

Prisoners of War (East Central Europe)

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Summary

During the war, hundreds of thousands of East Central Europeans mobilised to the imperial armies of Austro-Hungary, Russia, and Germany were taken prisoner. Beyond the ordinary problems of POWs such as malnutrition, hunger, infectious diseases, insects, lack of suitable clothes, longing for family and friends, boredom, monotony of life, overcrowding, dirty quarters, mistreatment at times, and hard physical work, these POWs were exposed to intensive propaganda campaigns aimed to abandon loyalty to the state they served and join the voluntary units fighting on the side of their formal enemies to establish independent states.

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Introduction

Whereas earlier research has mainly concentrated on the treatment and experience of [POWs](#), more recent studies have highlighted the significance of POWs as part of the broader political transformations connected to the First World War, particularly concerning the role of POWs in state-building and in the export of political ideas (as in the case of Revolutionary [Russia](#)).¹ This gives the field a much broader relevance for the history of the emergence of independent states in East Central Europe, such as [Poland](#), [Finland](#), and [the Baltic States](#).

During the First World War, over three million Poles and hundreds of thousands of soldiers from the Baltics were mobilised into the imperial armies of [Austro-Hungary](#), Russia, and

[Germany](#).² Thus from the Polish perspective, the First World War could be characterised as a Polish Civil War. This fact was well known even prior to the start of the hostilities. Just a few hours before the outbreak of the German-Russian war, the daily newspaper *Dziennik Bydgoski* commented:

We are convinced that every Pole, called to military duty, will fulfilled his duty, but we could not free from the feeling that after all it will be fratricidal fighting. Poles from the different parts of partitioned Poland will shoot at each other.³

This statement proved to be true. For example, in opposite trenches near Łowczówek in Galicia during Christmas 1914, Polish legionnaires fighting on the Austro-Hungarian side and Polish soldiers from the Russian Siberian Rifle took turns singing stanzas of Polish Christmas songs.⁴ Of one Cracovian bookseller's twelve nephews, eight served in the Austro-Hungarian army, two in the Russian army, one in the Prussian army, and one in the American army.⁵

It is likely that a few hundred thousand of East Central Europeans fell into captivity, though no statistical details are available. Beyond the ordinary problems of POWs such as malnutrition, hunger, infectious diseases, insects, lack of suitable clothes, longing for family and friends, boredom, monotony of life, overcrowding, dirty quarters, mistreatment at times, and hard physical work, these POWs were exposed to intensive [propaganda](#) campaigns aimed to abandon loyalty to the state they served and join the voluntary units fighting on the side of their formal enemies to regain Polish independence or establish Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian nation states.

Though interest in the history of POWs on the [Eastern Front](#) has risen in the last few years, an [imperial](#) perspective still dominates the research. The experiences of different nations, whose members served in the multinational Russian and Austro-Hungarian armies, have not been given enough consideration by historians of the Great War. These topics are also not especially popular in the national [historiography](#) of Poland and the Baltic states.

Poland

Entente States

At the beginning of the war, Polish [POWs in Russia](#) from the Central Powers' armies were treated well as Slavic brothers. However, when they refused to form voluntary units, as did some Czechs and Slovaks, they were accused of being traitors to the Slavic cause and thus subjected to worse treatment.⁶ Some Polish POWs, along with soldiers of other nationalities, working in severe climate conditions, constructed the Murmań Railway. Others were interned

in Turkestan where they also constructed railways or were employed in cotton fields.⁷ The best living conditions were experienced by those who were sent to the countryside to help farmers. They enjoyed a wider range of freedom and often a higher standard of living than at home. Some of them bonded with local women and planned to stay in Russia after the war ended.⁸ Paradoxically, relatively decent living conditions prevailed for POWs in eastern Siberia.⁹

