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War Aims and War Aims Discussions (East Central Europe)

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Already in autumn 1914, East Central Europe became a main theatre of operational warfare and an object of strategic planning for the Central Powers, Russia, and later the Entente. After strategic failure in the West, Germany focused on this region as an economic and geopolitical base for sustained warfare and for creating a continental Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*) bloc. Russia, in turn, sought to secure its influence in the region as a means to maintain its great power status. The deadlock between the Central Powers and Russia motivated representatives of the region's stateless nations to lobby the Western Powers – the United States especially as of 1917 – to accept them as allies and make their national independence an official war aim.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Basic Positions and Aims of the Eastern Powers in 1914-15](#)
 - [2.1 Russian War Aims](#)
 - [2.2 Austro-Hungarian War Aims](#)
 - [2.3 German War Aims](#)
- [3 The Great Powers' Considerations about the Future of Central Europe 1915-1918](#)
 - [3.1 The Central Powers](#)
 - [3.2 The Entente Powers](#)
- [4 Goals of the Stateless Nations](#)
 - [4.1 Poles](#)
 - [4.2 Lithuanians](#)
 - [4.3 Jews](#)

5 Conclusion

Notes

Selected Bibliography

Citation

Introduction

Given the centrality to the outbreak of the war of the Austro-Russian disputes in the Balkans, German-British rivalry, and Germany's strategic preoccupation with the [Western front](#), the fighting in the east rather unexpectedly came to the fore when the Western front ground to a halt after the Battle of the Marne and the “race to the sea.” The only explicit [war aims](#) of any of the powers then were Austria's wish to crush [Serbia](#) and [Russia's](#) designs on [Turkey](#). In contrast, neither these two powers nor Germany had any defined goals in East Central Europe. There, any conquests had an operational function rather than the character of genuine motives for war. Politically, it was significant that now the German-Austro-Russian informal agreement to prevent any sort of Polish statehood that had brought fundamental stability during the “long 19th century” was no longer defended.^[1]

Basic Positions and Aims of the Eastern Powers in 1914-15

Russian War Aims

Russia's main aims were weakening Germany, eliminating Austria as a rival in the Balkans and gaining control of Constantinople, Thrace and the Straits. In order to support [France](#), the Russian general staff planned for an immediate offensive against the Central Powers. To achieve this, as soon as the [July Crisis](#) got out of hand they worked towards a quick mobilisation of the Russian army. As a means to strengthen their political engagement in the war, the Russian leadership made some (vague) indications as to the unification of the “Polish nation” under the Tsar's sceptre. This idea found its expression in the manifesto that the Russian Supreme Commander [Nikolai Nikolaevich, Grand Duke of Russia \(1856-1929\)](#) published on 14 August 1914 mainly in order to secure the support of the Russian Poles, but also with a view to possibly winning over the Austrian and Prussian Poles as well.^[2] While this concept was backed by the “liberal” Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of War, the more conservative Ministries of the Interior and of Justice were anxious not to let this policy trigger a general discussion about the right to self-determination of the stateless nations in Central Europe.^[3]

From Austria, Russia sought to annex Galicia and Carpatho-Ukraine as a “greater Russian” area in order to eliminate the perceived danger of a Ukrainian national “Piedmont.”^[4] These goals seemed to be in reach after a Russian offensive in summer 1914 managed to conquer the Bukowina and most of Galicia.^[5] Still, the Tsarist government was interested in preserving a reduced Habsburg empire as a great power since its complete dissolution in the name of national emancipation would likely

have repercussions in Russia. In this scenario, German Austrians would probably join and strengthen the German Reich.^[6] Despite the Russian failure in East Prussia, the [Russian](#) and [French governments](#) held talks in September and November 1914 in which both sides granted each other support for territorial expansion at the cost of Germany – Russia in East Prussia, France in [Alsace-Lorraine](#) and possibly the Rhineland. They even considered a dismemberment of the Reich into its single member states. Yet, territorial achievements were less important for Russia than retaining its role as a major power in Europe.^[7] In March 1915, in reaction to Turkey's joining the war on the side of the Central Powers, Britain and France granted Russia the right to annex the Straits. The Allied defeat at Gallipoli in early 1916, however, thwarted this plan.

