was discussed in the highest courtly and administrative spheres.<sup>29</sup> Public discourses on bourgeois virtues, as recorded

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<sup>24</sup> On this topic see for example: Klaus Margreiter, "Konzept und Bedeutung des Adels im Absolutismus," PhD dissertation (European University Institute, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> See on this with further examples and research literature: Marion Dotter, "Sich adelig schreiben. Nobilitierungsgesuche an das österreichische Kaiserhaus im 19. Jahrhundert," in *Adel im Vormärz. Begegnungen mit einer umstrittenen Sozialformation*, ed. Urte Stobbe and Claude D. Conter, Vormärz-Studien, 46 (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2023), 71–94.

<sup>26</sup> Petr Maťa, "Der Adel in der Habsburgermonarchie: Standeserhebungen und adelsrechtliche Regelungen," in *Verwaltungsgeschichte der Habsburgermonarchie in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Michael Hochedlinger, Petr Maťa, and Thomas Winkelbauer, vol. 1, Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 62 (Vienna: Böhlau, 2019), 117–148.

<sup>27</sup> Dietrich Rüchemeyer, "Bourgeoisie, Staat und Bildungsbürgertum. Idealtypische Modelle für die vergleichende Erforschung von Bürgertum und Bürgerlichkeit," in *Bürger und Bürgerlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jürgen Kocka (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 101–120.

<sup>28</sup> Werner Conze, "Adel," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979).

<sup>29</sup> For example, State Chancellor Wenzel Anton, Prince of Kaunitz-Rietberg, and the state theorist Joseph von Sonnenfels argued for a stronger focus on rewarding merit and a lower appreciation of hereditary privileges. Franz Fillafer, *Aufklärung habsburgisch. Staatsbildung, Wissenskultur und Geschichtspolitik in Zentraleuropa 1750–1850* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), 26; Franz Szabo, "Perspective from the Pinnacle: State Chancellor Kaunitz

and reproduced by normative writings and encyclopaedias, also took root in the administrative decision-making institutions of the Habsburg monarchy, which increasingly admitted a "middle-class" nobility. It is therefore not surprising that precisely middle-class values and attitudes were the common basis by which the Habsburg new nobility could be defined in its late phase.<sup>30</sup>

The duality of the ennoblement processes between administration and imperial grace becomes particularly evident in the ennoblements of officers. With the so-called *systematisierte Nobilitierung* since the reign of Maria Theresia, this group of applicants was especially privileged, because it gave bourgeois military persons an easier and automated path to nobility. Every officer who had served in the military for at least thirty years and had actively fought against the enemy on the battlefield was qualified for systematised nobility.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, a great number of officers longing for a title did not fulfil these criteria, and therefore applied to the imperial grace for a dispensation.<sup>32</sup>

In particular, bravery as a "basic aristocratic virtue" was supposed to open the way to the nobility for officers, since bravery in the face of the enemy referred to an "ethos of deportment." At the risk of their own lives, officers were supposed to stand up for the goals of the state and society.<sup>33</sup> All these factors were taken into account in the submissions, with the minister emphasising the officers' eagerness to fight. Participation in various military campaigns, for example during the Napoleonic Wars, was considered a sign of noble qualities.<sup>34</sup> Many applicants listed their injuries and medals for bravery as special proof of

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on Nobility in the Habsburg Monarchy," in *Adel im "langen" 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Gabriele Haug-Moritz, Hans Peter Hye, and Marlies Raffler (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 239–260.

<sup>30</sup> For the criteria to define nobility see: Kučera, *Adel*.

<sup>31</sup> "Österreichische Verordnungen in Bezug auf Adelserhebungen," *Heraldisch-Genealogische Zeitschrift. Organ des Heraldisch-Genealogischen Vereins "Adler"* I (1871): 11. See on this topic the speech of the minister of war Zeno Welser von Welsersheimb from 1900: "Heer Und Parlament," *Militär-Zeitung/Österreichischer Soldatenfreund*, 8 March 1900, 65. See also: Marcus Funck, "Vom Höfling zum soldatischen Mann. Varianten und Umwandlungen adeliger Männlichkeit zwischen Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus," in *Adel und Moderne. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Monika Wienfort and Eckart Conze (Cologne: Böhlau, 2004), 205–235, 217–224; István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps 1848–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Julius von Wickedede, *Die Rechte und Pflichten des Offiziers. Leitfaden für junge Männer, welche sich dem Offiziersstande gewidmet haben oder noch widmen wollen* (Stuttgart: Eduard Hallberger, 1857).

<sup>32</sup> Systematised ennoblement was granted by the department of the nobility; if one was not eligible for it, one had to apply to the emperor.

<sup>33</sup> Margreiter, "Konzept," 199.

<sup>34</sup> See for example: Franz Lux, AT-OeStA/HHStA KA KK Vorträge 9-1873, KZl. 1711.

their dedication to "crown and country."<sup>35</sup> One of them was Major Alois Fedrigoni, who "was shot through the chest and severely wounded by an enemy musket ball on 26 August 1813 during the storming of Dresden in his courageous and fearless advance." For this feat he claimed knighthood.<sup>36</sup>

If, on the other hand, an officer had not taken part in any armed confrontation, he had great difficulty in making his merit credible. Although Franz Gibel, for example, had "served continuously and impeccably in the infantry for over 35 years," he had never been able to "prove his bravery before the enemy."<sup>37</sup> Therefore, even with a laudable behaviour, as attested by the ministry of war to Franz Gibel, an ennoblement was not possible.<sup>38</sup> This proves that the requirement of "good conduct before the enemy" as a criterion for being made a noble was often valued even more highly than a long period of service, especially in the 1850s.

Several decades later, other achievements were also recognised in the ennoblement procedures. Johann Schwab, for example, received a knighthood for inventing and introducing smokeless gunpowder.<sup>39</sup> Facilitating the admission of officers to the nobility was absolutely necessary at the end of the nineteenth century, since the Habsburg monarchy—with the exception of the occupation of Bosnia in 1878—had not taken part in any major armed conflicts from the 1860s onwards. Since this historical fact deprived many officers of the prospect of systemic nobility, Franz Joseph reformed the law in 1896. From then on, it was sufficient to show forty years of service; service at the front was no longer a prerequisite for systemic nobility.<sup>40</sup> The notion of patriotism and masculinity was therefore subject to certain changes in line with political and social circumstances.

As crucial as the army was for the survival of the multi-ethnic empire, the civil service proved to be just as important. It was brought into line with the military in terms of the virtues expected from its members, such as discipline, loyalty, and professionalism.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Elias Novakovic, AT-OeStA/HHStA KA KK Vorträge 3-1851, MCZl. 3804.

