

Occupation during and after the War (Austria-Hungary)

By [Wolfram Dornik](#)

While on the Western Front there were only limited territorial movements, the Eastern Front and warfare in southeastern Europe, including parts of Italy, had all the characteristics of mobile warfare. During the course of the war, Austria-Hungary took control of decisive territories with a long-term plan to incorporate them into its sphere of interest. In the short term, the Habsburg Empire wanted to integrate these lands into its war economy and reduce the number of troops needed to maintain public safety and order. However, the occupation administrations were involved in confusing conflicts with the civilian population, had to deal with guerrilla warfare and growing disputes with their allies, in particular Germany.

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Introduction

Although [Austro-Hungarian pre-war planning](#) foresaw decisive expansions in case of war, there were no concrete plans as to what to do with the occupied territories until the fighting had ceased. Thus, in all cases of captured territory, Vienna responded according to the specific diplomatic and military framework: The circumstances in those countries occupied and formally considered friendly states (such as [Albania](#) or [Ukraine](#)) were different from those considered enemy states (such as [Serbia](#) or [Montenegro](#)). For all involved, the aim was to support the war efforts of the Central Powers in general and maintain self-sufficiency more specifically. Or, as [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#) said himself at the end of March 1918 in a handwritten memo to the head of the Austro-Hungarian troops in the Ukraine, [Eduard Böhm-Ermolli \(1856-1941\)](#): The "requisitions have to be carried out ruthlessly, even by force."^[1]

In addition to pursuing its own economic interests, the [Habsburg Empire](#) pursued its strategic military and diplomatic aims by expanding its areas of interest in an effort to secure a bargaining chip for post-war negotiations. The preferred solution to achieve these objects was the cooperation with "old" aristocratic elites, or clan-leaders to uphold a supranational policy. If this did not work fast enough brute force was exercised to fulfil the expectations. In this context the army was the guardian of the

imperial realm. Since 1848, its main opponents had been [nationalist](#) groups from within (and outside) the [empire](#). This was also true for the occupied territories, which were ethnically and nationally mixed.

Poland

Starting in May 1915, the Central Powers experienced their first decisive turning point on the [Eastern Front](#) with the successful [Gorlice-Tarnow offensive](#). Following this win, the Polish territory in Russia (Vistula Land/Privilinsky krai, until 1867: "Congress Poland") was divided up between the "[German Government General of Warsaw](#)" (GG Warsaw) and the "Military Government General of Lublin" (MGG Lublin). Initially, the German and the Austro-Hungarian [occupation zones](#) were completely distinct economically, which led to considerable difficulties. Gradually, the strict separation was relaxed through bilateral agreements and decrees.^[2]

Because of their central position and their desire for a resolution to the Polish question, which had grown increasingly vehement in the second half of the 19th century as a result of the Polish nationalist movement, Berlin and Vienna focused their efforts at first on reorganizing the region. In Austria-Hungary, the leadership formulated an "[Austro-Polish solution](#)". This concept foresaw the reappearance of [Poland](#) as a kingdom under the Habsburg Crown. But, the details were unclear and the idea remained a controversial topic even in Lemberg, Vienna and Budapest.^[3] The military and economic weaknesses of the Danube Monarchy, which had already come to light in the first months of the war, did not provide a stable enough foundation to implement these ideas.^[4] Initially, German policy towards the idea of a Polish state was unclear at the beginning of the war. There were even strategic deliberations on whether to cede it to Austria-Hungary.^[5] It was in 1916 at the latest that Berlin proclaimed an independent Polish state with the "Two Emperors' Declaration" of 5 November. This initiative did make it clear whether the [German Empire](#) had taken charge of the Polish question.^[6]

