

The Internment of Russophiles in Austria-Hungary

By [Serhiy Choliy](#)

Summary

The internment of “suspicious persons” became a widespread practice and an important component of home front actions during WWI. This entry discusses the Austro-Hungarian internment of parts of the population in the northeastern Habsburg lands (Galicia, Bukovina, and parts of Northern Hungary). The main targets were mostly Ukrainians (Ruthenes), the Eastern Rite Christian inhabitants of border areas with assumed pro-Russian sentiments in the event of war. The proclamation of a local Ukrainian (Ruthenian) ethnic group as enemy aliens, their execution, internment, and subsequent resettlement in various camps became an important event for the development of Ukrainian national historical discourse in the region.

Table of contents

[1 Introduction: Prewar Situation](#)

[2 The Beginning of WWI and Internment Activities in Galicia](#)

[3 Public Discourse and Responsibility for Internment](#)

[3.1 The Official Version](#)

[3.2 The Russophile Version](#)

[3.3 The Ukrainian Version](#)

[4 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction: Prewar Situation

As in many other cases of the designation of populations as “[enemy aliens](#)” and mass internment, the emergence of the “Russophile question” in Galicia had its roots in international dynamics. Galicia’s importance for [Russian](#) geopolitics and ideology made it one of the first war goals. At the same time, a popular social and political movement within Austria was considered Russia’s “fifth column” even before the beginning of the war.

Habsburg Galicia can be described as a typical province within [Austria-Hungary](#). It was populated by two major (Poles and Ukrainians) and several minor (with Jews and Germans as

the most significant) [ethnic groups](#). Several [confessions](#) were represented within the majority Christian population. Roman Catholicism was the dominant religious confession among [Poles](#) and [Germans](#), while [Ukrainians](#) were divided between Greek Catholicism and Orthodoxy, depending on where they lived. Poles dominated the population in absolute numbers and comprised the absolute majority in the western part of Galicia while Ukrainians had a majority in most locations of eastern Galicia, with the exception of large and medium-sized cities and towns which had a Polish and Jewish majority. In absolute numbers, there was a north-south division line of Polish or Ukrainian domination among the population (Jarosław-Przemyśl-Sanok), with an increasing number of Ukrainians to the east. The Ukrainians populated the neighboring Bukovina and several bordering counties of Hungary (Máramaros, Bereg, Ung, Ugocsa, Zémlen, Sáros, and Szepes). These territories were less developed within Austria-Hungary and political participation among the local population was low while the clergy, who were both Russophiles and political activists, exhibited great influence in local affairs.

Another important feature of political life in Galicia was the *de facto* absolute dominance of Poles, installed shortly after the 1867 Compromise and the creation of the dualistic Austro-Hungarian state. Poles were present in every Austrian government after 1867 and sometimes even took the position of minister-president, as did [Agenor Maria Gołuchowski \(1849-1921\)](#), minister-president from 1895-1906). Poles were given a free hand in Galicia as a payment for their loyalty to the dynasty on the imperial level.

The Ukrainian national movement consisted of several main strata of cultural, social, religious, political, and temperance movements, among others. Local priests were usually the organizers of such movements in their parishes as they were the sole or one of the few literate persons in the community. This is why religious activists traditionally played a key role in the Ukrainian national movements in Habsburg lands. Starting from the first popular organization of Ukrainian priests, the *Rus'ka triytsya* (Rus' trinity, 1833-1837), the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic clergy began the process of Ukrainian national revival. After the active participation in the revolution of 1848-1849 as part of the reactionary forces (pro-Habsburg and anti-Polish), most of the Ukrainians were disappointed by the reconfiguration of the Habsburg state and the following reconciliation of Habsburgs and Poles during the 1860s. This dissatisfaction increased the popularity of Russophile clergy and civil activists who emphasized the religious and genetic relation between the local Ukrainians and Russia. Other popular political movements, the Radicals and Ukrainophiles, overshadowed the Russophiles until the beginning of the 20th century. At the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, the Russophile movement slowly decayed due to generational change and the rising activity of other political groups.