Austro-Hungarian War Aims

[Austria-Hungary's primary war aim](#) was survival as a great power by destroying Serbia's potential to undermine the multi-national Habsburg Empire. War with Russia was anticipated as highly likely in the case of war against Serbia given Russia's self-proclaimed identification of its interests with those of the Balkan Slavs.^[8] Thus, weakening Russia became a logical further aim. However, after the autumn 1914 Austrian offensive in Galicia failed, Russian troops advanced up to the Carpathian rim.^[9] The situation worsened further when Italy joined the Entente in May 1915 after it had been promised as a prize Austrian Tyrol, Trieste and Dalmatia. In addition to defending their borders, the Austrians considered annexing territory in Serbia, [Romania](#) or [Italy](#), and later in [Poland](#) and [Ukraine](#), as buffer zones.

German and Austrian interests in Poland were hard to reconcile. From the beginning of the war the Austrian leadership, driven by loyalist Galician Poles, aimed at linking Russian Poland to Galicia within the Habsburg Empire with what was referred to as the "Austro-Polish solution."^[10] The Germans, in contrast, saw Poland as either a potential buffer zone or a trading object. The issue came up in earnest after the Central Powers' conquest of the region in summer 1915. On 10-11 November 1915 a general agreement on the "Austro-Polish solution" was reached but practically blocked by the German desire to keep the option of a separate peace with Russia and by the divergent security interests of the Central Powers.^[11]

From 1914 to 1916, during the phase known as war absolutism (*Kriegsabsolutismus*), the [Austrian government](#) prohibited public discussions of war aims and ran a sharp censorship policy in order to secure its freedom of manoeuvre. Despite this, several "private" circles of politicians and entrepreneurs developed war aim catalogues and presented them to the government. There were two essential orientations: one focusing on territorial gains notably in Poland and Serbia while the other was more concerned with the war as an opportunity for internal reforms which would enhance Austria's stability.^[12] Several memoranda advocated some form of economic and possibly political union with Germany, often with a view to strengthening the German-Austrian element against the Hungarians and Slavs. Interestingly, industrial associations mostly refused plans of a customs union

or other economic rapprochement for fear of superior German competition.^[13]

German War Aims

Germany's pre-war policies had aimed at political and economic penetration of the Ottoman Empire and of certain overseas areas but not at conquering any new territory. Since German industry was deeply integrated in the global economy the *Reich* sought a leading position within this system rather than at its expense.^[14] However, Britain's massive reaction to the German naval build-up, together with the increasingly hostile attitude of France and Russia, made the German leadership believe that the only way to maintain the Reich's global position was a pre-emptive war aimed at preventing an enemy attack on two fronts and breaking up the Triple Entente. The increasing fragility of their only major ally Austria-Hungary in the face of South Slavic nationalism was an important reason for the German leadership to risk war in 1914.^[15] The German military successes of August 1914 in the west prompted a number of political and industrial interest groups to make unsolicited calls for annexations in Luxemburg, Belgium and France. Similar claims were made with regard to the western borderlands of Russia. Such annexationist schemes were voiced already in summer 1914 by representatives of the right-wing "national opposition," such as the Pan-German League (*Alldeutscher Verband*). Its president Heinrich Claß (1868-1953) in September 1914 circulated a "private memorandum" that envisaged the creation of a Polish buffer state and German territorial expansion into the Baltic lands, Belarus and Northern Ukraine.^[16] As a reaction, Reich Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (1856-1921) in October 1914 prohibited the open discussion of war aims.^[17] Despite this, right-wing groups continued pressuring the government and formed the War Aims Movement (*Kriegszielbewegung*). One of its products was the 10 March 1915 memorandum from the five largest German industrial associations which insisted on territorial and other gains in Europe and overseas as the only acceptable outcome of the war. This position came to be known as *Siegfriede* (victorious peace). More sophisticated, but similarly demanding in terms of "securities" to be achieved by the Reich, was the so-called "Intellectuals' Memorandum" (*Intellektuelleneingabe*) of May/June 1915.^[18]