Special camps for German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers of Polish nationality were also organized in [France](#), [Great Britain](#), and [Italy](#). Especially after 1917, when the Polish National Committee, a kind of unofficial government-in-exile, was established in Paris, these soldiers were encouraged to join the Polish army in France. The separate camps that existed for Poles were organized by the British in Feltham, a suburb of London, and in France in Longenau and by the French authorities on the island of Belle-Île and in Miliana, Algeria. From the summer of 1915, Polish POWs from the German army were placed in camps in Le Puy, Montluçon, and Vierzon.¹⁰ Up to the spring of 1919, 20,000 soldiers went through camps for Polish [POWs in France](#).¹¹ At the end of the war about 15,000 Austro-Hungarian POWs of Polish nationality, concentrated in two camps near Naples, Cassagiove and Santa Maria Capua Vetera, were imprisoned by the Italians.¹²

Central Powers

From the very beginning of the war Polish POWs from the tsarist army were regarded by the German authorities as potentially interested in serving against the Russian empire.¹³ Especially in the second phase of the war in late 1916, the Central Powers planned the establishment of a new Polish army to fight against Russia. To give a legal basis for this project, [William II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) and [Franz Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#) announced 5 November 1916 “The Declaration of Two Emperors” which reestablished an independent Polish State in the Russian part of Poland, a constitutional monarchy to be allied with the Central Powers.

The first step in forming Polish units was the concentration of Polish POWs from the Russian army in separate camps. At that time, [German camps](#) were comprised of about 60,000 Russian POWs of Polish nationality. They were asked to submit their willingness to be moved to the special POW camps located in Ellwagen and Helmstedt for officers and in Celle and Gardelegen for soldiers.¹⁴ Captured Polish officers of the tsarist army were summoned to special propaganda camps where with movies, lectures, and carefully selected books the

camp authorities tried to indoctrinate them into “a true picture of Germany.”¹⁵ They could also observe national holidays and were visited by Austro-Hungarian officers of Polish nationality and civil national activists from the Danube Monarchy. They also enjoyed better living conditions than other officers of the Russian army. Furthermore, some of the Polish POWs were granted a short leave to visit their homes located in areas occupied by German or Austro-Hungarian troops.¹⁶ In 1917, Piotr Głasek, an unknown soldier, complained in a letter sent from a Hungarian POWs camp to his mother and confiscated by censors:

We are in a camp with only Poles, we have been starving already for three weeks and one orders us to join a Polish legion, a Polish army. Nobody is released to their homes and nobody knows how it will finish but without exception, we will starve to death.¹⁷

Despite propagandistic efforts, the majority of POWs remained indifferent to patriotic agitation and preferred to stay in German and Austro-Hungarian POW camps until the end of hostilities, rather than joining the Polish army with the risk of losing their lives in the trenches or by execution resulting from being kept on the battlefield by former brothers of arms. The motivations of the small group who did join the volunteers were diverse: some did it for patriotic reasons, others just wanted to get out of the camp under any pretext. As one observer, Józef Jadaczyk, noted, probably with exaggeration, they would be ready to join any army, even Chinese, only to free themselves from the barbed-wire zone.¹⁸ Those who decided to move to special POW camps for Poles hoped for better living standards or wanted to change their social environment. Only 180 Polish officers from the Russian army decided to join the Polish army. Sixty-eight of them arrived in Warsaw in December 1916. About 1,000 Poles from the Russian army were taken prisoner by Turkish and Bulgarian troops. In October 1917 all were released.¹⁹

Relations between Polish POWs and ethnic Russians worsened after the declaration of 5 November 1916. As a result, Russian POWs in Germany started to look at their Polish comrades as potential traitors. In some camps, Poles were excluded from the distribution of material aid sent by the Russian government with the excuse “that they are now citizens of the other state.”²⁰ In the second half of 1917, German authorities, disappointed by the weak response to their endeavors, lost interest in forming a Polish army.