However, even during the first decades of the 20th century, Russophile organizations still had many supporters. In some cases, this was a result of tradition or the relative weakness of other political and social movements in some districts of Galicia. For example, the territory of the Lemko region was under the influence of Russophile organizations which have remained active up to today.¹

According to the most widespread opinion in Austro-Hungarian society of the early 20th century, Russophile political and social activities in the northeastern part of the Empire survived for so long as a result of foreign support from Russia. Russophiles often were accused of being paid spies who were involved in anti-state activities. Data from Russian archives, as well as numerous accounts from contemporaries, only partially confirms this suspicion.

The Russophile movement was complex and at times differed from the [irredentism](#) of other national groups who inhabited the Dual Monarchy. The Russian official description of nation as [Sergey Uvarov's \(1786-1855\) "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality"](#) (Pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost'), in connection with the Russian claim to be the leader of Slavic people, proclaimed Austrian Ruthenes to be part of the official Russian nation. The political or cultural activities of Russophiles within the liberal legal framework of the Habsburg Monarchy added to the image of the Austro-Hungarian Ukrainians as possible [enemy aliens](#); several markers, such as language, religious affiliation, and [nationality](#), were later transferred to the whole population.

Believing Russophile activism to be a threat to state security, the Austro-Hungarian administration cracked down on the conversion movement from Greek Catholicism to Orthodoxy which had become popular in the traditional centers of Russophile activity. There were several legal actions directed at limiting pilgrimages and the activism of priests of Russian origin. The first, known as Ol'ga Grabar trial, was initiated in 1882 in response to the conversion of the village Gnylychky in the Zbarazh district in Galicia. During 1904-1906, there were three legal proceedings in Munkács (Mukachevo) against nineteen defendants responsible for the conversion of the Iza village in Hungary. During 1914 there were three more court hearings with the same charges in Marmaros-Sziget in Hungary, the Bendasyuk process in L'viv, and the Chernivtsi process in Bukovina. The latter was never finished due to the start of the First World War. Most of the defendants received short-term prison sentences or were even set free because of the absence of a *corpus delicti*. The Austrian and the Hungarian administration used informal methods to force individuals to leave the Empire and cease their anti-state activities.

The Beginning of WWI and Internment Activities in Galicia

During the first stage of military action, Austria-Hungary activated war plan B ("Kriegsfall B"), directed towards [Serbia](#). After several days, Russia had entered the war. Then the Austro-Hungarian High Command put war plan R, directed towards Russia, into action. Galicia was subjected to a range of activities connected with mobilization practically from the first days of the war.

Internment was closely connected with military mobilization. Mobilization plans included specific actions for the first fifty-six days after the proclamation of war. In addition to self-evident military actions, such as the mobilization of men, [horses](#), and material assets, there were also secret actions pertaining to civil matters.

Mobilization plans contained specific guidelines concerning internment. As a result of prewar police investigations, the names of suspects, including "enemy aliens" were well-known and enumerated in special lists. Those listed were incarcerated after the proclamation of a state of emergency. For the territory of Galicia this occurred only after the introduction of war plan R, on and after 2 August 1914.

It goes without saying that most of the Russophile activists were immediately limited in their freedom of movement, if not incarcerated from the first days of [warfare](#). A feature that rapidly worsened their fate was the military defeat of Austro-Hungarian troops in Podolia and Galicia (the Battle of Galicia) and the following disorganized retreat of the Austro-Hungarian army and administration. The general belief that the military retreat was a result of [espionage](#) and betrayal by local Ruthenes (Ukrainians) led to soldiers' abuse and mob violence against the local Ukrainian population and representatives of Eastern Christian rites.