The main objective of the Chancellor's own "September Programme" of 9 September 1914 was to send a message that he was in charge of political strategy. In this memorandum, he defined Germany's principal aim as the creation of economic hegemony in Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*) centred on a customs union with Austria-Hungary, Belgium, the Netherlands, France and a number of other countries. This was to be a self-sufficient economic zone which would enable Germany to sustain the Allied blockade as well as future boycott measures. Only the French iron ore mines at Longwy and Briey were considered for direct annexation. Another goal was to tie Belgium closely to the Reich in military and political terms. Finally, the acquisition of a large colonial empire in Central Africa (*Mittelafrika*) was envisaged. This scheme primarily aimed at pushing back the extreme annexationist proposals and favoured an indirect power projection. This was in tune with the position taken by moderate conservative politicians like the *Zentrum* chairman Matthias Erzberger (1875-

1921).^[19] At the same time, it refused the [Social Democrats](#) and left liberals' call for a negotiated peace without gains (*Verständigungsfriede*). Generally, the "September Programme" was a flexible reference point rather than a rigid agenda; until 1917, Bethmann Hollweg would continuously adapt his goals to the situation.^[20]

The western focus of the "September Programme" was due to the strategic situation before the Battle of the Marne and to the influence on the Chancellor of German industrialists whose interests lay in the west rather than in the east.^[21] A precursor to a more eastward-looking orientation had been the Central European Economic Association (*Mitteleuropäischer Wirtschaftsverein*) of 1904, a private expert group that discussed a closer connection of the European continental economies in order to sustain competition with Britain and the USA. During the war, the group supported plans for an economic rapprochement of the Central Powers.^[22] In political and business circles, the concept of *Mitteleuropa* was further discussed in many variations of which the best known was [Friedrich Naumann's \(1860-1919\)](#) book of 1915 by the same name. At the heart of his liberal imperialist approach was the future relationship between Germany and Austria fostered by a customs and economic union around which other countries could gather and which would offer them progressive economic and political development.^[23]

Regarding Russia, a number of Baltic German and Pan-German writers had called for annexations of the Baltic provinces ever since the [Russian revolution of 1905](#). However, these ideas never became government policy. In case of war, Russia was to be knocked out but not conquered.^[24]

The Great Powers' Considerations about the Future of Central Europe 1915-1918

The Central Powers

In spring 1915, the Central Powers redirected their operational focus against Russia in order to regain the strategic offensive. The result was the breakthrough of the Tarnów-Gorlice offensive that began on 1 May 1915 and, by autumn 1915, resulted in the conquest of Galicia, Russian Poland, Lithuania and Courland.^[25] This military success brought back to the fore the ancient "Polish question" as the "Central European question" in the context of prolonged war, for which situation no prepared plans existed. In fact, in August 1914 the German Foreign Office together with the General Staff had considered ways of stirring up a rebellion in Russian Poland, but given the reserved attitude of the Russian Poles and the delicate position of the Prussian Poles, the idea had been given up.^[26] From 1915 on, similar moves were planned for other borderland nations of the Russian Empire, notably the Ukrainians and Finns. As one instrument to this end, in 1916 Germany launched the "League of the Alien Peoples of Russia" that claimed the right to self-determination of the non-Russian nations. This measure was also intended to counter the Entente's claims to fight for that very right.^[27]

After 1915 there was an informal majority in the Reichstag which comprised even the right wing of the Social Democrats in favour of at least minor territorial goals.^[28] Still, until mid-1916, Bethmann Hollweg's plans for the east vacillated between two options: the first one – actually preferred by the Chancellor – was a separate peace with Russia that would have allowed Germany to focus on Britain as the main enemy. This option entailed handing back most of the conquered Russian territory. At most, Germany would then have claimed a “border strip” in Poland to acquire a more easily defensible border. Some concepts presented notably by the Supreme Army Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, OHL) and industrial pressure groups envisaged also the removal of the Polish and Jewish population from the “strip” and their replacement with ethnic Germans from Russia who would separate the Prussian Poles from their ethnic brethren beyond the new border.^[29] Continued Russian refusal of a separate peace drove the German leadership towards the other option: defeating Russia and taking control of its western borderlands as a means to Germany's long-term security. There, options were either the direct annexation by Prussia of Lithuania and Courland (and possibly the “border strip”) or, as the Chancellor preferred, the creation of formally sovereign states that would be closely linked to Germany in military, economic and political terms. This latter approach was referred to as “fringe state” or “dismemberment policy” (*Randstaatenpolitik* or *Abgliederungspolitik*).^[30] In both of these cases, the German leadership considered the settlement of up to 1.5 million ethnic Germans mostly from Russia in the “border strip” and the Baltic regions.^[31] In this context, some other German states made claims to certain territories and positions to balance the growth of Prussia's influence (for example Bavaria in Alsace and Saxony in Poland).^[32]

