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Prisoners of War (Austria-Hungary)

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The following article offers an overview of the central fields of research concerning Prisoners of war (POWs) in the Habsburg Empire during World War One, including living conditions in war camps, propaganda campaigns, forced labour, repatriation and the memory of captivity.

Table of Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Situation of POWs in Austria-Hungary
- 3 Living Conditions of POWs in the Camps
- 4 Forced Labour
- 5 Propaganda in the POW Camps
- 6 End of the War and Repatriation
- 7 Memory and Captivity
- 8 Conclusion

Notes

Selected Bibliography

Citation

Introduction

Prisoners of war (POWs) in Austria-Hungary remained beyond the focus of rigorous historical research until the 1990s when the subject began to attract the interest of a younger generation of historians. Although progress has been made in examining the fate of POWs in Austria-Hungary from 1914 to 1918, the relevant historiography is still dominated by studies of single POW camps. These studies are generally restricted in scope and emphasize the importance of POW camps on a

local level.^[1] Frequently, the situation in Austria is emphasized over that in the dual monarchy as a whole. Some studies, such as those referring to racial-anthropological examinations given to POWs who were captured by the Austro-Hungarian army, strive to illustrate the impact of captivity on postwar developments and reach beyond positive descriptions of POW living conditions.^[2] Nevertheless, studies that are broader in scope and deeper in nuance are outnumbered.^[3]

Current research, however, seeks an expanded perspective and focuses on forced labour, the correlation between the treatment of prisoners and war propaganda, humanitarian relief programs for POWs and the military-civilian interdependency during a "total war."^[4]

Massive numbers of POWs were interned in Austria-Hungary during the war. Yet, the total number of prisoners in Austro-Hungarian captivity is highly contested. Austro-Hungarian military authorities alleged that they discharged 1.3 million registered POWs in January 1918. Later information estimates that between 1.86 and 2.3 million POWs had been captured by the Habsburg army during World War One.^[5]

The discrepancy in numbers can be explained by administrative problems regarding the registration of POWs and efforts on the part of the military authorities to manipulate the number of POWs who died between 1914 and 1918. Official numbers concerning the mortality rate of POWs are therefore equally questionable. We do know that the majority of POWs came from Russia. According to available numbers, 1,269,000 soldiers from the Romanov Empire were in Austro-Hungarian captivity, followed by 369,000 Italians, 154,700 Serbs and 52,800 Rumanians. The number of POWs from Montenegro, Albania, France, Great Britain or the USA remained comparatively small. [7]

Situation of POWs in Austria-Hungary

In the late summer of 1914, the 10th Department of the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of War which was concerned with POW affairs expressed its surprise at the volume of captured enemy soldiers. By the end of 1914 about 200,000 POWs were held within the Habsburg Empire. [8] The responsible authorities were not prepared for such an influx of POWs and existing accommodations were quickly operating at capacity. In September 1914, the Austro-Hungarian government began to set up about fifty huge camps including stations for captured officers. Military authorities unfortunately underestimated the importance of sanitation and hygiene in their construction efforts. In the winter of 1914/1915, the authorities had to cope with an outbreak of typhoid fever in several POW camps (e.g. at Mauthausen or Marchtrenk in Upper Austria). Thousands of interned soldiers died. However, after taking measures to avoid the outbreak of further epidemics. POW camps began to empty.

In 1915, POWs were confronted with the introduction of a new dimension of captivity: forced labour. As a result, the majority of prisoners left the POW camps. They were used for several work projects in the hinterland. In addition, thousands of prisoners had to work behind the Austro-Hungarian front

lines and even in the combat zones. Consequently, various opportunities to violate the terms of the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 concerning the treatment of POWs arose. However, the assignment of prisoners to different kinds of labour need not be automatically linked with violence and arbitrariness. Sometimes the close contact between POWs and the civil population that above all was a result of the usage of prisoners at small farms contributed to an improvement of their living conditions: the food-supply was better than in the camps and the accommodation more comfortable. As a matter of course, the military authorities were afraid of fraternization between prisoners and people that would have encouraged a rebellious atmosphere among those parts of the civil population that had got more and more war-weary or had shown sympathy towards nationalist ideas. Especially in Bohemia Slavic inhabitants of the Habsburg Empire began to fraternize with Russian soldiers.

All POWs were affected by the supply shortages which began in 1916. Thousands of POWs died from disease, exhaustion and undernourishment. Only a few hundred prisoners were chosen in 1917 for a "Hospitalisierung," an internment due to medical sanctions in Switzerland or Denmark and Norway. Prisoners unable to work and captured officers remained in the camps. Although living conditions were much better in the camps, those who stayed behind had to cope with problems of a different kind: the monotony of internment, hopelessness and depression (the so-called "barbed wire disease").