Over the intervening years, a Polish civil administration was set up alongside that of the occupying forces. In December 1916, the Provisional State Council was founded, and from 12 September 1917, the Regency Council, consisting of three men, formed the provisional Head of State with the new constitution. Civil authorities remained under the guardianship of the occupiers, as well as being under permanent pressure from the Polish independence movement. From the summer of 1915 onwards, the most important aim of the occupying administration was the economic exploitation of the territory. The country's resources were to be put at the disposal of the war efforts, with coal, ore, agricultural produce and wood as the main points of interest.^[7] Despite all steps towards more Polish self-administration, the results of the economic exploitation of the Austro-Hungarian occupation zone in Lublin were rather modest and definitely disappointing from the perspective of Vienna. Throughout the years open resistance and military violence between occupiers and occupied were the order of the day. But we do not see further escalations or collective punishments.^[8]

Serbia

It was the declared aim of the Austro-Hungarian planning in the event of war to overrun the Kingdom of Serbia as quickly as possible and [integrate the territory](#) into its own realm. However, for almost a year all attempts by the Habsburg forces to conquer Serbia remained unsuccessful. It was not until [Bulgaria](#) entered the war that it was possible to carry out a successful military offensive that ultimately led to defeating the small kingdom by December of 1915. Bulgaria was given the eastern and southern territories. The Imperial and Royal military governorate Serbia (*Militär General Gouvernement Serbien*, MGG/S), from Šabac and Belgrade in the north to Pristina in the south (today Kosovo), comprised around 1.5 million people and was based in Belgrade.^[9]

The military commander of MGG/S was [Johann Ulrich Salis-Seewis](#) (1862-1940), who was replaced in July 1916 by [Adolf von Rhemen zu Barenfeld](#) (1855-1932). The military administration attempted to keep the peace by enforcing the military penal law and [martial law](#). Serbia's civilian administration had been completely disbanded. Cooperation with Serbian representatives only took place at the local level. Meanwhile, the Serbian government spent its time in exile together with what was left of its army.^[10]

The main job of the occupying troops was to [gather food](#) and other supplies. However, Serbia was in ruins: One and a half years of fierce battles, requisitions and the almost complete mobilization of the population had left the country exsanguinated. The occupation authorities found it necessary to invest and modernize. It was only from the fall of 1916 that the situation began to

improve.^[11] In the second half of 1916, it was possible to come up with 4,600 wagons of grain to make bread, in 1917 it was a further 9,000 wagons and in the following year, 1918, the number had increased by October to 11,500 wagons. By the middle of 1917, the export of cattle totaled 170,000, that of lamb 190,000 and that of pigs 50,000.^[12]

In order to provide the necessary labour for construction work or farm work, the authorities reverted to a “mixed system”: [prisoners of war and internees](#) were drawn together to form work groups. In addition, there were civilian “volunteers” who were called up and forced to work under old Serbian law. It was no more than a system of [forced labour](#), with which the military administration had 14,500 to 20,000 workers at their disposal.^[13] At the same time, there was a depletion of the population due to the deportation of “suspicious” individuals: tens of thousands of citizens of the Kingdom of Serbia were taken to Austro-Hungarian internment camps, i.e. Aschach, Braunau, Jindřichovice/Heinrichsgrün or Nezsider/Neusiedl.^[14]

While in the first months of 1916 starvation was rampant in Serbia, the army leadership remained unyielding: Serbia had to be punished for its long resistance. In the end, they gave in. They shipped their own food items and allowed international shipments of relief. However, the mutual distrust remained. The delicate situation received support from the emerging partisan movement not least because of the “ethnic cleansing” carried out by Bulgarian troops.^[15] At the beginning of 1917, the Bulgarians began in their occupation zone to conscript men, which was the starting point for an uprising by the so-called *Komitadjis*. Quickly the whole occupation territory was under attack. Austria-Hungary responded with brute force: their troops burned entire villages to the ground, 600 persons were shot dead either under martial law or as hostages. Around 20,000 people died during the uprising, mainly Serbian civilians.^[16] The rebellion quickly collapsed and the insurrection caught up in a civil war against the “collaborators”. Following this, the Habsburg troops changed their procedure: The population at large was no longer regarded as an outright threat, but the *Komitadjis* were all the more so.^[17] Even though they reacted with brutal force, the military administration did not totally escalate the situation: Serbia should eventually become part of Habsburg’s realm of influence so it should not be devastated.^[18]