After the conquest of Serbia at the end of 1915, the Austro-Hungarian Common Imperial Council of Ministers met on 7 January 1916 to discuss further war aims.^[33] The *public* discussion of war aims was allowed again only in December 1916 after the conquest of Romania and the Entente Powers' refusal of the Central Powers' peace offer. Like the German Reichstag, the Imperial Diet (*Reichsrat*) in Vienna voiced both annexationist and “negotiationist” positions. Specifically, the debate included considerations of the Empire's internal development in light of the self-determination issue.^[34]

In April 1916, Bethmann Hollweg began to abandon his hopes for a peace with Russia but rejected the “Austro-Polish solution” in favour of a buffer state with basic national Polish institutions under primarily German control. A main motive for this step urged by the OHL was the desire to recruit a Polish auxiliary army against Russia. After drawn-out negotiations between Berlin and Vienna, on 5 November 1916 the two Emperors proclaimed a “Kingdom of Poland” with yet undetermined borders that was to be governed until the end of the war by a Provisional State Council (*Tymczasowa Rada Państwowa*) dependent on the occupation powers.^[35] Eastward from this new Polish state, the independence of the OHL from the government allowed the commanders of *Ober Ost* not only to exploit local resources for the German war effort but also to create *de facto* state-like structures (*Land Ober Ost*) that suggested a lasting German presence.^[36]

On 27 November 1916, the OHL forced the reopening of the public war aims discussion, counting on

support from annexationist circles.^[37] After the [Russian Revolution of February 1917](#), the creation of buffer states in the Baltic region became the focus of German *Ostpolitik*. Several meetings of German and Austrian representatives in March 1917 showed their divergent interests concerning the possible path to peace and territorial gains. At a meeting in Kreuznach on 23 April 1917, the German leaders confirmed their “Eastern programme” that was, in principle, agreed upon in June 1917 by the Austrians who, however, insisted on seeking peace with Russia at any price to close the eastern front.^[38] The October Revolution of 1917 removed the belligerent [Provisional Government](#) and gave the Central Powers a negotiation partner for a separate peace. The two [Treaties of Brest-Litovsk](#) with Ukraine (9 February 1918) and Soviet Russia (3 March 1918) seemed to give Germany its sought-after position in the East; however, they could not deliver the material needed to continue the war nor could the Eastern position be maintained when the Western Front broke down in summer 1918.

The Entente Powers

The German-Austrian advance of 1915 severely limited Russia’s capability to influence the future of East Central Europe. Still, the Tsar insisted on having a hand in reordering the region, notably Poland, after an Allied victory. While the French government in particular sought to consider the interests of the “small nations,” the wartime coalition with Russia had highest priority. In April 1916, Russian foreign minister [Sergey Sazonov \(1860-1927\)](#) failed to propose a liberal autonomy project for Poland. A similar declaration by the Tsar on 25 December 1916 had no meaningful effect. Shortly afterwards, in their answer on January 10, 1917 to US President [Woodrow Wilson’s \(1856-1924\)](#) peace initiative of December 1916, the British and French mentioned, if vaguely, the rights of “nationalities” as a war aim, mostly to garner Wilson’s goodwill. After February 1917, the democratic claims of the new Russian Provisional Government changed the Entente’s policy towards East Central Europe. As already indicated above, crucial here was, next to the demise of Tsarist autocracy and the new rulers’ promises for independence of non-Russian nationalities, the position of President Wilson in light of the US’s imminent entry into the war. Wilson made *national self-determination* a central war aim that would justify the sacrifice of US neutrality and qualify Allied warfare as progressive in contrast with that of the “autocratic” Central Powers. In this context, [Roman Dmowski \(1864-1939\)](#) and [Ignacy Paderewski \(1860-1941\)](#) lobbied in favour of Polish independence, calling it crucial for the entire post-war order. As a result, in a declaration of 8 January 1918, Wilson defined his “[Fourteen Points](#)” as including a Polish state comprising all “indisputably Polish territories.” On 3 July, the Entente adopted the “Fourteen Points” officially. The small nations’ representatives were recognized as Allied nations. The Allied victory of 1918 and the consequent [Paris Peace Conference](#) of 1919 showed a contradiction between the idealistic goals proclaimed by Wilson and the imperialist aims effectively achieved by Britain and France. Accordingly, the role of the newly established East Central European nations turned out to be on one hand that of “foster children” legitimising the Allied war, and on the other, that of “little Allies” representing Entente power to the rear of the enemy.