During the first days after mobilization, the activities of any Russia-related or Russian-sponsored organizations were banned. This included mostly religious, cultural, and educational centers in large cities. Their property was confiscated while their offices were often plundered by aggressive pro-Habsburg mobs, "full of patriotic feelings." Such manifestations were widespread in large cities during the first months of the war. In fact, all national groups in the province took part in "patriotic activities" and the search for spies, including the production of false denunciations. Both Russo and Ukrainophiles blamed Poles who were overrepresented in government administration for organizing the arrests. Jews were blamed as highly active participants in aggressive mobs involved in street violence. In reality, Ukrainians were also involved in searching for spies, both as representatives of the local administration or as political activists who were trying to neutralize political opponents. This was the main reason why many active Ukrainophile and pro-Habsburg activists were

interned. On the other hand, Russophile activist [Vasilij Vavrik \(1889-1970\)](#) was incarcerated due to the denunciation of Ukrainophile village clerk Ivan Kecko. Personal antipathies as well as financial incentives on offer for denunciations could also be the reason for the internment of innocent people during the turbulent summer and autumn of 1914.

Unlike in the large cities, suspected persons in the countryside were arrested in a chaotic manner. The most vulnerable group during these events were Orthodox or Greek-Catholic priests, who were mistakenly recognized by transient troops as pro-Russian activists because of their garments and Russian-seeming language. In contrast with the local gendarmes who arrested priests, newly arrived troops who did not know the real ethnic, religious, or political background of a specific person arrested citizens for any reason. Many units abused their military power and sentenced to death those people who looked suspicious to them, especially in the most strained conditions of simultaneous military defeat, [casualties](#), and disorganized retreat during the summer-autumn of 1914. Such actions were similar to the Austro-Hungarian [atrocities](#) on the Balkan front during the invasion of Serbia during the same time period.

Most people were incarcerated in the interior of the state, having been transported there by train. At railway stations along the route, they were often subject to beatings, abuse, and insults. The majority were placed in the construction area of a new camp, named Thalerhof (near Graz in Styria), as well as Theresienstadt in Bohemia. During the next years of the war, several other locations were used for the placement of Russophile suspects, but they usually housed a smaller numbers of internees, not more than several tens of them. Thalerhof became a place of internal exile for those who were accused of treason, plagued by mortality, malnutrition, infectious diseases, and limitation of freedom. Like in other camps of this period, mortality was an unforeseen consequence of the concentration of large masses of people in one place and mismanagement during the war, but not the goal. As an example, the same poor conditions could be found in other camps like Gmünd in Lower Austria, constructed for the [refugee](#) population from Galicia that was recognized as state-friendly and had to be secured from war by resettlement.

The next stage of internment actions took place in 1915, after the Russian defeat at the front during the battle of [Gorlice-Tarnów](#) and the following retreat from Galicia. The majority of the Russia-friendly population and those who had no wish to be mobilized for war by the Austrian administration received the opportunity to flee. Those who preferred to stay were later examined by the Austrian gendarmes and courts and thereafter interned or even executed.² Many of these internees were also sent to Thalerhof, but there had been a significant change in the state's practices: people were sentenced to internment as the result of a formal judicial procedure. There still were exemplary moments of execution on the spot or false

denunciations, but these were already exceptions from the rule.

Mass-scale internment in Galicia stopped only in the fourth year of the war: on 2 July 1917, [Charles I|Emperor Karl I \(1887-1922\)](#) disbanded the Thalerhof internment camp and released most of its [prisoners](#). At the same time, those who were still recognized as not state-friendly were kept confined in other locations or were forbidden to return to Galicia.

Public Discourse and Responsibility for Internment

Immediately after the beginning of the war, several historiographic traditions emerged with different interpretations of internment in Galicia. All of them recognized atrocities committed during the war as a negative component and tried to determine those responsible for it.

The Official Version

The official Austro-Hungarian version of these events includes either the negation of the fact of atrocities or attempts to charge the responsible persons, but not the state itself. Such a point of view is still visible in many contemporary pieces of research on this topic. According to this version, all the cases which involved death penalties were approved by court hearings and applied only to those who were guilty of treason. Harsh conditions in the internment camps were, consequently, the result of wartime shortages, while executions on the spot were classified as an abuse of power by low-level executors. This disregards the large-scale systematic abuse that was officially approved by secret mobilization instructions. All activities pertaining to civil internment were legal components of mobilization. That is why the execution of a suspected person on the front was just a minor administrative case, nothing special from the legal point of view. Even those who participated in executions but could not avoid punishment because of the public nature of their offenses were usually shielded by the state. For example, a certain Gendarme Wachtmeister Johann Drescher, who was personally responsible for numerous executions in the Bukovina, was sentenced to prison in 1915, but later released because of his mental illness.³ The official position also cannot ignore evidence in the form of pictures of hanged traitors ("gehängte Verräter"). It seems that many Austrian officers and non-commissioned officers took photos against a background of hanged suspected traitors as a "keepsake" of their military experiences.