<sup>36</sup> AT-OeStA/AVA Adel HAA AR, Alois Fedrigoni, pag. 18v/19r.

<sup>37</sup> Franz Gibel, AT-OeStA/HHStA KA KK Vorträge 3-1875, KZl. 550.

<sup>38</sup> The *Kriegsministerium* (ministry of war) existed from 1848 until 1866, when it became the *Reichskriegsministerium*. For the Austrian and the Hungarian part of the empire, two separate ministries of defence (*Landesverteidigungsministerium*) were additionally founded that were also involved in the ennoblement processes of officers.

<sup>39</sup> Johann Schwab, AT-OeStA/HHStA KA KK Vorträge 12-1911, KZl. 1152.

<sup>40</sup> Jan Županič, "Die tschechischen Eliten und Standeserhebungen in der Donaumonarchie," *Prague Papers on History of International Relations* (2003): 155–175.

<sup>41</sup> On the virtues expected from Austrian civil servants see: Maximilian von Obentraut, *Grundsätzlicher Leitfaden für angehende junge Beamte in practischen Umrissen* (Prague: Gerčabek, 1857).

Although the Habsburg *Dienstadel* (the ennobled bureaucrats) never acquired a systematised claim to nobility, the bureaucrats also benefitted from many years of consistently diligent service to the monarchy. Emperor Joseph II (r. 1765–1790) had already introduced the *Anciennitätsprinzip*, a criterion for career advancement in the public sector based on the length of service, which was intended to increase the bourgeois representation in the civil service.<sup>42</sup> Many bureaucrats were therefore ennobled at the end of their careers solely on the grounds of their long term of service. For example, Heinrich Tullinger was awarded nobility on the occasion of his fiftieth year in the administrative apparatus.<sup>43</sup> However, in the course of the nineteenth century, seniority as the only requirement for ennoblement was criticised; the diligent and active fulfilment of official duties gained much more importance for the decoration of a civil servant.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, until the end of the monarchy, bureaucrats never faced the necessity to acquire special merits for an ennoblement. They merely had to perform the work required of their position with zeal and perseverance; outstanding dedication to the service did not constitute an essential argument for distinguishing them with a noble title.<sup>45</sup>

In the nineteenth century, state employees—regardless of whether they worked in the army or in the administration—automatically had the reputation to serve the “general good” because of their position in the state service. They were not only regarded as good citizens but also as good nobles simply by performing their work dutifully and diligently.<sup>46</sup> In the modern era, the bourgeoisie increasingly took over these positions, which were traditionally held by the aristocracy. Likewise, the *Wirtschafts- und Bildungsbürgertum* (the bourgeoisie in business and education) became the drivers of the country’s economic development and scientific discourse. However, they faced the challenge of reinterpreting their achievements, which naturally were primarily dedicated to their own success, reputation, and profit, as a service to others and to the state. Initially lacking financial and social capital, they strove to acquire it with diligence and eagerness.<sup>47</sup> Having achieved the former, they became involved in the preservation of tradition and culture of the monarchy,

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<sup>42</sup> Waltraud Heindl, *Gehorsame Rebellen. Bürokratie und Beamte in Österreich*, vol. 1, 1780 bis 1848, Studien zur Politik und Verwaltung 36 (Vienna: Böhlau, 2013), 35, 253.

<sup>43</sup> Heinrich Tullinger, AT-OeStA/HHStA KA KK Vorträge 8-1855, MCZl. 1888.

<sup>44</sup> Heindl-Langer, *Gehorsame Rebellen*, 55.

<sup>45</sup> See on this topic: Dotter, “Adelspolitik,” 84–86.

<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Kleinwächter, *Der fröhliche Präsidialist* (Zürich, Leipzig, Vienna: Amalthea, 1955), 256.

<sup>47</sup> Rüschmeyer, “Bourgeoisie,” 102; Stekl, “Ambivalenzen,” 151–152.

acquiring the latter in the process.<sup>48</sup> But also in this context the arguments that strengthened a decision of ennoblement were not homogeneous: the possession of wealth, how it was earned, and what it was spent for, was evaluated differently in the submissions to the monarch.

Trading and industrial activities were generally seen positively, but in certain cases it could make an extremely bad impression if, like the wholesaler Philipp Köppely from Pest, one had become rich through "lucky speculations" and had never worked hard for one's fortune.<sup>49</sup> Although Köppely used his wealth to the benefit of the state and the economy, these merits did not qualify him for the ennoblement he coveted, since they were financed with "dishonourable money," as the ministry of the interior expressed it.<sup>50</sup> There was no general policy to exclude merchants and businessmen from state honours, but especially stock marketers had difficulties to prove their merits for society. To live according to their status, candidates for nobility had to have capital at their disposal, but this money was to be acquired in an "honest" way in order to ensure the good reputation of the future nobleman. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that this attitude changed due to an "increasing materialisation of life."<sup>51</sup> Property and capital thereby became the decisive category for the status in the bourgeoisie and, in the imperial submissions, a quality that could be used in favour of a candidate for ennoblement. Once again, what was presented to the emperor as noble behaviour was adapted to the current conditions of society and thus influenced the official image of the nobility, which towards the end of the century more and more became an aristocracy built on wealth and money. This did not only mean that the financial situation and possibilities of the applicant were

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<sup>48</sup> On the Austrian bourgeoisie see: Oliver Kühschelm, "Das Bürgertum in Cisleithanien," in *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, ed. Helmut Rumpler and Peter Urbanitsch, vol. 9, *Soziale Strukturen: Von der feudal-agrarischen zur bürgerlich-industriellen Gesellschaft* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 849–907.

<sup>49</sup> Philipp Köppely, AT-OeStA/HHStA KA KK Vorträge 22-1857, MCZl. 4241.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Mohl, "Gewerbe- Und Fabrikwesen," in *Staats-Lexikon oder Encyklopädie der Staatswissenschaften. In Verbindung mit vielen der angesehensten Publicisten Deutschlands*, ed. Carl von Rotteck and Carl Welcker (Altona: Hammerich, 1838). See further: Gerhard Meißl, "Die gewerblich-industrielle Arbeitswelt in Cisleithanien mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Berufszählungen 1890 und 1910," in *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, ed. Helmut Rumpler and Peter Urbanitsch, vol. 9, *Soziale Strukturen: Von der feudal-agrarischen zur bürgerlich-industriellen Gesellschaft* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 323–377; János Szulovszky, "Die Gewerblich-Industrielle Arbeitswelt in Ungarn," in *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, ed. Helmut Rumpler and Peter Urbanitsch, vol. 9, *Soziale Strukturen: Von der feudal-agrarischen zur bürgerlich-industriellen Gesellschaft* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 379–422.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Zunhammer, *Zwischen Adel und Pöbel – Bürgertum und Mittelstandsideal im Staatslexikon von Karl v. Rotteck und Karl Theodor Welcker* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1995), 82.

described in the submissions—the sums he had invested in charity and social projects were also named.