Goals of the Stateless Nations

Poles

After the [Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905](#) and the Revolution of 1905, the main Polish political camps intensified their work towards national autonomy or independence. One position was that of the conservative and ethno-nationalist National Democrats led by Roman Dmowski who favoured Polish autonomy within Russia since he regarded Germany as the most dangerous enemy of Polish nationality. In contrast, the leader of the Polish Socialist Party [Józef Piłsudski \(1867-1935\)](#) saw Russia as the principal enemy which led him to seek cooperation with Austria where the Galician Poles enjoyed a high degree of autonomy.^[39] Beginning in 1908, he organised riflemen units that would support the Austrian army against Russia. In 1912, the pro-Austrian Polish parties formed an official alliance. However, after the war began in August 1914, initially neither Dmowski nor Piłsudski could gain any considerable influence over the course of events.

The Central Powers' occupation of Russian Poland in summer 1915 changed the situation: Dmowski fled to St. Petersburg to further pursue a Russian solution while his party colleagues who remained in Warsaw adopted a "passivist" attitude. In turn, Piłsudski joined those politicians called "activists" who were ready to offer the Central Powers conditional cooperation in exchange for the establishment of Polish statehood defined by "government and army" (*rząd i armia*). The wavering policies of the Central Powers on this issue as well as the severe economic strain on the country led to repeated tensions with the activist forces. At the same time, the [German administration in Warsaw](#) pursued a cultural re-Polonisation of public life. This policy which peaked with the proclamation of the Kingdom of Poland encouraged the activists to regard themselves as speakers of a sovereign nation. As a result, the activists led by Piłsudski refused to join the German war effort and make Polish volunteers swear an oath to [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#). As a consequence, Piłsudski was imprisoned in Magdeburg until November 1918. In the meantime, Dmowski had gone to [Switzerland](#) and then to Paris to lobby the Entente to support the foundation a Polish state which essentially corresponded to the pre-1772 Polish Republic. Still, since Dmowski emphasized its ethnic Polish core, he was ready to somewhat limit his ambitions in the east while in the west pressing for an "ethnic" border at the cost of Germany. Accordingly, he offered an anti-German alliance with the Western Powers.^[40] He found his most important supporter in President Wilson who decided to include the specific goal of Polish independence in the "Fourteen Points."^[41] Although his most extreme demands were refused, Dmowski retained a strong influence over Allied policies and the peace settlement of 1919. However, he had to share his political weight with Piłsudski who, in November 1918, was entrusted with military and political power in Russian Poland and Galicia and thus could shape the establishment of the Polish state. In particular, his military intervention in the [Russian civil war](#) in 1919 was aimed at achieving his "federal" – multicultural and imperialist – version of statehood. The main difference between Piłsudski and Dmowski was Piłsudski's anti-Russian orientation and relative indifference towards Germany. The two leaders were similar in terms of their territorial ambitions and the wish to dominate the other peoples of the historical Polish

East (*kresy*).

