

# Occupation during and after the War (East Central Europe)

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## Summary

This article examines the politics of the German (Generalgouvernement Warschau) and Austro-Hungarian (Militärgeneralgouvernement Lublin) occupation of the Kingdom of Poland during World War One. Both occupation governments strove to exploit the human, industrial and agricultural resources in order to supply themselves with much needed labourers, soldiers, and foodstuffs. Each regime also hoped to win favour with the Poles via the granting of civil rights and charitable donations so as to become the ruler of the territory after the war had ended. Thus, the politics of the Austro-Hungarian and German occupiers were continuously shifting and included sanctions, coercion and attempted partnerships with the locals. The occupation regimes ultimately did not attain their desired quotas for the export of food and military manpower.

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## Introduction

The [Schlieffen plan](#), [Germany's](#) strategy for initiating an armed conflict against [France](#) and [Russia](#), envisaged first a massive advance in the west and a mere delaying defence in the east. After a victory in the west, troops could be relocated to defeat the Tsarist Empire. Although this strategy was not implemented as planned, the Germans did achieve some military success. In contrast, [Austria-Hungary](#) was soon forced to retreat and temporarily surrender large parts of Galicia. In the beginning of the winter of 1914/15 the coordination of the Central Powers' armies improved. After the battle of Łódź, together they were able to

conquer some parts of western Congress [Poland](#) around the city. In May 1915 the two allies achieved a huge victory in the battle of Gorlice-Tarnów. Consequently, the Russian army was forced to retreat from Congress Poland by the end of the summer of 1915, bringing the country under the [occupation](#) of Germany and Austria-Hungary until the end of the war.

## Two General Governorates: Location, Structure, and Personnel

By the end of 1914, the Germans had established a *Generalgouvernement*, or General Governorate based in the industrial city of Łódź while Austria-Hungary took greater control of the religious centre of Częstochowa and the major mining area of Dąbrowa. On 5 January 1915, a civil administration under the command of a Governor General took responsibility for the German occupied territories. When Warsaw was conquered on 24 August it became the new administrative centre for the German occupiers.<sup>1</sup> A small part of Poland around the cities of Augustów and Białystok remained under the military rule of the [Ober Ost](#).<sup>2</sup>

The south-eastern part of Congress Poland, encompassing the areas east of the Vistula and the towns of Radom, Kielce, and Lublin, was administered by Austria-Hungary. The occupying government was initially named the *Militärgeneralgouvernement* Kielce on 25 August 1915, as its first seat was there. However, on 1 October, it was moved away from that town and renamed the *Militärgeneralgouvernement* Lublin after the largest and most important city in the occupation zone, where also the administration took its seat. With 48,000 square kilometres and a population of about 3.5 million,<sup>3</sup> the Austro-Hungarian occupation zone was much smaller than that of Germany which enclosed 62,000 square kilometres and a population of 6 million.<sup>4</sup>

There were significant differences in the pre-existing infrastructure of the areas under German and Austro-Hungarian control. The Germans occupied the industrial centres of Warsaw and Łódź. Thus, they had to supply several hundred thousand workers with food and employment. Austria-Hungary, on the other hand, ruled almost entirely agrarian territory. Apart from some coal mines in the Dąbrowa region, only food processing enterprises and small businesses fell under Austrian control. These differences ultimately exerted a great influence on the political outcomes of the two regions.

The General Governorate Warsaw had much more administrative freedom than its k.u.k. counterpart. The Governor General, Generaloberst [Hans von Beseler \(1850-1921\)](#),<sup>5</sup> was directly appointed by and subordinate only to the German *Kaiser*. Beseler set the political agenda but its actual implementation and execution was the responsibility of a civil

administration under [Wolfgang von Kries \(1868-1945\)](#), who was subordinate to the Berlin Reich authorities but otherwise independent.<sup>6</sup> Beseler was in power until the war ended and Kries until mid-1918. Together they fostered a high degree of political continuity and were relatively unaffected by the frequently changing desires of the [Supreme Army Command](#) [*Oberste Heeresleitung*, or OHL].

