

Sich Riflemen

By [Oksana Dudko](#)

Summary

The Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (Ukrains'ki Sičovi stril'tsi, USS) was a Ukrainian battalion within the Austro-Hungarian army. The USS was active in the defense of the Eastern Front in World War I from 1914 to 1917. Following the conclusion of hostilities, the Riflemen formed the basis of the Ukrainian Galician Army (UGA), the military arm of the West Ukrainian National Republic (Zakhidnoukrayins'ka Narodna Respublika, ZUNR), and the regular army of the Ukrainian National Republic (Ukrayins'ka Narodna Respublika, UNR).

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Conditions for the Legion's Establishment

The Ukrainian Sich Riflemen was a Ukrainian battalion within the Austro-Hungarian army. The group was founded in August 1914 at the initiative of the Supreme Ukrainian Council (*Golovna Ukrayins'ka Rada*, GUR), the Ukrainian representative body within Austria during the war.

The Ukrainian sports-gymnastics organizations "*Sich*" and "*Sokil*", which originated just before the turn of the 20th century, formed the basis for the legion. These were joined by the Ukrainian "*Plast*" (est. 1911) Scouts movement and the paramilitary groups "Sich Riflemen I", "Sich Riflemen II", and "Ukrainian Sich League". The latter "Sich" groups were significantly influenced by the [Bosnian Crisis](#) of 1908-09 and the [Balkan War of 1912-13](#). Their chapters began to appear throughout Ukraine in 1909. They drew their organizational model from the Polish paramilitary groups.

Combat on the Eastern Front alongside the Austro-Hungarian Army (1914-1917)

Composed of Galician Ukrainian volunteers, the legion served in the Austrian Landwehr (Gruppe Hofmann). The legion was attached to the 55th Infantry Division and fought in the 129th and 130th Brigades. They also formed part of the 131st Brigade of the 8th Cavalry Division.

The USS fought on the [Eastern Front](#) between 1914 and 1917. Their initial involvement consisted of skirmishes with Russian [Cossack](#) platoons in the Carpathian Mountains towards the end of September 1914. In October 1914, the USS participated in the Austrian counter-offensive, retaking the Carpathian passes and the Galician towns of Boryslav, Drohobych, and Stryi. The appearance of yet another Russian reserve force compelled the Austrian divisions to retreat again into the Carpathians. During the winter of 1914-15 hundreds of USS riflemen in the 130th Brigade provided reconnaissance and security in the Carpathian passes.

In the spring of 1915, the Sich Riflemen were involved in battles all along the Carpathian Front in an attempt to check the Russian offensive. One Austro-Hungarian stronghold was Mount Makivka, which fell under heavy Russian attack in late April and early May 1915. In this battle, forty-two Sich Riflemen were lost, seventy-six injured, and thirty-five captured. In August 1915, the legion was reorganized into the 1st Regiment of Ukrainian Sich Riflemen, an independent combat unit under the command of Colonel [Hryhoriy Kossak \(1882-1939\)](#).

At the beginning of November 1915, the 1st Regiment defended the front near Mount Lysonia (elevation 399 m), attempting to impede the Russian advance into Berezhany. Virtually the entire Sich legion was lost in the fight, casting doubt on its further deployment. The USS sustained major losses in the effort, with more than 1,000 casualties and captured fighters. In the summer of 1916, the Sich Riflemen suffered losses amounting to eighty-one killed, 293 injured and 285 taken captive in battles with the Russian forces. Many officers were also lost, necessitating the reformation of the legion. By 30 September 1916, only nine officers and 444 infantrymen remained. The regimental remnant was sent to the rear, where it reformed itself yet again into a *kurin* (typically comprised of between 400 and 800 men).

In February 1917, the Sich Riflemen again returned to action at the front where, in late June and early July 1917, they faced the Russian - or Kerensky - Offensive in the Berezhany region. The legion suffered significant casualties in the battle.

March on the Dnieper Ukraine

Between March and October 1918, in keeping with the terms of the [Brest-Litovsk Treaty](#), the Sich Riflemen in the Austro-Hungarian and German armies were commissioned to Dnieper (or 'Great') Ukraine to aid in the liberation of the territory from Bolshevik forces. Initially, they were stationed in the regions of Kherson, Odessa, and Zaporizhia and assigned to the command of [Wilhelm, Archduke of Austria \(1895-1948\)](#) or, as he was known in [Ukraine](#), Vasyly Vyshyvanyi. Inasmuch as Wilhelm was a Ukrainophile with advanced plans to establish a new Ukrainian state, he permitted the Riflemen under his command to engage in a pro-Ukrainian political, educational, and cultural program of activism in the territories under their control. He pursued a policy that would not commandeer land or crops from the local rural communities. Under pressure from [Germany](#), which took a dim view of Wilhelm's policies, the Sich Riflemen were redeployed to Bukovyna in October 1918.

The Ukrainian Sich Riflemen after 1918

With the declaration of ZUNR on the territory of Eastern Galicia on 1 November 1918, Sich Rifleman began to join the Ukrainian Galician Army, doing battle during the [Ukrainian-Polish War](#) of 1918-19. Following the advent of the [February Revolution](#) of 1917 in [Russia](#), the UNR's declaration in Kyiv, and the formation of the Ukrainian General Secretariat government, the former Ukrainian Sich Riflemen [prisoners of war](#) were assembled into one of the regular armies of the UNR, active between 1917 and 1919. The objective of the army was to defend the Ukrainian Central Council and the newly formed Ukrainian National Republic from Bolshevik forces.

In April 1918, with the subsequent establishment of the Ukrainian State, the Hetmanate of [Pavlo Skoropadskyi \(1873-1945\)](#), the regiment was reformed yet again. It was not long before the Sich Riflemen Force was at the head of the anti-Hetmanate resistance, taking a leading role in defeating Hetmanate forces in a battle near Motovylivka on 18 November 1918. As part of the Military Directorate of the anti-Hetmanate government, which was spawned from the Central Council, the Sich Riflemen occupied Kiev on the night of 14-15 December 1918.

In the autumn of 1919 a formation of Sich Riflemen fought against General [Anton Denikin \(1872-1947\)](#) Volunteer Army and soon found themselves in dire straits. Suffering insurmountable losses and decimated by typhoid fever, the Sich force was demobilized.

Post-representation

USS activity occupies an important place in the formulation of the Ukrainian national historical narrative in both the contemporary Ukrainian and the Ukrainian Diaspora

historiographic research. The Riflemen Corps are typically portrayed as examples of heroic opposition to Russian [imperialism](#) in the service of Ukrainian independence. A peculiarity of the legion was that it had women serving as officers, a phenomenon wholly uncharacteristic of military structure at that time. Among the most decorated of the Riflemen were Cornet [Olena Stepaniv \(1892-1963\)](#) and Cornet [Sophia Halechko \(1891-1918\)](#).

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External Links

- [Shankovsky, Lev: Sich Riflemen \(Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Sodol, Petro: Ukrainian Sich Riflemen \(Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine\) \(Article\)](#)

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