The contemporary historiography of the issue, as with the official position in Austria, changed its accents to recognize the tragic events in numerous WWI camps and their commemoration. Thalerhof is recognized as a place of wartime abuse of authority that cost more than two thousand of its captives their lives.

The Russophile Version

A second discourse was created by Russophile activists. Its main component was the victimization of those who survived Habsburg repressions. The supporters of such views actively collected eyewitness testimonies during the interwar period in Poland, [Czechoslovakia](#), and Germany. They edited and published numerous public and historical articles with "The Thalerhof Almanach" as the most prominent collection of documents and memories about internment and Habsburg atrocities. In their publications, Russophiles tried to create an image of inhumane living conditions, cultivated in the camps by the Habsburg administration to physically destroy the supporters of pan-Slavic unity. This was the "Galician Golgotha" – a moment of piety, self-sacrifice, and sorrow. They also claimed the highest numbers of mortality due to executions and internment: up to thirty thousand people, three thousand of whom died in Thalerhof alone. The Russophiles also argued that pro-Habsburg Poles and Ukrainians used internment to eliminate Russophiles as their political opponents.

Unfortunately for the Russophiles, they found themselves in a geopolitical gap after the end of WWI that limited opportunities for the further development of their movement. Their initial orientation towards the Russian Empire had played a malicious trick on them. After the [Russian revolution\(s\)](#) in 1917, they continued to support the White Movement and appeared to be in full isolation after the end of the [Russian Civil War](#). They still played a minor role in [parliamentary](#) and civil activities in interwar Poland and Czechoslovakia and slowly became marginalized.

The Russophiles included the underlying theme of race in their works during the late 1930s and 1940s with the sharp contrast of the Germans and the Slavs being in their "racial competition". This political motto emerged after the end of WWII with Russophiles drawing direct parallels between the Thalerhof camp and Hitler's extermination camps. Even such a political and propaganda move did not help. The active Russophile movement completely vanished until the 1950s because of generational change and post-WWII Soviet repressions.

The Ukrainian Version

Ukrainian authors gave significant attention to the wrongful use of internment and misconduct by the Austro-Hungarian administration with regards to the loyal Ukrainian population which was never involved in any kind of anti-state activities. Indeed, up to one third of all interned persons were the victims of false denunciations. Many of them were imprisoned or even executed due to conditions on the front. What's more, they were often the representatives of statute-permitted political parties or organizations. As an example, the first transport to Thalerhof included 867 priests, most of them randomly chosen in the imperial northeast, with both pro- and counter-Russian sentiments. Another well-known

example is [Vasyl' Makovsky \(1872-1944\)](#) , the Galician lawyer and Ukrainian political activist. At the very beginning of WWI, he was on vacation in Odessa on the Black Sea but decided to return home. As he could not travel by rail, he used the help of Romanian smugglers. Entering Galicia, he was imprisoned and robbed by Austro-Hungarian soldiers and later interned in the Thalerhof camp as a suspicious person. After three and a half months there, he was released. The Makovsky case is reinforced by numerous examples of execution of local peasants who usually demonstrated no interest in politics and were terrorized by transient troops. Gallows in villages and mobilization of men to the front are the key events in practically every memoir of this period and territory. According to these accounts, the Hungarian troops were most active in searching for spies and their execution during the first months of the war.