With these developments, the state's attitude towards the bourgeois virtue of charity also changed. While charity in the eighteenth century was intended to contribute to the Christian idea of the salvation of souls, secularisation led to a reduced support for ecclesiastical institutions with a simultaneous adjustment of the associated individual patronage interests.<sup>52</sup> Usually, humanitarian generosity was also associated with the hope of accumulating social capital and using it for social advancement—which was provided not least by a title.<sup>53</sup> Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the decision-makers of the ennoblement system preferred personal, time-intensive commitment of the applicants to charitable projects, for example by leading charitable associations or assuming various honorary offices. Simple monetary contributions were held in much lower esteem.<sup>54</sup> For a long time, therefore, the dominant view in the submissions was that donations to charitable causes did not constitute a sufficiently impressive achievement to entitle a candidate for ennoblement.<sup>55</sup>

With the spread of capitalist thinking at the end of the nineteenth century, the significance of charity was transformed in the submissions of ennoblement. In contrast to the early phase of the period under study, when a single large monetary donation was not regarded highly by the bureaucrats of the ennoblement department and therefore had no relevant effect on the decision-making process, significant material gifts now attracted higher attention and approbation, occupying broad space in the records. More and more frequently, therefore, titles appear as an official—and thus also imperial—reward for the generous financial support of state projects and institutions. Several cases reveal that these payments were not only informally negotiated and agreed upon between the officials and the applicants, but became also visible in the submissions to the emperor. He knew and supported the practice of compensating wealthy subjects for significant individual financial contributions with an ennoblement.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See for example: Jan Županič, "Militäradel der Österreich-Ungarischen Monarchie während des Ersten Weltkriegs," *West Bohemian Historical Review* 12, no. 2 (2022): 177–232.

<sup>53</sup> Andreas Schulz, "Mäzenatentum und Wohltätigkeit. Ausdrucksformen bürgerlichen Gemeinsinns in der Neuzeit," in *Bürgerkultur und Mäzenatentum im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jürgen Kocka and Manuel Frey, *Bürgerlichkeit, Wertewandel und Mäzenatentum 2* (Berlin: Bostelmann & Siebenhaar, 1998), 240–262.

<sup>54</sup> Siehe etwa: Brüder Spirta, AT-OeStA/HHStA KA KK Vorträge 4-1853, MCZl. 764.

<sup>55</sup> Philipp Köppely, AT-OeStA/HHStA KA KK Vorträge 22-1857, MCZl. 4241.

<sup>56</sup> See for example the submissions of Albert Mayer, AT-OeStA/HHStA KA KK Vorträge 19-1890, KZl. 3916, and Carl Pfeiffer, AT-OeStA/HHStA KA KK Vorträge 6-1887, KZl. 1297.

Candidates for ennoblement spent their money in all areas of public life, for example cultural institutions, infrastructure projects, or the repayment of the national debt. The need for financial resources, which the sovereign required above all for his military operations, had always been an important driver of decorating policy. Since the eighteenth century, the imperial house reacted by honouring loyal entrepreneurs who had supported the state with financial injections in this threatening situation.<sup>57</sup> Prime Minister Friedrich Ferdinand von Beust intensified this strategy around 1870, when he enticed foreign lenders to replenish the empire's treasury, which was empty after the loss of Lombardo-Venetia, with the promise of a title.<sup>58</sup> Although there was no direct dependence between the Habsburg system of decorations and financial policy, on a small scale the prospective decorations provided the occasion for important private investments that were intended to support the state. They were thus considered an effective tool of economic policy.

In this context, ennoblements, orders, and decorations appear as prestigious but purchasable objects of exchange that Habsburg officials and politicians handed out especially for the benefit of the state. 194 of the 929 richest Viennese and Lower Austrians are therefore said to have received an ennoblement<sup>59</sup> "by their own power" in the nineteenth century, as Stefan Zweig put it in *The World of Yesterday*.<sup>60</sup> Governor and Prime Minister Erich von Kielmansegg, for example, in his memoirs recalls a railway entrepreneur who urgently needed to raise his status in order to marry into the old aristocracy. The Minister of Trade Heinrich von Wittek hoped to "squeeze out" from him common stocks "to the amount of half a million crowns" and saw the desired ennoblement as a viable solution to obtain the required capital. "I faithfully reported this to the emperor, and he resolved: 'Wittek<sup>61</sup> shall squeeze'. The squeeze succeeded and a title was the reward; 'von Bahnquetsch' would have been such a pretty 'predicate'!" Kielmansegg emphasised

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<sup>57</sup> Ingrid Mittenzwei, *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen. Wiens frühe Bourgeoisie an der Wende vom 18. zum 19. Jahrhundert*, Bürgertum in der Habsburgermonarchie 7 (Vienna: Böhlau, 1998), 242–251; See also: William McCagg, "Austria's Jewish Nobles, 1740–1918," *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 34, no. 1 (1989): 163–183.

<sup>58</sup> Kai Drewes, *Jüdischer Adel. Nobilitierungen von Juden im Europa des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2013), 291.

<sup>59</sup> Roman Sandgruber, *Traumzeit für Millionäre. Die 929 reichsten Wienerinnen und Wiener im Jahr 1910* (Vienna: Styria, 2013), 146.

<sup>60</sup> Stefan Zweig, *Die Welt von Gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2017), 24. Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, trans. Anthea Bell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> "Wittek, Heinrich Ritter von," in *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon 1815–1950*, ed. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 16: *Warchalowski Jakob-Zycha Marianne Emilie* (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2022).

that the "nobleman" had earned a lot of money but had few other merits. In this and similar cases, virtues and merits as the usual basis of decision-making had to take a backseat to economic and financial considerations.<sup>62</sup> The ideal of a meritocratic nobility that was honoured solely on the basis of its achievements must therefore be called into question. Many applicants benefited from this system, but the practice of ennoblement and their public reputation suffered severely.

For the state, the various forms of ennoblement were an adequate possibility to honour the merit of its citizens and to present the emperor as the graceful father of his deserving and loyal subjects, which in the nineteenth century predominantly followed bourgeois virtues. The virtues and merits that determined the state's idea of nobility depended on the profession and the status of a person, but also changed over time because it had to be adapted to external conditions and impulses. At the same time, the state used this tool for its own purposes: a title was therefore not always an indication that the honoured person was particularly meritorious, but that he was useful to the state in a certain situation—and this raised the resentment of the public.