The *Militärgeneralgouvernement* Lublin, on the other hand, was a purely military regime which was always subordinate to the army high command.<sup>7</sup> The heads of the Lublin administration changed often and four governors were in power during the war: [Erich Baron Diller \(1859-1926\)](#), [Karl Kuk \(1853-1935\)](#), [Stanisław Graf Szeptycki \(1867-1950\)](#), and [Anton Lipošćak \(1863-1924\)](#).<sup>8</sup> Although a *Zivil-Landeskommissariat* (civil administration) did exist, the competence of its bureaucrats lagged behind their German counterparts. The only continuous part in the administration played the long-time chief of staff [Arthur Hausner \(1877-1953\)](#).<sup>9</sup>

## The Polish Question: a Guideline for Politics?

The efficiency of the occupational administration was debated already during the war.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it was not possible to rule a country as large as Poland, especially in a time of war, with only German and Austro-Hungarian staff. The occupiers therefore took over most of the administration of Russian Poland and continued employing the locals who were far more numerous than their occupiers: by the middle of 1918, the Germans had some 6,000 officers and just over 100,000 soldiers stationed in the country.<sup>11</sup> The scope for design on site was limited anyway; “big politics” were made in Berlin and Vienna. From there, the policies aimed first and foremost at the widest possible economic utilisation of the land and secondarily at recruiting soldiers for one’s own armies. Concrete plans for an occupation regime had not been thought out before the war, as the military on all sides had assumed a quick decision that did not require extensive designs, thus referring any further planning in the area of politics.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, more concrete plans for the occupation regimes began to be made at the highest levels only after the German and Austrian armies had secured their position in Poland. The two governments in Vienna and Berlin discussed the “Polish question,” what Poland’s role would be in prospective post-war Europe. Germany planned to incorporate a large part of the county or, at least, significant districts in the west.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, [Fritz Fischer \(1909-1999\)](#) argued that Germany had placed “a bid for world domination” during the war.<sup>14</sup>

A key point of this plan had been the incorporation of a larger part of Poland – if not the whole country, then at least significant districts in the west.<sup>15</sup>

Austria-Hungary also had far-reaching plans. In the summer of 1914, even while experiencing military defeat on the [Eastern front](#), Austria-Hungary thought about enlarging its possessions in Poland.<sup>16</sup> The “Polish question” evolved to one of the major controversial points between the Central Powers from 1915 to 1918. Ideas of how to share the Polish “cake” not only varied, but were largely inconsistent, even incompatible.

The complete division of Poland between the two occupiers was hardly discussed at the time. There were three visions for how a defeated Poland could be integrated into the new order of states in Central Europe (“[Mitteleuropa](#)”)<sup>17</sup>: first, Poland could become a crown land of the Dual Monarchy. With this solution there would be more Polish than Austrian inhabitants in the [Empire](#), thus endangering Austro-Hungarian dualism and risking high levels of unrest if the Poles desired independence. Second, Poland could become part of the German Reich. This would have thwarted “Germanisation” efforts in the previously Prussian parts of Poland, as more Poles than ever would be German citizens. It would have also spurred efforts for a unification of the country and thus the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire’s position in Galicia. Finally, Poland could become an independent state under the hegemony of the Central Powers, possibly even under a regency of one of their princes. This option would have raised discussions about the future status of Galicia and West Prussia.<sup>18</sup>

The first two concepts remained only on paper. The Central Powers lost the war and their reflections were obsolete in the fall of 1918 at the latest. Of much greater importance for local policy was the proclamation of the Kingdom of Poland on 5 November 1916, which was announced by the Governors General in Warsaw and Lublin.<sup>19</sup> On behalf of the two emperors, they promised an independent state with a hereditary and constitutional monarchy. The latter two aspects remained unexplained in any detail and independence was postponed until after the war. In a meeting on 6 January 1917 the German chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) and k.u.k. foreign minister [Ottokar Graf Czernin \(1872-1932\)](#) agreed that, for the time being, neither the political nor economic independence of Poland should be sought.<sup>20</sup>