Ukrainian representatives in the Reichsrat began a [press](#) and pamphlet campaign from the first days of the war. Its main aim was to diminish the importance of Russophiles for the general image of Ukrainians in Austria-Hungary. The most active representative was [Longin Cegelsky \(1875-1950\)](#), the secretary of the Ukrainian parliamentary representation in Vienna and the deputy of both the Galician Landtag and the Austrian Reichsrat. In his writings, he tried to show the Austrian public that the idea that all Ukrainians were pro-Russian was absurd and that most Ukrainians were loyal citizens who were actively engaged in the war and defended their fatherland. He also edited a special brochure for soldiers with similar information called "What should each soldier know about the lands to the East of San river..." ("Was soll jeder Soldat über die Länder..."). This campaign precipitated the release of people interned without cause from Thalerhof and lowered the ratio of spontaneous arrests and executions on the Eastern Front.

The Ukrainian historical narrative also included symbols of sacrifice and victimization, with the addition of the severe fate of refugees and mobilized soldiers during the war. At the same time, Ukrainian authors also added political reasoning to the military motives of anti-Ukrainian internment. In their account, the Ukrainian-Polish and Ukrainophile-Russophile confrontation had a major impact on the scale of internment. They argued that many tried to solve their political problems with the help of false denunciations and accusations, leading to internment for their competitors. Such a model was actively used by Polish and even Russian actors to justify the internment of those who were not Russophiles, but rather Ukrainian activists who were popular among the local population.

Conclusion

Most of the warring nations used internment practices similar to those in northeast Austria-Hungary to deal with emerging threats to state security on the home front. Like in many

similar cases, the northeastern Austro-Hungarian population was divided into loyal and possibly hostile groups, with the latter recognized as dangerous to the state as “enemy aliens” in the case of war. New methods of [resettlement](#) by train and internment camps were tested on a “suspicious” group of the Ukrainian population and pro-Russian activists to secure Austria-Hungary from possible threats. Internment also became an important part of internal political struggle as it removed political opponents from the political arena.

Internment in Galicia also became important for the creation of national historiographic discourses which remain in force even after 100 years in the successor states of Austria-Hungary. Three main political and historical concepts were shaped through internment and actively used by successive generations: the idea of a liberal and multinational state, forced to oppress its inhabitants by wartime conditions; the ideas of Political Rusynism, shaped by the sacrifices of the “Galician Golgotha” during WWI; and the Ukrainian national movement which had another reason to confront the Poles and Russians.

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Notes

1. The Lemko region was the contemporary border area of Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine, a central part of the borderland of Galicia and Hungary within the Habsburg Empire. Here I am talking about political Rusynism, the contemporary political and cultural movement aimed at the recognition of Rusyns as a separate national group and the fourth East-Slavic nation in addition to Russians, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians. It is most active in the Transcarpathia region of contemporary Ukraine and Eastern Slovakia.
↑
2. There were numerous cases of executions, imprisonment, or release during the following years of Austrian rule in Galicia. For example, one of the cases on 19 February 1917 indicates that from twenty-four people who were charged as traitors, two died during the investigation process, sixteen received death sentence while six were recognized as not guilty. In contrast with common situations in 1914, the hanging of these sixteen people was a result of court proceedings, but not an abuse of power. The State Historical Archive of Ukraine in L’viv, Fund 146 Statthalterei Galizien, Opys 6, Sprava 1388, Letter from the Military commandant of Vienna to the Austrian Ministry of internal affairs from 19 February 1917, pp. 407-408. ↑
3. Information about Drescher is taken from the memories of Ukrainian teacher, school director and national activist in Bukovina Ilariy (Ilarion) Karbulytsky (1880-1961): Мої спомини (уришок про жандарський терор в 1914-1918 pp) [My memories (the fragment about the gendarme terror in 1914-1918)]. In: Dobrzahnsky, O. & Staryk, V.:

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External Links

- [Austriacus: Polnische Russophilen und Masseverhaftungen staatstreuer Ukrainer in Galizien, Berlin 1915 \(diasporiana.org.ua\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Choliy, Serhiy: War as a Model of Population Movement in the Modern World. The Galician Perspectives in the First World War \(Academia\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Markov, Dmitrii: Die russische und ukrainische Idee in Oesterreich, Wien 1908 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)

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