Montenegro

After the fall of Serbia at the end of 1915, the troops of the Central Powers marched farther to the west. Montenegro was quickly overtaken. By 11 January 1916, the strategically important [Mount Lovćen](#) was captured, two days later the capital Cetinje was seized. What was left of the government in Montenegro began the negotiations with the enemy. The Royal and Imperial troops established a military governorate based in Cetinje at the beginning of March 1916. The first commander was [Rudolf Braun \(1861-1920\)](#), who was succeeded one month later by [Viktor Weber von Webenau \(1861-1932\)](#). He, in turn, was followed in July 1917 by the former Prime Minister [Heinrich Clam-Martinic \(1863-1932\)](#).^[19]

Montenegro had no surplus production of food or any special natural resources to fall back on even in times of peace. The military authorities had to bring in supplies of food from different parts of the monarchy. The people were also instructed to plant gardens to grow vegetables. The only things the country had to offer were sheep’s wool, hides and tobacco.^[20] The worsening food situation also gave rise to widespread banditry that had to be curbed by deploying around 3,000 men from the *Feldgendarmarie* and a further 40,000 to 45,000 regular troops, a number that was far above that in the considerably larger military governorate in Serbia, where roughly 21,000 troops were stationed.^[21]

The only strategic function of the Austro-Hungarian presence in Montenegro was to protect the port of Kotor/Cattaro, which could come under threat from the [artillery](#) positions on Mount Lovćen, and use it as a naval base and secure supplies for Albania. With Kotor under their control, the Royal and Imperial navy made sure that the Entente forces did not succeed in expanding the Otranto Barrage. In addition, Vienna wanted to be in a position after the war to keep Serbia and [Italy](#) away from the east coast of the Adriatic Sea.^[22] With this, Vienna and Budapest wanted to secure their manifold post-war aims in the Balkans, the main reason to stand by the side of its German ally even after summer 1917 when the Habsburg Empire stabilized all three of its fronts ([Italy](#), the [Balkans](#) and Russia).^[23]

Albania

Austria-Hungary viewed Albania as a strategically important country to rule over the west Balkans.^[24] It was the chief of staff \$Occupation during and after the War (Austria-Hungary) - 1914-1918-Online

Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf (1852-1925) who saw in Albania the “key country” that Austria-Hungary had to have under its “control.”^[25] But, the state that had been proclaimed in November 1912 in the course of the [first Balkan War](#) and given international recognition, however, turned out to be a “failed state.” The German count Wilhelm zu Wied (1876-1945), who was selected to rule over the newly independent country, did not succeed in establishing a workable system. Wied had resigned from his post on 3 September 1914. Essad Pasha Toptani (1863-1920) did become president of the state council, but he was unable to extend his sphere of influence beyond Durrës/Durazzo. Italian, Serb and Montenegrin troops temporarily controlled Albanian territory. Thus, in January 1916 it was easy for the Austro-Hungarian troops to seize northern and central Albania. The Entente troops, comprised mainly of Italian and French forces, set up base in the south. Gradually, there developed an “Albanian Front”, running north of the port of Vlorë to the isthmus between Lake Ohrid and Lake Prespa.^[26]

Officially, Albania was not occupied enemy territory, since no military governorate was established there. The administration of the country, strongly based on local tribal structures, remained intact. In the formal sense, the Albanian territory was the base of the *XIX. Korpskommando*. The commander was Ignaz Trollmann von Lovćenberg (1860-1919). He was succeeded in October 1917 by Ludwig Koennen-Horak von Höhenkampf (1861-1938), and Karl von Pflanzer-Baltin (1855-1925) took over the post in July 1918.

In Vienna, meanwhile, until shortly before the end of the war the idea was not to let Albania come under control of Count Wied, but instead to possibly transform the country into a protectorate of the Habsburg Monarchy.^[27] Efforts were made “to create facts on the ground.” These included building schools, combatting epidemics, conducting a census as well as carrying out geological surveys to discover mineral resources.^[28] As far as agricultural development was concerned, the occupying troops considered it to be in an absolutely catastrophic state. Just as in Montenegro, it was necessary to import food to Albania. The troops stationed in the country could only come up with about half the meat and wood they needed. But, the procurement of coal, asphalt, chrome ore, copper, iron ores, gold sand, sulphur and salt was “encouraged.”^[29]

The strategic importance that Austria-Hungary attached to Albania did not change during the course of the war. By supporting the young nationalist movement, they aimed over time to “groom” an ally.^[30] With the help of the Albanian voluntary units already assembled during the war, roughly 100,000 troops under the command of the Monarchy were able to ward off the attacks by the Entente in the spring and summer of 1918.