### **The Public Reaction to the Official Decisions on Ennoblement: Criticism against the State and the Nobility**

In 1876, a group of high nobles sent a complaint concerning a Jewish bank owner to the ministry of the interior in Vienna. They accused him of unfair business practices and of using a false Austrian baronial title. Although they patently felt offended by the elevation in status of a member of the Jewish minority, they presented their complaint as a report of concerned citizens who wanted to protect the imperial nobility from an impostor: "Since the qualifications of that Jew do not at all justify such honour, we consider it as our duty to inform Your Majesty."<sup>63</sup> According to the investigation conducted by the ennoblement department, the banker was authorised to hold a title. Still, at least in a part of the public, there remained the accusation that he had received the title without justification, i.e. without corresponding merits. The public therefore played a crucial role in the ennoblement policy of the late Habsburg empire: it scrutinised not only nobles who had possibly presumed their title but also the official justifications for ennoblements. Criticism

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<sup>62</sup> Erich Kielmansegg, *Kaiserhaus, Staatsmänner und Politiker. Aufzeichnungen des k. k. Statthalters. Mit einer Einleitung von Walter Goldinger* (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1966), 50. See also: Jan Županič, "The Making of Business Nobility. The Social Rise of Austrian Businessmen after 1848," *Studia Historica Slovenica. Časopis Za Humanistične in Družboslovne Študije. Humanities and Social Studies Review* 21, no. 3 (2021): 655–694.

<sup>63</sup> Drewes, *Jüdischer Adel*, 277.



of an unpopular decision by the official noble policy could be expressed, as in the cited case, in a denunciation. It could, however, also take on more public forms. Frequent criticism of the bureaucratic decisions and the state's inability to prevent noble pretensions was bound to have a negative impact on the general attitude towards the newly ennobled. This contributed to a rejection of the nobility which could no longer argue why it held its privileged position.

The criticism of the practice of ennoblement was soon combined with a more general discussion about the nobility as an honoured social group in society.<sup>64</sup> For the nineteenth century, Dieter Langewiesche identifies two lines of critique against the nobility, which either demanded the complete abolition of all noble privileges and titles, or the transformation of the class into a functionalist elite based on their merits.<sup>65</sup> Both movements culminated in the revolutionary years of 1848-1849, when the Frankfurt parliament<sup>66</sup> as well as the Austrian Reichstag<sup>67</sup> decided to abolish the privileges of the nobility.

As Nadir Weber describes in his text in this publication, the term of aristocracy was negatively connotated before and during the French Revolution. In Austria, the distinction between *Aristokratie* and *Adel* was not a virulent issue in the political discussions. More important for the members of the parliament was the will to establish the equality of all citizens before the law. In particular, the debates on the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph of the constitution, which was being discussed in Kremsier (Bohemia) at the beginning of 1849, reflected this will and thereby also the canon of bourgeois criticism against nobility, which was, however, never as harsh as in France about half a century earlier.<sup>68</sup> Explicitly, the passing of this law should end all privileges of status, but there was no consent between the

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<sup>64</sup> On the criticism of the nobility in the early modern period see for example: Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree. Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>65</sup> Dieter Langewiesche, "Bürgerliche Adelskritik zwischen Aufklärung und Reichsgründung in Enzyklopädien und Lexika," in *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland 1770-1848*, ed. Elisabeth Fehrenbach, Schriften des Historischen Kollegs 31 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994), 11-28.

<sup>66</sup> See on this topic: Wolfram Siemann, "Die Adelskrise 1848/49," in *Adel und Bürgertum in Deutschland 1770-1848*, ed. Elisabeth Fehrenbach, Schriften des Historischen Kollegs 31 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994), 231-246.

<sup>67</sup> For the Reichstag see: Andreas Gottsmann, *Der Reichstag von Kremsier und die Regierung Schwarzenberg. Die Verfassungsdiskussion des Jahres 1848 im Spannungsfeld zwischen Reaktion und nationaler Frage* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995). On the parliamentary debates regarding nobility in Germany and Austria see: Oliver Groß, *Die Debatten über den Adel im Spiegel der Grundrechtsberatungen in den deutschen Parlamenten 1848/49* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> The *Grundgesetz* was later transferred to the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph of the constitution.

delegates on how far this prohibition should be extended: no speaker stood against the abolition of all political, economic, and legal privileges of the nobility, which had already been decided on earlier by the dissolution of patrimonial jurisdiction and the feudal system. However, it became a decisive point of contention in parliament whether the nobles should simultaneously be deprived of their coats of arms and titles, as these not only had a legal but specifically also a social potential.

Josef Lasser Ritter von Zollheim, a politician from Salzburg, summed up the problem in his speech thus:

The principle of equality before the law, gentlemen, demands this, but it seems to me, only this: that the law makes no distinction between the nobles and the non-nobles, that the law does not grant the nobles as such any special claims against the state, and that there are no longer any privileges of the nobility. [...] If you take away this difference of rights, the nobility is completely equal to all other classes of the people, it ceases to be a class. But if you want to go further, gentlemen, if you want to go beyond the principle of the equality of all citizens before the law, then I simply advise you to tackle the matter directly and express it [...]: Should the nobility be abolished or not?<sup>69</sup>

The essence of the discussion held in Kremsier thus concerned the question whether the title was part of the noble prerogatives and rank, or whether it should be counted as part of the possession and self-image of the individual nobleman. Many deputies saw the deprivation of the title as a "humiliation" and "spitefulness" against the nobility, which had already been hit hard by the revolution. The title, like all family names, was understood as the genuine property of the individual—an inalienable right that even the constitution could not oppose without injuring the property rights of the individual.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, the supporters of a broader definition of the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph argued that the use of noble predicates was less a right than a privilege, less a possession than a distinction that destroyed the equality between the citizens. Only when it was no longer the noble criminal who was degraded to a bourgeois but the bourgeois criminal who was degraded to a nobleman—according to the polemical remark of the German Leftist Ludwig von Löhner—the title would have lost its privileging effect and could therefore be retained.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Reichstag Österreich, ed., *Verhandlungen des österreichischen Reichstages nach der stenographischen Aufnahme*, vol. 4, 53. bis 83. Sitzung (Vienna: K. k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1848–1849), 426f.

<sup>70</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 371.

<sup>71</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 458.