Without consultation with the [German government](#), Beseler had already arranged for the formation of a Polish state in October 1916.<sup>21</sup> Beseler’s primary motivation was to begin the recruitment of Polish soldiers, which had previously not been possible for reasons of [international law](#), as Russian nationals, Poles were not allowed to serve in the armies of the

Central Powers. But, as citizens of a supposedly independent country with its own army, Poles could be formally allowed to serve the Central Powers. Beseler also imagined that the Polish army would be under the German High Command.

## Local Politics and the Rivalry between Lublin and Warsaw

It was quickly recognised that Austria-Hungary and Germany were less interested in a military victory than in their own expansionist national goals. Nevertheless, the two empires still attempted to convince the Poles of their “honest” intentions and undertook real efforts to eliminate the ravages of war and improve infrastructure by building roads, railways and bridges.<sup>22</sup>

Given the unresolved question of whether the house of Habsburg or of Hohenzollern would be the future ruler of Poland, veritable competition between the two governments in Lublin and Warsaw quickly developed.<sup>23</sup> Both wanted to present themselves to the Poles as the better, more effective and kind ruler. Austria-Hungary promoted a “myth of the good occupier” full of grace,<sup>24</sup> in which the Catholic faith was emphasised as a unifying element. The Germans tried to cast themselves as a progressive force providing order, for example by means of a municipal constitution which gave Polish cities relatively far-reaching freedoms. The Dual Monarchy was forced to follow suit in order not to lose face in their propagandistic efforts.<sup>25</sup>

The two occupying powers also rivalled one another in cultural politics. Here the Germans were clearly the dominant player because they possessed Warsaw, the spiritual capital of the country. They also attempted to mitigate the fear of Germanisation. Beseler erected many new schools and allowed the use of the Polish language which was not permitted in state institutions during Russian rule. On 15 November 1915 the university was solemnly reopened which had educated students only as an Imperial Russian institution since 1864.<sup>26</sup>

The occupiers found other ways to present themselves as good and just rulers in religious and social matters where they sought to outdo each other in their willingness to donate. [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) gave 10,000 Marks for the poor while visiting the monks of Jasna Góra in Częstochowa. The k.u.k. delegate in Warsaw thereupon recommended a donation of a higher sum than the gift of the German *Kaiser* by [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#) specifically for the maintenance of the monastery.<sup>27</sup> Even the death of the Austro-Hungarian monarch offered an opportunity to achieve – at his funeral service – an obeisance by the Poles that was not directed towards the unpopular

alliance partner.<sup>28</sup> Local holidays, e.g. memorial days for the Constitution of 1791 or the national hero [Tadeusz Kosciuszko \(1746-1817\)](#), provided an opportunity to make the other Central Power look inconsiderate of Polish needs by “generously” allowing parades to take place and sometimes even participating in the festivities.<sup>29</sup>

The German and Austro-Hungarian occupiers also entered into indirect competition regarding the granting of civil rights. The tsarist regime had been comparatively restrictive and backward so that the partial granting of freedoms common in Germany and Austria was a considerable advance. The Central Powers acted partly out of genuine conviction and partly out of tactical concern, especially in matters regarding Jews. Although Jews were granted the right to vote, they were simultaneously disadvantaged as they were only allowed to vote for one of the six curia into which the urban population was divided. Austria-Hungary was particularly anxious not to appear “pro-Jewish” so as to protect its image as a Catholic power. As one Austrian contemporary put it: “The population should have clearly recognised that the philo-Semitic tendencies have been broken once and for all.”<sup>30</sup> Still, formal recognition of the Jews as a religious community was announced by Warsaw in November 1916<sup>31</sup> which was a step towards equal treatment under the law. At the same time, however, [anti-Semitism](#) was on the rise among the Poles.<sup>32</sup>

## Occupation Aims: Soldiers and Workers for the Central Powers

One of the main goals for the Central Powers’ occupation of Poland was the recruitment of labourers. Before the outbreak of the war, tens of thousands of Poles had been employed as seasonal harvest workers on estates east of the Elbe. Without them, Prussian agriculture was not viable and, at first, these men and some women were prohibited from returning home. After Congress Poland was captured, the occupiers tried to lure more Poles to the West as increased numbers of labourers were needed to replace the many German men who had departed for the front. The Poles who journeyed to Germany, known as “Saxony-goers” (*Sachsengänger*), were paid but they were not guaranteed a return home at their own discretion.