Relief Actions

The civil war dimension of the First World War for the Polish nation had some positive aspects for Polish POWs. Namely, they could count on the help of their compatriots who were subjects of a hostile state. For example, in autumn, 1914, the Polish POWs, who were transported via

Warsaw to internal provinces of Russia, were provided by inhabitants of the city with warm clothes, shoes, and gloves.²¹ In Tyumen, western Siberia, a Polish colony organized a special women's committee to support Polish POWs in the local camp.²² Delegates of Poles, among them [Stanisław Trzeciak \(1873-1944\)](#), a lecturer from a Roman Catholic Seminary in Petrograd, visited the construction site of the Murmań Railroad to control the living and working conditions of POWs.²³

Due to the lack of a Polish state institution, the burden of helping Polish POWs rested on the shoulders of society and non-government organizations. Such committees for POWs functioned in many Polish towns and abroad in Vevey and Freiburg in Switzerland and Leiden in [Holland](#).²⁴

In sum, despite the endeavors of the Polish national activists, Polish POWs' loyalty toward Russia, Germany, and Austria was surprisingly enduring. As mentioned above, the majority of Polish POWs from the Russian army showed indifference to the Polish national cause and even mocked those active in that area.²⁵ The same applied to the Polish POWs from the Habsburg Army in Russia, where many soldiers and officers, even of Polish nationality, tried to dissuade those wanting to join the Polish national troops with threats of denunciation to the Austrian authorities after the war.²⁶ At times, there was conflict between Polish POWs from different regions of partitioned Poland but placed in one camp. In French camps Poles from the German province of Posen quarreled with those from the German province of Silesia, regarding them as too loyal to the German state.²⁷ Endeavors aimed at convincing Polish POWs from the German army to reinforce the ranks of the Polish Blue Army in France returned more than modest results. Only 10 percent of soldiers in the 1st Rifle Regiment had previously served in the German or Austro-Hungarian armies.²⁸

The Fate of Former Legionaries

After refusing to take a new oath of fidelity to the German emperor in July 1917, three brigades of [Polish legionaries](#) were dissolved and their soldiers, former Russian citizens, interned in camps Szczypiorno and Beniaminów.²⁹ One of the main occupations of interned legionnaires was playing handball and from that time on the sport was unofficially called "*szczypiorniak*" after the camp in Szczypiorno.

Some of the legionnaires, mostly from the Second Brigade and Austro-Hungarian citizens, decided to continue fighting and joined the Polish Auxiliary Corps. After the conclusion of the

[Brest Litovsk Treaty](#) between the Central Powers and the Ukrainian National Republic in February 1918, in which the Chełm Land (Chełmszczyzna) was given to the [Ukraine](#) – which Polish public opinion unanimously regarded as extremely unfavorable to the Polish cause – soldiers of the Polish Auxiliary Corps decided to go over to the Russian side of the front line. Only a part of this group managed to fight through the front line. The majority were surrounded by Austro-Hungarian troops and forced to lay down their arms. In the next months, the former legionnaires were interned in camps where they awaited the judgment of high-treason, processed mainly in eastern-north Hungary (Huszt, Máramarossziget, Dulfvalf, Bustyahaza, Szeklencze). The Polish public opinion in Galicia regarded them as martyrs for the Polish cause, supporting them morally, materially, and legally while intensively lobbying for their release. Interpellation in their name was submitted by the Polish deputies to the Austrian parliament and they were defended by the best Polish attorneys. Finally, in the last days of September 1918, the [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#) granted them a pardon.³⁰

Baltics and Finland

Finnish POWs had a particular experience during the First World War. The Grand-Duchy of Finland was completely excluded from Russian conscription until 1902, which resulted in mass refusals to serve and opposition to the draft. After two years of protests, the Russians gave up, the attempt to enact conscription in Finland was abandoned, and the draft was replaced with a payment, the so-called “military millions,” paid regularly from the budget of the Grand-Duchy to the Empire. As result, during the First World War only about one thousand Finnish volunteers served in the Russian army. On the German side about 1,600 Finns fought. Only a small number of Finns serving in the Russian army were taken prisoners. In POW camps they were simply placed among the other Russian soldiers. A few of them joined the *Jäger* movement. The most prominent was [Wilhelm Thesleff \(1880-1941\)](#), who served as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Russian army in 1914-1917 and was captured by the Germans on the Riga Front. He decided to join the Finnish *Jäger* Battalion and returned to Finland with the Germans in 1918. For a very brief time in 1918 he served as minister of war in Finland.