Italy

The Austro-Hungarian troops, together with German units, were able to finally make a breakthrough during the [twelfth Isonzo/Soča offensive](#) that began on 24 October 1917. The Italian troops suffered such a blow that they were not only forced back to the Tagliamento, but even as far back as the Piave River. Italy thus stood on the verge of collapse. For the period of a year, the provinces of Udine and Belluno as well as parts of Venetia, Treviso and Vicenza came under Austro-Hungarian rule. The remaining civilian administration and the administration responsible for economic matters fled with the retreating Entente troops. Plans to establish a military governorate were soon scrapped and the occupied territory was administered by the two army commanders, Svetozar Borojević von Bojna (1856-1920) and Conrad von Hötzendorf. Thus, the administration was subject to the base regulations.^[31] What is more, the German alliance partner had to be consulted when measures were taken and dividing up the spoils was concerned. When certain goods, food and animal fodder, textiles, metals and machines were involved, then the two sides signed an agreement that took the needs of the alliance partners into account. Those goods not specified in the agreement were split 50/50.^[32]

In contrast to the hopes and the propaganda of coming across rich granaries, what they actually encountered was a territory which, after functioning as the Italian military base for almost two and a half years, was on its knees. Even when the military authorities tried to “motivate”^[33] the civilian population, for example, in Venetia to work in the fields using a mixture of “statements”, “invitations” and “threats”, the results were rather meager. The dismantled businesses as well as the [raw materials](#), goods, [food](#) and animal fodder obtained from the people or other sources failed to procure more than half of the requisitioned amounts of booty. Indeed, between January and September 1918, only 3,764 wagons could be transported from the occupied territory in Italy to Austria-Hungary and a further 1,763 wagons to the German Reich.^[34]

In Austria-Hungary, the people had long entertained hopes of claiming for the monarchy at least smaller parts of the territory occupied from October 1917 after the war.^[35] Even government reports confessed in October 1918: “[...] we have to accept, our occupation will be recalled with horror and feelings of hate and hostility will stay; [...]”.^[36] Thousands of civilians of the occupied territory had been detained and suffered under catastrophic conditions.^[37] Who was to blame for this? Contemporary political debates pointed to the policy of distrust and hostility towards the Italian-speaking people as the basis for mismanagement in the camps. It seems the apparent “neutrality” of military administration had been overruled by widespread hate against the “Italian traitors”.^[38]

Romania

The Kingdom of Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary on 27 August 1916. Encouraged by the initially successful Russian [Brusilov offensive](#), the government in Bucharest hoped that by entering the war on the side of the Allied powers they would move one step closer to annexing Transylvania. However, a massive counter-attack by the Central Powers thwarted their success: German, Austrian and Hungarian forces under [Erich von Falkenhayn \(1861-1922\)](#) drove the Romanian units out of Transylvania and quickly advanced to Wallachia. German-Bulgarian troops under [August von Mackensen \(1849-1945\)](#) crossed the Danube from the Bulgarian side and began their march to Bucharest. By January 1917, the military campaign was over. The government and the royal court retreated to Moldavia and began talks with the Central Powers from their base in the Romanian capital-in-exile Iași.^[39]

In the following process of touch-and-go, the occupation administration Austria-Hungary remained the “junior partner”. The territory was divided into three parts: Wallachia, Bucharest and Dobruj. All three governorates were administered with the assistance of the alliance partners. However, the German troops were always in the majority when it came to decision-making.^[40] The Habsburg Monarchy had a somewhat better standing in the business administration than it did in the military field. The economic staff was on equal terms with the Germans and was headed by [Alexander Kontz de Körpényes \(1870-1942\)](#) and a German chief-of-staff. The body was responsible for all matters pertaining to the economy.^[41]