In the General Governorate of Warsaw worker recruitment was organised by a relatively effective system directed by the German Workers’ Central (*Deutsche Arbeiterzentrale*, or DAZ). This private-sector institution was responsible for the pre-1914 provision of harvest workers to Prussia and continued its work now with regional offices in German occupied Poland. The later initiatives of the Polish State Council, which offered itself as a mediator due to frequent complaints against the practices of the DAZ, were rejected by the General

Governorate because the existing system served German interests well.<sup>33</sup> On the whole, the German demand for workers was largely met because the journey west was traditionally perceived in the Polish countryside as an opportunity to earn good money. Additionally, unemployment was high during the war, especially in the large cities of Warsaw and Łódź.<sup>34</sup>

The Austro-Hungarians had more difficulty enticing workers to leave Poland. Around Lublin, small-scale subsistence farming demanded labour from every available man. Furthermore, the Dual Monarchy could not pay the same wages offered by their ally. Although they made similar efforts, Austria-Hungary's recruitment was much less successful and in the spring of 1917 could count only 102,000 temporary seasonal workers in agriculture and 15,000 in industrial Cisleithania.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, in the summer of 1918 some 200,000-240,000 Poles worked in Germany, including 30,000-35,000 Jews despite often anti-Semitic hiring policies.<sup>36</sup>

In both General Governorates, many men were drafted to labour service to work on roads or railways. The k.u.k. frequently had to resort to penalties to recruit men into its civilian worker battalions. Many Poles fled and organized collective resistance within their villages. Nevertheless, the Dual Monarchy had 81,000 men organised in 328 civilian worker battalions in December 1915.<sup>37</sup> The General Governorate Warsaw used similarly drastic measures but only for those few labour battalions which were deployed in the Ober Ost.

With the proclamation of the Kingdom of Poland in November 1916, almost all coercive measures came to an end. Protests against German and Austro-Hungarian practices had increased and [forced labour](#) did not mesh with the image of an independent Poland being propagated by the occupiers. However, in 1917/18 the Germans, in an imitation of the k.u.k. practice encouraged by Polish landowners,<sup>38</sup> implemented agricultural labour duty for the first time: peasants were forced to cultivate the arable land of large estates instead of their own fields.

Both Central Powers were far less successful when it came to the recruitment of soldiers. Although Austria-Hungary had already established so-called [Polish Legions](#) in the summer of 1914 which gathered volunteers from Congress Poland to combat Russia, their number grew only to 25,000 men over the next two years. Precisely due to problems with the legality of the deployment of an army in an occupied territory, Beseler pushed for the proclamation of the Kingdom of Poland. The Legions, known as the Polish Army, were put under German command but success was largely lacking. The legions' commander Józef Piłsudski (1867-1935) wanted to assure his independence and was not willing to submit to all orders. When the soldiers refused to swear allegiance to the German Emperor on 9 July 1917, the

failure of Beseler's strategy became clear: total numbers lagged far behind the expectation of several hundred thousand men and the legion was not willing to become part of the German military. 15,000 legionaries were interned and even under the command of the Polish Regency Council from the fall of 1918 onward only 9,000 men served in the Polish Army.<sup>39</sup>

## Occupation Aims: Resources

The acquisition of material resources was as important as the recruitment of labourers and soldiers for the occupiers. Immediately after the invasion, the Central powers essentially stole all of industrial material they could get ahold of. Textile factories in Łódź ceased operations throughout the war due to the removal of their machinery and [raw materials](#). Furthermore, the German textile industry feared Polish competition and demanded that Beseler allow allocations of wool only in strictly limited amounts if at all.<sup>40</sup>