The chaplain Johann Sidon, who belonged to the Austro-Slavic Club, put it even more clearly: "We must ensure that the name of a citizen is the only title, and that in a democratic-constitutional state, we no longer know any status apart from the sovereign and the people."<sup>72</sup> These statements can be understood as intentional and provocative reversals of familiar ideas and values. Belonging to the bourgeoisie rather than to the nobility was to be the desired goal in a liberal, post-revolutionary era. The deputies were convinced that the bourgeois era had in the nineteenth century replaced an all-too-long domination of the aristocracy. The politicians by no means doubted the achievements of the aristocracy in the past, but understood them as an integral part of history, not of the future:<sup>73</sup> the nobility appeared to many parliamentary politicians as a "relic of a bygone era."<sup>74</sup> In contrast to the bestowal of medals, which were to remain untouched by the new laws, it was precisely the ennoblement that was subject of sharp criticism because of its hereditary nature. While the rewarding of personal merit by the state still found the approval of the meritocratic bourgeois, the members of parliament could hardly tolerate a preferential treatment of individual groups independent from merit.<sup>75</sup>

The criticism against the nobility was therefore ignited by the hereditary nature of its privileges and titles, which could honour "the deserving father in the undeserving son."<sup>76</sup> Since the eighteenth century at the latest, the bourgeoisie had contrasted the concept of a spiritual and mental aristocracy with that of blood in order to distinguish itself from the privileges of the nobility, which were based only on birth and not on self-acquired merits.<sup>77</sup> Against this background, the bourgeoisie presented itself as a worthy counter-elite to the nobility, whose undeserved and therefore unjustified privileges it could finally abolish during the revolution. In this context, the statements of some noble deputies are revealing, who in their position as members of the Reichstag clearly identified themselves as members of the bourgeoisie and did not want their attitude to be influenced by their membership to the nobility. The Lower Austrian Ignaz Wildner von Maithstein's self-image was radically clear in this sense: he declared to his fellow parliamentarians that he would "gladly lay down his title on the altar of the fatherland" at any time, so that his descendants

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<sup>72</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 378.

<sup>73</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 444.

<sup>74</sup> Rudolf Sieghart, *Die letzten Jahrzehnte einer Großmacht. Menschen, Völker, Probleme des Habsburger-Reichs* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1932), 127.

<sup>75</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 449.

<sup>76</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 427.

<sup>77</sup> Gunter Heinickel, *Adelsreformideen in Preußen. Zwischen bürokratischem Absolutismus und demokratisierendem Konstitutionalismus (1806–1854)*, *Elitenwandel in der Moderne* 16 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 49–51.

could acquire merits of their own and would not depend on hereditary honours.<sup>78</sup> The monarch was openly criticised for the ennoblement policy of the state. By awarding decorations, he promoted inequality in society, the nobility still being an outstanding class. Aristocrats were born with this status due to the heredity of noble titles, but did not have to demonstrate merits of their own anymore. Awarding non-existent merits, as the sovereign did to the descendants of the ennobled through the granting of hereditary titles of nobility, was for many deputies a clear violation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph. They therefore discussed to eliminate the bestowal of nobility from the canon of imperial prerogatives.<sup>79</sup>

The negotiations thus finally reached the central question of the "nature" and basis of nobility in the nineteenth century: although nobility was exclusively granted by the emperor, it was in its essence related to the public. In the margins of the discussion on the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph of the constitution, a dispute therefore developed about the power of the nobility, from which it drew its legitimacy and definition. In this context, Lasser asked the rhetorical question:

Do you know, gentlemen, what I am convinced is more effective and more powerful for the nobility than the decisions of the monarch and the nobility law? Public opinion. Everything derives its value from opinion alone, and it is in opinion alone that the validity of nobility is rooted. If it lives on in the recognition of its surroundings and its people, you cannot abolish it.<sup>80</sup>

Lasser therefore belonged to the faction that considered the nobility indissoluble by legal and political means. It was society that, through its acceptance, provided a stage for the first (and to a certain extent the second) estate.<sup>81</sup>

Opponents of the nobility, on the other hand, questioned the importance of public prestige for the noble self-image and thus assigned the state greater freedom of action in shaping the society and its classes. Members of parliament such as the liberal Rudolf Berstel and the leftist Franz Schuselka proposed to rely on state authority in these matters. They assumed that if the nobility titles were abolished altogether, it would not be possible to change "the customs," but at least the political and legal conditions could be created to influence social life. Accordingly, the regulating effect of the laws would in time also lead

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<sup>78</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 381.

<sup>79</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 457, 438.

<sup>80</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 427.

<sup>81</sup> Margreiter, "Konzept," 190.

to a fundamental change of opinion among the people and gradually cause the disappearance of nobility, which would suffer a loss of value and prestige without the protection and support of the state.<sup>82</sup> For the harshest critics of the nobility, the privileges of noble status included not only those political and legal privileges that were granted to them until 1848, for example at court and in the military, but above all the social dimension of distinction, especially their public visibility. Johann Sidon put it under the catchphrase "the name is the thing" as follows: "If one leaves the title, one leaves the whole caste, one leaves its effectiveness, one leaves the main moment of aristocracy, the outwardly conspicuous, albeit slight, distinction among citizens."<sup>83</sup> The legislating institutions in his opinion therefore had the duty to change and alter the public opinion with their decisions.

Despite the dissolution of the Kremsier Reichstag about one and a half months after this discussion, the nobility suffered great losses in privileges and prestige as a result of the revolution. Moreover, the demands and ideas of the critics of the nobility persisted in society—not least due to personal continuities. In certain cases, the bourgeoisie no longer needed a title to feel that they belonged to the Habsburg elite. For a great number of people, the ennoblement still crowned their social climbing, but especially members of liberal and nationalist circles frequently rejected offers of ennoblement in the second half of the nineteenth century. The strong civic pride that did not need ennoblement to be self-sufficient correlated at the same time with a rejection of the aristocratic self-image and a fear of the revival of aristocratic prerogatives by the state.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, the reasons for the individual decision to remain a bourgeois or to become a noble were very diverse: while nationalists did not want to be identified with the monarchic system they were fighting against, representatives of the wealthy middle class that stood loyal to the emperor demonstrated their self-confidence apart from nobility. They did no longer see it as desirable to belong to aristocracy and expressed their pride as bourgeoisie by refusing the chance to become noble. Civil engineer Johannes Schebek, for example, posed the question of his own identity, rejecting ennoblement with his frequently quoted justification: "Baron Schebek is not a hair's breadth better than engineer Schebek."<sup>85</sup>

Not only the nobility itself, but also the monarch's decisions relating to this class were exposed to public judgement and criticism, which in turn brought the state's

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<sup>82</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 437.

<sup>83</sup> Reichstag Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 377. See also the identical discussions in the Paulskirchenparlament: Conze, "Adel," 40f.

<sup>84</sup> Österreich, *Verhandlungen*, 42–47.