The main challenges beyond using measures to keep the peace and maintain security were of an economic nature. First and foremost, the occupation troops obtained the supplies they needed by tapping the resources available. In cases where they were dealing with acquired supplies not in the possession of the Romanian state, they then had to make purchases that were officially commissioned. All procurement applications had to be approved by the German military administration. In addition to providing troops, the occupation territory also had to supply raw materials (wood, coal, oil) and food for the core countries.^[42] The results were truly remarkable. In the first half of 1917 alone, almost 1 million tons of food and animal fodder were exported. From the fall of 1917, production figures began to fall, although in the second half of the year they still reached 670,000 tons. However, the situation continued to worsen in 1918. Nevertheless, it was still possible to produce 100,000 tons on a monthly basis. All told, 54,000 wagons containing grain, legumes and maize were shipped to Austria-Hungary, 40,000 to the German Reich and several thousand to Bulgaria and [Turkey](#).^[43]

The massive exports as well as the actual structure of the occupation administration resulted in supplies within Romania being more than unequally distributed. This was especially the case in the cities, the mountainous regions and in Dobruj, which had been severely affected by the fighting. Added to that were the catastrophic harvests in the years 1917 and 1918, which made food rationing necessary, although it must be said that the rations for Bucharest in some fields were almost double those in effect at the time in Berlin or Vienna.^[44]

Ukraine

Since the outbreak of the war the Central Powers took two independence movements inside [Russia](#) quite seriously: in Ukraine and Crimea. These were immediately instrumentalized for their own ends. Throughout 1917, the Central Rada in Kiev, based on the Petrograd Soviet model, developed into a broad, socio-political forum of the autonomy-seeking area within the majority-Ukrainian region of the former Russian Empire. After the break with the Bolsheviks, the Rada sent a delegation to the negotiations at [Brest-Litovsk](#). At the same time, representatives were also sent to Iași, to negotiate with Entente diplomats. After Russian and Ukrainian Red Guards marched into Ukraine from the northwest and the Rada were driven from Kiev, their

delegates hastily signed a peace treaty with the Central Powers on 9 February 1918, in Brest-Litovsk, in the hope of receiving immediate military assistance. The Bolsheviks had hoped to shift the blame for the continuation of the war onto Germany, and thereby motivate the workers in the Central Powers countries to start a [revolution](#). Even after the German troops began to advance on a wide front on 16 February 1918, no revolution occurred in Germany. In contrast, the German *Reichstag* – apart from the independent socialists – had accepted the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Ukraine by a large majority. Many hoped for an improvement in the [food situation](#). On 28 February, Austro-Hungarian troops also advanced into Ukraine.^[45]

The invasion of Ukraine progressed rapidly. In the western governorate, troops advanced along the railway lines from one city to another, and were quickly able to reach Kiev and Odessa. Even though the Rada had been able to retreat to their center of power, it still did not put a stop to the German and Austro-Hungarian troops. They marched on and reached Rostov-on-Don and Sevastopol in Crimea. Resistance grew in eastern Ukraine's industrial hubs. The Central Powers troops were obliged to show no mercy to the combatants, who were officially regarded as guerrilla fighters. While Austro-Hungarian troops got involved in a desperate small-scale war against peasants, criminals and local warlords, German troops experience for the first time ideological warfare against the Red guards.^[46]

Even though Ukraine was officially a sovereign state, which had sought assistance from the individual countries of the Central Powers before the invasion of foreign troops, the presence of the troops developed step-by-step into a *de facto* occupation of a puppet state. In a *coup d'état* directed by the German occupying authorities at the end of April, the Rada was deposed and the former tsarist General [Pavlo Skoropads'kyj \(1873-1945\)](#) was declared Hetman. With this, a military-political leading position was reinvented that had based its legitimacy on historical origins in the 17th century [Cossack](#) Hetmanate led by mystified (and politically instrumentalized) figures as [Bohdan Khmelnytsky \(1595-1657\)](#). In the spirit of stabilizing the state, they also urged him to reassure the population through a moderate policy of Ukrainization. But, Skoropads'kyj was Berlin's man. The coup revealed Vienna's bystander role in Kiev. The Austro-Hungarian army was isolated in Odessa, where they tried to do their best to support Austro-Ukrainian sympathies and strengthen economic ties with their experiences from Lemberg and Chernivtsi. The attempts of [Wilhelm von Habsburg, Archduke of Austria \(1895-1948\)](#) to strengthen Ukrainian nationalism were observed and finally stopped by Berlin and Kiev.