In comparison with the fate of captive rank-and-file soldiers, enemy officers did experience a significantly "better" internment in the Habsburg Empire due to privileged treatment granted to officers as specified by the Hague Conventions. They were accommodated in special stations for captured officers ("Stationen für kriegsgefangene Offiziere") from 1914 until the summer of 1915. Later, they were transferred to separate areas of already existing POW camps. Their privileged treatment continued there. Therefore, it is necessary to keep in mind that two unequal forms of captivity existed within Austro-Hungarian POW camps.^[10]

Living Conditions of POWs in the Camps

In the late fall of 1914, the erection of POW camps designed to quarter up to only 40,000 soldiers. POWs were crammed together in camps that were much too small. In the spring of 1915, when the health epidemics had subsided, the camps were partly reconstructed, enlarged and equipped with sanitary facilities. Thus, for a while the living conditions of the prisoners improved. From 1915, a minority of POWs remained in the camps in order to work in internal production facilities. These prisoners followed a predetermined daily routine which included some hours of leisure so that they had time for activities such as religious observance. At this time, camp administrators began to see the benefit of social activities for those POWs who suffered from the psychological effects of internment. From 1915, a kind of "camp culture" appeared, comprised of amateur theatres, bands, teaching units, libraries, sports and skilled manual work in order to prevent depression, escape attempts, agitation and revolt.

Austro-Hungarian military authorities, neutral or hostile countries, and institutions and associations approved these programs. The International Committee of the Red Cross, national Red Cross societies, the Vatican, the Young Men's Christian Association and neutral countries acting as "protecting powers" also tried to improve prisoners' living conditions in and outside the camps with humanitarian relief programs. These began in 1915 and included visitations to camps and POW places of work as well. Yet, captured officers were the ones who benefited most from these programs because they remained in the camps while the rank-and-file soldiers had to work wherever they where needed. Many relief actions did not reach the prisoners who were scattered across the Empire.

Although Austro-Hungarian authorities were willing to improve some aspects of camp life, their policy concerning POW affairs was generally dominated by the idea of reciprocity: When Austro-Hungarian soldiers were considered as being treated poorly by their enemies Austria-Hungary announced to act just the same way in regard of the treatment of POWs captured by the Habsburg army. Moreover, captivity was instrumentalised by propaganda in order to expose the "immorality" of the enemy: Austria-Hungary contrasted its internment policies with those of its enemies in order to show that the latter treated POWs worse. In post-war Austria, where the testimony of former officers of the Austro-Hungarian army dominated the historiography of World War One, the experience of POWs in the Habsburg Empire was described as a shining example of humanity in contrast with the "horror" of Russian captivity.^[11] There was no discussion of the negative aspects of captivity in Austria-Hungary, the deplorable situation in the camps at the beginning of war or the disastrous effects of the food shortage that lasted from 1916/17 until the end of war.

Forced Labour

Mobilization for war quickly created a shortage of civil manpower in Austria-Hungary. The labour shortage continued until 1918 and increasing number of disabled, escaped, hospital-bound and repatriated POWs threatened Austria-Hungary's wartime economy with collapse. Thus, the use of forced POW labour was considered an economic necessity and had been discussed as early as 1914. In the spring of 1915, when the first prisoners were sent to several work sites, the authorities responsible had to cope with new administrative challenges in order to retain control of the POWs who were now being sent all over the monarchy.

In July 1915, more than 120,000 prisoners worked as harvesters. In the second half of 1915, only thirty to forty percent of all available POWs remained in the camps. At the end of 1916, 1.1 million POWs were used as forced labourers. POWs were arranged in "mobile and steady POW work-units" and military and civilian authorities decided on their assignments. POWs were either sent to work in agriculture, at private and public works, in industry, and behind or on the front lines. Country of origin and associated stereotypes influenced the type of labour to which POWs were assigned. As a result Russian prisoners of war, for instance, usually were sent to work in agriculture because they were considered as typical peasants unqualified for work in industry.