<sup>85</sup> Županič, "Eliten," 166.

practices of ennoblement into the focus of general interest. Many representatives of the Reichstag could still understand and tolerate the distribution of titles among the most commendable and loyal civil servants, officers, and citizens as a personal distinction. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, merit often no longer formed the basis of the award—the intersection between achievements and the decorations associated with them visibly diminished. People could still recognise and support nobility as a sign of true success and effort on behalf of the state, but in an enlightened and liberal society, noble privileges and prerogatives, which were largely based on monetary or political bargaining, were increasingly met with resentment.<sup>86</sup>

Undeserved titles caused irritation among the achievement-oriented bourgeoisie, so that the title-holders and decision-makers were exposed to ridicule in the scrutinising public.<sup>87</sup> The Viennese Mayor Cajetan Felder, for example, described the “‘Parüre’<sup>88</sup> with orders in buttonholes, around the neck and on the bib,” who “strutted around like parrots decorated with ribbons, crosses, and stars,”<sup>89</sup> but added to this satirical remark a harsh criticism of the nobility, directed not only at the entire class, but also at the state decision-making procedures: even as a nobleman, “it always sounded shrill and repulsive in my ears [. ...] when I was addressed as ‘Baron’, because I could never shake off the thought of the numerous stock exchange, bank, and railway barons whose merits grew only out of their money pockets.”<sup>90</sup> If a nobleman himself did not want to be addressed by his title and use it because there were unflattering associations, the entire class had to fear a loss of reputation.

In this sense, the “Deutsches Volksblatt” noted in 1906 with reference to the ennoblement of three German Jews in Prussia, that they “earn more in one day on the stock exchange than a Prussian noble family earns through centuries of loyal service for king and fatherland.”<sup>91</sup> In the eyes of some critics, rich (and especially Jewish) applicants could easily raise the donations necessary for the ennoblement, but they could still not to be

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<sup>86</sup> Županič, “The Making of Business Nobility,” 688.

<sup>87</sup> Jan Županič, “Ennoblement Policies of the Habsburg Rulers in Bohemian-Austrian Lands and Cisleithania in the Long 19th Century,” in *Changes of the Noble Society. Aristocracy and New Nobility in the Habsburg Monarchy and Central Europe from the 16th to the 20th Century. A Collection of Studies from Sections P69 and P80 of the 11th Congress of Czech Historians (14th-15th September 2017, Olomouc, Czech Republic)*, ed. Jiří Brňovják and Jan Županič (Ostrava, Prague: Ostrava University, 2018), 69–93, 88f.

<sup>88</sup> Old-fashioned for jewellery, here to address the ennobled.

<sup>89</sup> Cajetan Felder, *Erinnerungen eines Wiener Bürgermeisters* (Vienna: Forum, 1964), 277.

<sup>90</sup> Felder, *Erinnerungen eines Wiener Bürgermeisters*, 277.

<sup>91</sup> “Judentum, Hoflust und Antisemitismus,” *Deutsches Volksblatt*, 11 March 1906, 1f.

counted among the "noblest of the nation."<sup>92</sup> Accordingly, the large number of such cases increasingly failed to raise the status of the decorated individuals in the eyes of the public but rather contributed to the devaluation of the entire noble class. Especially successful entrepreneurs in the coal, steel, railway, or banking sectors were regularly attacked in the general criticism against the practices of ennoblement. Despite the state distinction, they were denied social recognition.

Resistance and displeasure against the state decisions were expressed in the common civil society organs of the nineteenth century, especially in the press. New ennoblements were announced in the official outlets, above all the *Wiener Zeitung*. Meanwhile, independent newspapers regularly informed the public about "erroneous developments" in this field, with critical undertones towards the government. They emphasised especially the venality of the titles, a trend that became more and more common since the 1880s, during municipal and nationwide elections. In these circumstances, ministers and their respective local party supporters exchanged state awards for campaign donations.<sup>93</sup>

The scandalous trade with symbolic capital reached a climax around 1900 under Prime Minister Ernst von Koerber, who bribed press representatives and Reichstag deputies not only with money but also with titles. It was an open secret in political and bureaucratic circles that the various Habsburg honours could be bought from him at fixed prices.<sup>94</sup> Koerber's activities did not remain unnoticed by the government's opponents, so that in 1902 the Czech national deputy Václav Klobáček denounced these unfair practices in a passionate speech in parliament, referring to an article in "Die Zeit." He named a number of ennobled entrepreneurs who were said to have spent "no less than half a million florins" on their titles and thus financed the government's so-called disposition fund. This, in turn, flowed into bribing corrupt journalists and politicians. Through "bartering away nobility predicates, titles, and decorations," however, Koerber had not only succeeded in building up an essential source of money to finance his political propaganda, he was also responsible

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<sup>92</sup> "Judentum, Hoflust und Antisemitismus," 1f.

<sup>93</sup> See for example the Hungarian case of Sigmund Ormos and Franz Feger: *Siebenbürgisch-Deutsches Tageblatt. Allgemeine Volkszeitung für das Deutschtum in Rumänien*, August 31, 1888, 867f; *Die Presse*, August 29, 1888, 4; *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, August 29, 1888, 5.

<sup>94</sup> Kielmansegg, *Kaiserhaus*, 52.

for the decisive weakening of the nobility, "for nothing is so effective in shaking the reputation of our high-nosed nobility" as the numerous ennoblements of "rich Jews."<sup>95</sup>

Klofáč used his critique against the nobility and the ennoblement system as a weapon against the political enemies—in order to defame and attack them, any means was acceptable to him. He thereby protested not only against the government and its way to decide on ennoblements, but also the aristocracy that could no longer ask for distinction when its ranks became "infiltrated" with groups of "unworthy" candidates. Nevertheless, he did differentiate between various actors within the monarchical state apparatus and asked the prime minister directly whether he had informed the emperor about this style of government and the abuse of imperial grace tied to it. Although he saw himself as a democrat, he was convinced that the aging Franz Joseph had been kept in the dark about these practices. Indeed, in the broader public opinion, the emperor's integrity made him appear to be the last representative of an impeccably functioning and strictly supervised ennoblement system. Incidents were circulated in the press that showed the monarch as an unyielding defender of the aristocracy, which increased the discrepancy between his incorruptible attitude and the crooked actions of his ministers.<sup>96</sup>

As already mentioned, however, the real casualty of these scandals was the nobility itself, whose general abolition was now once again publicly demanded in the Reichstag: "We do not want a nobility, we deny it any right to exist in the state, and all the more so because we know that the admission to its ranks is not bought by personal service to the state, but by a contribution to the secret disposition fund of the government," said Klofáč, who thus once again contrasted a meritocratic elite with the unworthy financial nobility.<sup>97</sup> About fifty years after the discussion on the abolition of the nobility at the Reichsrat of Kremsier and almost twenty years before the actual abolition of the nobility in numerous successor states of the Habsburg monarchy, this demand thus appeared also in 1902 in the highest political body of the country.