Most Baltic POWs interned in Germany were from Lithuania due to the swiftness of the Great Retreat of 1915 and the ensuing rapid occupation of Lithuania and southern parts of Latvia. While it is difficult to establish precise numbers, it is safe to say that almost 20,000 Lithuanians and more than 5,000 Latvians were interned as POWs in Germany. Thanks to the relatively small population size and the late occupation of Estonia in February 1918, only around 2,700 Estonian POWs were interned in Germany.³¹ POWs from the Baltics were

interned along with other – mostly Russian – soldiers of the imperial Russian army. In 1916 a monument was erected in Schneidemühl (Piła) to [commemorate](#) Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian soldiers who had died in the POW camp there.

In 1917, German agents systematically infiltrated POWs from the Baltics to identify potential collaborators – especially among the officer corps – who could act as representatives for Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania at the peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk to provide legitimacy to German territorial claims. However, these efforts were frustrated by the relatively low degree of national fervor among interned soldiers from the Baltics.³² Activists within Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, on the other hand, demanded the return of all POWs before any aspects of state building under German tutelage (such as the election of national assemblies) could start.

After the November Armistice, national committees for the repatriation of POWs were formed in the Baltic States in the context of broader repatriation efforts. In Lithuania, a Committee for the Repatriation of Prisoners of War was established at the end of 1918 and attached to the delegation to the Paris Peace Conference.³³ However, repatriation was thwarted by the continuing state of war in the region. The Allied [Supreme War Council](#) attempted to act as a central organizer for the repatriation of POWs, planning to ship Estonians directly to Tallinn or Saaremaa. Russian POWs were to be sent by rail through Lithuania via Kaišiadorys. This plan had to be abandoned as a consequence of fighting around Vilnius.³⁴ Alternative plans to repatriate Russian POWs through Latvia were called off because of Latvian and international worries that as long as a quick passage through Bolshevik lines was not guaranteed, the emerging state would very likely be destabilised by soldiers in transit, who were suspected to harbour Bolshevik tendencies. The Allies also considered transporting Russian soldiers via Danzig directly to Narva at the Russian border. Moreover, the Western Entente worried that a quick repatriation would block desperately needed maritime transport and in turn strengthen the Red Army.³⁵ In July 1919, the Allied Supreme Council estimated that 15,400 Lithuanians, 5,300 Latvians, and 2,300 Estonians were still awaiting repatriation, some of whom were considered fit for further military service against the Red Army, but most of whom were deemed too severely weakened by their internment.³⁶

The influx of returning POWs to the Baltics provided a desperately needed pool of recruits for the emerging national armies and for [paramilitary](#) units, which fought in the [Wars of Independence](#) and the [Russian Civil War](#). Vilnius, in particular, which was fought over by the Polish army, the Lithuanian army, and the Red Army, became a hub for the recruitment of POWs.³⁷ The continuing wars and border conflicts resulted in further soldiers taken prisoner

and interned in makeshift camps, for instance Lithuanian POWs in Poland and Latvian POWs in Lithuania.³⁸

Conclusion

Prisoners of war from East Central European nations shared the fate of their brothers-in-arms, serving in the imperial armies of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. However, especially in the second part of the war, when the pre-war political and territorial status quo was undermined by prolonged war, some decided to join national units aimed at fighting on the side of former enemies for establishing new nation states.

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External Links

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