Congress Poland was an essentially agricultural country and Germany and Austria-Hungary strove to mollify their own food shortages at home by extracting resources from the occupied territories. Beginning in April 1915, the German occupiers also faced problems of how to feed the urban Polish population. Fighting had devastated the harvest, magazines and supply lines. To transport any food out of the country at all, a comprehensive system of [rationing](#) was established.<sup>41</sup> In May 1917, the inhabitants of Warsaw received only 131 grams of bread and 205 grams of potatoes per day. The daily consumption of bread before the war had stood at 720 grams.<sup>42</sup>

The Austro-Hungarians demonstrated similar interests and methods in the General Governorate Lublin. In 1915 the Austro-Hungarian occupiers executed a full seizure of the harvest, took control of seed distribution and introduced food supply quotas in the few major cities of their territory. The sale and purchase of basic [foods](#) such as cereals or potatoes was only granted to dealers specially authorised by the occupation administration. Many farmers saw no economic incentive to increase the harvest when it all had to be handed over to the occupiers. Some even perpetrated acts of sabotage such as burning barns. In response, the authorities in Lublin forced some farmers to work their fields and held prominent members of the Polish community responsible for the agricultural damage.<sup>43</sup>

Many peasants in the Lublin area produced enough foodstuffs to feed their families. Therefore the k.u.k. administration did not have to worry about feeding the Polish population as did their German counterpart and pushed for a quick exploitation of the harvest for Austro-Hungarians. However, the Austro-Hungarians made hardly any investment in the

infrastructure of their territory whereas the Germans deemed the building of light railways necessary for effective transport of the harvest out of the country.<sup>44</sup>

After almost two years of largely failed exploitation efforts, both occupation regimes changed course and focused on greater economic incentives and partial cooperation with the locals. Beginning in the autumn of 1916, the Centre for Harvest Exploitation (*Ernteverwertungszentrale*, or EVZ) in Lublin controlled and coordinated the production cycle for the main agricultural products. This organisation was technically self-administered and formally independent yet was still under Austro-Hungarian military leadership. In Warsaw on 1 July 1916 a national grain company (*Landesgetreidegesellschaft*) took the place of the import goods company (*Wareneinfuhrgesellschaft*).<sup>45</sup> Thus, in the middle of 1916, some 40,000 tonnes of potatoes were taken each month from [Generalgouvernement Warsaw](#) to the Reich, while only about half that amount was issued to the local population.<sup>46</sup>

To reduce the growing criticism of a heteronomous policy, Germany and Austria-Hungary also founded a Polish agricultural council in May 1917, which formally took over the organisation of the harvest in July. This organisation was not truly autonomous because it was overseen by a government commissioner and its only task was to process trading. On-site representatives of the occupying powers monitored the harvest. The responsibility for fulfilling local quotas was still in their hands and they could ensure a successful seizure by force if necessary.<sup>47</sup> But the attempt to rely on a partnership with the locals was not successful for other reasons: Polish bodies simply could not pay the prices that were offered to farmers on the black market. The quota was then regulated once more from above. Rather than estimating reasonable local quotas or requiring only certain surpluses, Lublin assigned quotas to all the counties that were too high even in the eyes of the county chiefs.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

In the end, neither Austria-Hungary nor Germany could fulfil the overly optimistic predictions of possible food deliveries westwards. The politics of occupation evolved more from a state of rivalry than planned agreement, were a system of continual adaption and readjustment that did not function without sanctions and coercion. Neither Germany nor Austria-Hungary did use methods comparable in any respect to those of Nazi Germany thirty years later. Terror and mass murder did not exist in First World War's Poland. Furthermore, both regimes were much lighter than that in Ober Ost, where a military administration tested the project of a new kind of direct rule - which remained a singular appearance among all the occupied territories.

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## Notes

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