For the enlightened bourgeoisie, self-acquired merits that indicate inner virtues and a "nobility of soul" were interpreted as the only justification for social advancement. It therefore rejected the nobility of birth and the heredity of titles as well as the

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<sup>95</sup> Reichsrat Österreich, ed., *Stenographische Protokolle über die Sitzungen des Hauses der Abgeordneten des österreichischen Reichsrathes in den Jahren 1901 und 1902. XVII. Session*, vol. 11, 95. bis 105. Sitzung (Vienna: K. k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1902), 9385–9388.

<sup>96</sup> See for example: *Die Drau. Unabhängiges Wochenblatt*, August 17, 1915, 2. The emperor became more permissive in his later years.

<sup>97</sup> Reichsrat, *Stenographische Protokolle*, 9385–9387.



ennoblement of persons for political and financial reasons. The nobility and the emperor's or the ministers' way to enhance and redefine it became a point of critique in the late Habsburg empire. The official practices of ennoblement, in the eyes of their critics, did not fulfil their own standards. Therefore, and because it exacerbated unwarranted social differences, the institution of nobility slowly lost the acceptance of the public—yet it was especially this acceptance that it needed for its continued existence.

### **State and Public in Dialogue: Supporting the Nobility against Its Decline**

From the chapter above, it becomes clear that the public followed the decisions on ennoblement by the emperor and his administration or the ministers with interest. At the same time, public opinion was also a point of reference for the inner state decision-making processes. It should support the state in confirming its decisions. The public was used as an important assistant of the state when the imperial monopoly of decision-making on a person's nobility was challenged by impostors. In the nineteenth century, the so-called fraudulent arrogation of nobility (*betrügerische Adelsanmaßung*) more and more endangered the idea of a nobility formed by the state and acknowledged by the public. The impostors themselves constructed the "noble" past of their families. In particular, the confirmation of obsolete and partially forgotten titles of nobility lent itself to all kinds of deceptive manoeuvres and promised the beneficiaries far more prestige than a new title. They also were an attractive way of making a business out of the nobility. Furthermore, the state's control mechanisms in this area were relatively weak.<sup>98</sup> It was therefore another task of the officials and the society alike to protect the nobility from those deceivers who made illegitimate claims to its privileges and nimbus.

The privileges still associated with nobility in the second half of the nineteenth century, which promised not only social prestige but also monetary benefits such as scholarships and high-ranking marriages, made the confirmation of old and forgotten titles particularly popular.<sup>99</sup> As mentioned before, the Habsburg monarchy gained new territories in several waves since the sixteenth century. These territories had to be integrated into the structure of the empire and their individual traditions of nobility and

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<sup>98</sup> Jan Županič, "Renobilitierungsprozesse und genealogische Agenten. Der Skandal um das Adelsdepartement im Innenministerium am Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 117 (2008): 335–357, 336; See further: Jan Županič, "Renobilitierung und Adelsentsetzung in Österreich," *WIKIa Szlachta*, accessed May 23, 2021, <https://szlachta.fandom.com/de/wiki/Renobilitierung-%C3%96sterreich>.

<sup>99</sup> Županič, "Eliten," 168.

ennoblement had to be harmonised with existing Habsburg legislation. It is important here that an ennoblement that was ratified by a foreign monarch also centuries ago never lost its validity in the eyes of the Austro-Hungarian state. On the contrary, a family could also demand the confirmation of a noble title that derived from the Middle Ages when it had evidence for it. Especially in a nationalised surrounding, for example in Bohemia or Moravia, a noble title that was not given by a Habsburg emperor but by a Bohemian king in the fifteenth century seemed very attractive for a large number of people. With the *Renobilitierungsdekret*, the court chancellery took an important step to formalise the recognition of old titles in 1840. Moreover, the significant reduction of the fee was a clear concession also to less affluent families to make use of this right.<sup>100</sup> The renewed official recognition of forgotten claims not only had the task of binding the old nobility more closely to the monarchy, but also served to create previously missing standards. While the ennoblement department wanted to consolidate its role as a controlling authority in this context, the new law quickly became the basis of fraudulent activities.

A spectacular scandal shook the Habsburg empire at the beginning of the twentieth century and made it even more difficult for the state administration to justify its monopoly in the practices of ennoblement. The frauds preyed on gullible people that were in need of recognition and obviously hoped to gain social prestige in this simple and unbureaucratic way.<sup>101</sup> Many probably were convinced that the titles which the false "ennoblement agents" claimed in their names were true and legitimate. It was tempting to believe in a family history of nobility and to hope for its confirmation. However, some also were aware of the questionable nature of the transaction. Still, they consciously accepted to increase their social prestige by the simple means of a monetary transaction. In this context, nobility appears as a simple object of exchange that could be acquired from "travelling merchants."

One of these "merchants" was the agent Josef Mejtsky, who, together with the civil servant Anton Peter Schlechta, developed a fraudulent scheme concerning the so-called *Renobilitierungssystem*. Mejtsky and other genealogists approached their victims with forged documents that they had allegedly "discovered" during their research. With these, they convinced their victims of the legitimacy of an often invented old noble origin. After receiving an advance payment by the deceived, the frauds submitted the fake evidence to the ennoblement department. The agents therefore deliberately sought contact with the authorities, making them a supporter of their scheme. In the ministry of the interior,

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<sup>100</sup> Binder-Kriegelstein, *Adelsrecht*, 130–132; Waldstein-Wartenberg, "Adelsrecht," 145f.

<sup>101</sup> See on this issue for example: AT-OeStA/HHStA MdÄ AR F60-43, Miszellen, Adel 202.

bureaucrats familiar with the system confirmed the pretended authenticity of the titles in exchange for a portion of the fee to supplement their modest salaries.<sup>102</sup>

Only a private dispute between the agent and a civil servant, which was also fought publicly, ended this agreement and raised general criticism against the work of the authorities. Although the complicity of the civil service in this corrupt practice was well known, it was above all the defrauded applicants—apart from a few noble agents convicted in a highly publicised trial—who turned out to be the losers of the scandal.<sup>103</sup> Along with the dearly bought titles, they also lost credibility and social standing, which they lamented with dramatic words: "The catastrophe that befell me 4 years ago ruined not only my social position personally, but of course my entire family; my two sons in particular were subjected to shame and ridicule," said for example Johann Diviš in a petition for the restoration of his title, which he had lost after the trial.<sup>104</sup>

The state and—not least—the nobility itself was alarmed by such an incident, because it threatened the whole social class and its prestige significantly. While the reaction of Franz Joseph and the government to this scandal is not documented, the Ministry of the Interior took far-reaching measures: the majority of the civil servants in the nobility department were retired or dismissed, and the procedure for reviewing re-ennoblements was tightened up considerably. The idea of falsifying noble titles and ancestry was not new, but the extent and involvement of the state bureaucracy was widely criticised by the public.<sup>105</sup> When the nationalist member Kľofáč attacked the prime minister openly in a speech in the Reichsrat in 1901, he also mentioned the case of Schlechta and Mejtsky.<sup>106</sup>

Even before this crisis, a small circle of nobility experts, most of them archivists, genealogists, and historians, had been convinced that only a professionalisation and clearer institutionalisation of the practices of ennoblement could prevent the monarchy from further abuse of state decorations. Pundits like Eduard Gaston Pöttickh von Pettenegg or Oskar von Mitis cited the need to safeguard the old nobility, which was endowed with special privileges as a closed legal group. Access to this elite had to be controlled and thus remain exclusive. Pöttickh declared:

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<sup>102</sup> On the scandal see: Županič, "Renobilitierungsprozesse."