At the same time, the occupying powers limited the Hetmanate's freedom to act. He was to put an end to the chaos within the country and become a reliable partner, but he would primarily be responsible for the food shipments that were promised in Brest-Litovsk. In the end, the 1 million tons of grain, which were agreed to be shipped to the Central Powers, never arrived in Vienna or Berlin. 650,000 tons of food supplies were raised, but this included cattle, eggs, sugar and other products. On the other side, the Central Powers had to send coal and industrial goods to get production going.^[47]

The German troops did not even support the Hetman's efforts to expand into Crimea. Germany had assimilated Taurida and the strategically important Crimea into their occupation zone without attempting to set out clear regulations for territorial relations. It was only in late summer, when the occupying troops had already thinned out significantly, that they gave the Hetman increasingly more freedom. They only continued to control the cities and were present along the railway lines and main thoroughfares. Skoropads'kyj's powerbase within the country was too small. For this reason, he was forced to retreat from Ukraine with the German troops in November/December 1918.^[48]

Conclusion

With the breakdown of the Salonica Front (mid-September 1918), and the last desperate defensive manoeuvres in the [Battle of Vittorio Veneto](#) (starting on 24 October), the end of the monarchy had arrived. This made the situation in the occupation zones very confusing: Individual soldiers or whole regiments changed their national affiliation and their uniforms at the same time within a matter of hours. What was once a single regiment more or less fell apart within one day along ethnic lines. In so doing, many of the soldiers turned from being occupiers into representatives of the new state order. Others directly went into new wars, which broke out on the borders between the nations in emergence.^[49] Those regiments and officers who stood loyal to the crown, tried to uphold discipline and some kind of stronghold for them. So some small units stayed on in their occupied territory even until the beginning of 1919 to handle the return of the administrative personnel, the last exports, and the returning prisoners of war.^[50]

The occupied territories, which had come under Austro-Hungarian control between 1914 and 1918, had very different settings and contexts. Serbia, Montenegro and Albania were to remain permanent security problems, and partly *de facto* war zones. Italian lands were too much devastated after more than two years of warfare and the horrors of the Isonzo battles. Romania, Poland and Ukraine fulfilled at least in part the economic expectations that the military and political authorities to uphold war efforts; only Romanian exports had a decisive impact on the supply situation of the starving Austrian cities.

Equally, in military and strategic aspects, the pacified fronts and occupied territories did not fulfill the euphoric expectations: In most of the territories, the forces were too busy fighting social, economic or simply anti-Habsburg violence, or requisitioning food. This made it difficult to free up troops to serve in more strategic important war theatres such as the [Western Front](#) and the Italian Front. Missing civilian experts and a strong political or economic part in the occupation administration, the counterinsurgency only was measured under military auspices. Similar to social conflicts within the empire even before 1914 the army saw itself as last “warden of the realm”, who suppressed even in times of peace civilian disobedience by military [weapons](#) (“*Assistenzeinsätze*”). In this way of thinking, it was simply logic to react on any situation of resistance or violence with even more violence. In particular when we take into account, that the occupation administration was build up within heavy devastated and traumatized communities by military personnel who themselves were brutalized by industrial [warfare](#). Discussion on the violence towards civilians began in Viennese parliament (“*Reichsrat*”), after Emperor Charles I. set hesitant steps towards liberalization and democratization since 1917. The implosion of the Habsburg Empire in autumn 1918 and the violence that followed in the interwar years as well as the Second World War halted social debates about and the legal conditioning of Austro-Hungarian occupation policies.

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