Lithuanians

Lithuanian national consciousness was fostered considerably by the 1905 Revolution. When war came, its most direct effect in the borderlands was the creation, as sub-units of the All-Russian Tatiana Committee, of “national” relief organisations for Lithuanians, Latvians, Armenians, Poles and Jews (the East Slavic Ukrainians and Belarusians were denied such an organisation). In Vilnius on 21 November 1914 the Lithuanian War Relief Committee was created. Initially, most Lithuanian parties supported this and other loyalist initiatives in hope of autonomy after the war. The German occupation of 1915 that initially suppressed Lithuanian nationalism made many Lithuanian politicians flee to the Russian interior. Some of them began to set their hope on the Entente and a “Lithuanian Information Bureau” lobbied in Paris for national independence. But the change in German *Ober Ost* policies from late 1916 which began to favour Lithuanian and Belarusian nationality against the Poles, made most Lithuanian politicians cooperate with the Germans. The February Revolution in 1917 strengthened both the German will to reorder the occupied Russian borderlands and the Lithuanian independence movement. The Lithuanians in St. Petersburg organised a congress in May-June 1917 to reconcile sovereignty with a lasting link with Russia. However, a Lithuanian National Conference acting in Vilnius from 18 to 22 September 1917 established a National Council (*Lietuvos Taryba*) that sought a nation state based on an “eternal” alliance with Germany as was agreed on 11 December. Throughout most of 1918, this cooperation continued, leading to the election in July 1918 of the German Duke Wilhelm von Urach (1864-1928) as Lithuanian King Mindaugas II. The new monarch never took power due to the German defeat in the West and rising tensions between the Lithuanians and the local Poles who claimed the Vilnius region for the new Polish state. While the Lithuanian Republic was set up in Kaunas, the Vilnius region during 1919-20 was fought over by Polish and Bolshevik units. In October 1920, in the wake of the Soviet retreat after the battle of Warsaw, Polish irregular units under General Lucjan Żeligowski (1865-1947) occupied Vilnius, annexing it *de facto* to Poland. This initiated a 20-year state of war between Poland and Lithuania.^[42]

Jews

The Jews living in East Central Europe were generally loyal to their home countries but had no stake in the war since, based on historical experience, they anticipated getting trapped between the fronts. Indeed, in 1914 the Jews suffered especially at the hands of the Russian military authorities who regarded them, together with the ethnic Germans, as potential spies. The Russians deported many Jews at the outbreak of the war and again when the Russian troops had to withdraw in summer 1915. On the other side, several hundred thousands of Jews from Austrian Galicia fled to the interior of the Habsburg Empire before the Russian advance in summer and autumn 1914. Most of them stayed on, especially in Vienna, which led to increased anti-Semitism on the part of Christian Austrians.^[43] After 1915, the Jews of Russian Poland came to regard the German-Austrian occupation – despite hardships that they had to endure (for example, forced service as civilian

labourers) – as preferable to Russian rule. Some of them served as interpreters and in other functions and, since they had no own state building intentions in the region, were not unsympathetic to the multiculturalism of the German *Mitteleuropa* schemes. This earned Jews the enmity of Polish and other nationalists. In contrast, a special relationship developed between the Jews of Russian Poland and Zionist German Jews who served in the German occupation administration. In the final stage of the war, Jewish organisations in the USA, Britain and France sought to influence Allied policy in order to secure for their East European brethren minority protection after the war since the “small nations” that had been recognized by the Allies often displayed an anti-Semitic ethnic nationalism and after 1918 indeed carried out numerous pogroms. One significant outcome of this Jewish activity was the minority protection treaties that the newly independent states had to sign in 1919-20.^[44]

Conclusion

When Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary entered into the war, they did so with a strategic view of the global conflict between the two military alliances. In this context, East Central Europe was to them a mere battleground that they were certain to keep under control given their belief in a quick victory. However, the course of the war uprooted the political and societal order of the region, and despite their military successes, the Central Powers turned out to be without a viable concept for a new order. Moreover, the drawn-out war fuelled political aspirations of the stateless nations who perceived the great powers’ war as an opportunity to gain autonomy or even independence. To this end, they supported the claim made by US President Wilson that the Allied war was motivated by the quest for national independence and democracy. This was later mirrored by the peace settlement with its ambiguous linking of democracy to nationalism which from 1919 on effectively turned East Central Europe once more into a battlefield of contrary moral and territorial claims.

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Notes

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