<sup>103</sup> Županič, "Renobilitierungsprozesse," 336–345.

<sup>104</sup> Divis-Cistecky ze Serlinku, NA, Šlechtický archiv, 26.

<sup>105</sup> Županič, "Renobilitierungsprozesse."

<sup>106</sup> Dotter, "Adelspolitik," 298.

As long as the hereditary nobility exists, as long as privileges are associated with it, which the state continually recognises either as a reward for merits or as a tribute to deserving forefathers in their descendants, it must not admit that unjustified persons so often arrogate such prerogatives to themselves and that the walls of the nobility, which have already been shaken so much in recent decades by the enormous oscillations of all values, completely collapse. That would mean going down the path of sleepy tepidity towards the same goal that the Jacobins pursued on the path of terrorism.<sup>107</sup>

Precisely because of the numerous forgeries and frauds, Pöttickh and his colleagues feared an irretrievable loss of prestige for the nobility, which could be completely destroyed by this reduction in value.<sup>108</sup> The state's way to handle the ennoblement policy and the confirmation of old noble titles was considered to be as disastrous as the fight against these titles by the government during the French revolution. However, it was not only the rights of the individual that were at stake, but also the prerogatives of the state, which must forfeit financial and above all symbolic capital as a result of the many aristocratic pretensions.<sup>109</sup> With these accusations against the nobility department in the ministry of the interior, the historically educated experts themselves attempted to take a privileged place in the state decision-making process concerning ennoblement.<sup>110</sup> Not "lukewarm civil servants" but "active scholars" were supposed to steer a new, independent herald's office.<sup>111</sup> However, these reform plans were impeded by the constant resistance of the state administration, especially the ministry of the interior, which did not want to lose its decisive position in the ennoblement procedure.

Notwithstanding the deep-rooted intellectual and discursive transformations regarding the attitude towards nobility in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the idea of a heritable title that lives on in a family starting from a commendable ancestor was still of great importance in the late Habsburg empire. The state accepted the duty of both helping the individual noble family to its rights and protecting the nobility as a whole against unauthorised persons. Not the merits of the present but the rights from the past

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<sup>107</sup> Eduard Carl Gaston Pöttickh Graf von Pettenegg, *Ideen über die Errichtung eines Heroldsamtes in Oesterreich* (Wien: Self-pub., 1880), 11.

<sup>108</sup> Dotter, "Adelspolitik," 244–274.

<sup>109</sup> Pöttickh Graf von Pettenegg, *Ideen*, 14.

<sup>110</sup> Oskar Freiherr von Mitis, *Adel und Urkundenkritik*. AT-OeSTA/HHStA StK Adelsakten 2-9, Konvolut A17: Projekte eines "Heroldsamtes," 1801–1813, pag. 266v.

<sup>111</sup> Pöttickh Graf von Pettenegg, *Ideen*, 16.

were decisive in these cases. The nobility of a person was therefore not shown by a certain *habitus*, but by a document that confirmed its status. Here, too, the public had an important task; it was to report possible arrogations of nobility to the authorities and thereby protect the nobility. However, individual circles in the public demanded stricter controls and thus greater security for the nobility from the state side as well. Yet public vigilance alone would not suffice to safeguard the institution of nobility according to some scholars. They therefore called for the establishment of an institution dedicated to the closer supervision of would-be nobles, but their wish never was fulfilled.

### **Conclusion**

In 1908, when the Danube monarchy celebrated the diamond jubilee of its Emperor Franz Joseph, the relationship between the supreme decision-maker and the nobility was taken into account on a symbolic level. During a "Collective Audience," 600 persons "who owe their nobility or the recognition thereof to the grace of our gloriously reigning emperor" were to pay homage to their sovereign and thereby repay the favour received with the ennoblement. In addition, they were to stand in a row with the high noble families who had guided the fate of the empire for centuries and were closest to the court, underlining the unity of this class in the late Habsburg monarchy. Moreover, this event showed the importance of the state in identifying and defining the nobility at that time: it controlled and specified access to this elite, whether it determined the qualities required for admission to the nobility or whether it confirmed the traditional family rights of noble individuals. For the state authorities, nobility was thus an imperial distinction for services to the "general interest and well-being," which was also intended to live on in the descendants of the ennobled.

Although this concept of nobility had a long history and tradition, it was subject to increasing criticism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: above all, the transferability of special rights to future generations independently of merit was a thorn in the side of the performance-conscious bourgeoisie. Instead of the old God-given social order, the bourgeoisie proclaimed general equality—which, however, in reality meant the advancement of "others." Their criticism intensified in the face of numerous scandals and contentious decisions by the authorities, which cast doubt on the reputation of the nobility and the state decision-making bodies.

It was not without reason that the public provided an important mirror for the applicants and the state. Although it could never reach the position of a "nobility maker,"

public opinion brought state decisions to life and put them into practice. More and more often, however, society itself also discovered the opportunity to impose its own idea of nobility and to use the politics of decorations for its purposes. The long-lasting conflict over the privileges of the nobility and their justification culminated in the abolishment of all titles in many successor states of the Habsburg empire after 1918.

The methodological approach of this article, which was to compare the concepts and definition of nobility constructed by the state and the public in the late Habsburg monarchy, is quite new for the research on nobility in the second half of the nineteenth century. Augmenting a history of nobility that focuses on the self-perception of the higher nobility, its *Obenbleiben* (staying at the top) and its inner dynamics, this text sheds light on administrative, academic and political ways to structure, configure, and use the definition of nobles for different purposes. This leads to a better understanding of the nobility as an ancient phenomenon in a period of great societal changes. In the nineteenth century, it was the bourgeoisie that shaped and created a picture of the nobility with its institutions, such as the administration, parliament, or public opinion. Deciding on who and what qualities earn the predicate "noble" was therefore included in a process of negotiation between different actors of the Habsburg monarchy and transformed the practices of ennoblement into a policy field. With this new approach, the history of traditional nobility on the cusp of modernity helps to improve our knowledge on the virulent questions of the nineteenth century as a whole.

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