Because of organizational problems in order to watch over POWs at work the military authorities originally decided to send only contingents of 200 POWs and more to employers. Economic demands however required smaller work-units – thirty men or less. Employers themselves were responsible for safeguarding the small group or single prisoner assigned to them. Prisoners who were sent to support farmers or small businesses could come into close contact with Austro-Hungarian civilians. Of course, sexual relations and love affairs between POWs and native women were forbidden and disapproved of not only by the military authorities, but also by civilians and the Catholic Church. All were afraid of the deconstruction of the concept of the enemy and a destabilization of the home front.^[12]

Similar to other belligerent states, Austria-Hungary directly violated the Hague Conventions' articles and international humanitarian agreements which had been necessitated by previous use of forced labour. Though the assignment of POWs for military purposes was forbidden by international law, the Habsburg state used POWs in armament factories (such as at the manufacturer Škoda in Pilsen/Bohemia), behind the front lines and in combat zones. Grouped in "mobile work-units" POWs worked as mine sweepers, carriers, in salvage-companies and did earthwork. The military authorities built up special POW stations in the Field Army (*"Armee im Felde"*) from 1917 on in order to guarantee the assignment of POWs for military purposes behind or on the front lines. Exhausted POWs who had to work in the combat zones were replaced by "healthy" ones from the rear. This kind of "exchange" however caused additional administrative problems and worsened the already existing deficits in the regulation of POWs. [13] Poor treatment, heavy work and malnutrition incited escape attempts in droves. Many died from exhaustion or dire living conditions.

Propaganda in the POW Camps

Austro-Hungarian authorities began exploring opportunities for the circulation of nationalistic propaganda among POWs shortly after the outbreak of war. As with other administrative questions, they largely adhered to the policies of their German ally. In contrast to Germany, however, the multiethnic Danube Monarchy was hesitant to exploit the differences between POWs from the multiethnic Russian Empire. On the other hand, the Austro-Hungarian military authorities were surely aware of the fact that Russia did deploy specific propaganda activities especially among the Slavic POWs from the Habsburg Empire in order to take advantage of supposed ethnic tensions.

In January 1915, the Austro-Hungarian Ministry for Foreign Affairs was on hand of an exposé including the anticipated advantages that might result from a nationalistic propaganda offensive among Russian POWs. They should have been influenced in a way that matched with the aims of the Danube Monarchy. The definition of goals remained vague. Nevertheless, the propaganda was intended to evoke and strengthen the "national consciousness" of the POWs and to appeal to their "autonomous cultures." The end goal was to incite independence movements among the "nations" to which the POWs belonged to break away from Russia. The propaganda campaign planned to address Ukrainian and Polish soldiers as well as those from the Baltic regions, Cossacks,

Georgians, Tartars and Kalmyks.

POWs from Ukraine were especially affected by Austro-Hungarian propaganda measures. In 1914 the Austro-Hungarian government endeavoured to cooperate with several Ukrainian exile organizations. The political aims of these organizations clashed with Austro-Hungarian policy concerning the Poles and the collaboration did not go smoothly. Nevertheless, up to 10,000 Ukrainians were transferred to the propaganda camp Freistadt in Upper Austria where they were taught Ukrainian literature, history and geography. Austro-Hungarian authorities even organized lectures by prominent Ukrainians to promote "national awareness." Due to the labour shortage throughout the Empire, priority was ultimately given to economic demands and Ukrainian prisoners were recruited to work in industry and agriculture. From 1916, a few hundred POWs remained at Freistadt and propaganda measures reached only a minority. Furthermore, the establishment of a military unit consisting of Ukrainian POWs proved only a limited success. 1,600 soldiers deserted within a few months though the Ukrainian "(Kosaken-)Schützen-Division" still fought in the Ukraine in 1918.

Due to its wavering position concerning Polish nationalist aspirations, the Danube Monarchy faced even more obstacles in developing propaganda measures for Russian POWs of Polish descent. Polish soldiers were either brought to the Bohemian POW camp Plan or the Hungarian camp Csót near Pápa where they were recruited for Polish legions in the Austro-Hungarian army. Yet, the responsible authorities were distrustful of the unexpected willingness of Polish soldiers to join these units and believed that the Polish POWs were interested in improving their living conditions as opposed to fighting against the Tsar. At the end of February 1917, the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of War refused all further requests by Polish POWs to join these legions. Polish POWs were ultimately used as forced labourers and propaganda initiatives for Polish POWs ceased in March 1917.

Muslim POWs comprised a special target group that was to be mobilised to fight a "holy war" and enlist the Ottoman Empire in the fight against Russia. Nearly 10,000 Muslim POWs were therefore concentrated in the POW camp Eger in Bohemia where they were treated in a privileged way. The costly propaganda had a relatively small impact. At length, only a few hundred Muslim POWs defected to the Ottoman army.

Austria-Hungary's propaganda program for soldiers of the Russian Empire failed for many reasons. First and foremost, there was no precise vision for the measures to be taken. The outlook presented in propaganda tracts was easily refuted and often made dubious comparisons between Austria-Hungary and enemy powers. Take the POW newspaper "Nedelja" (The Week), for example. The newspaper which had been published in Russian by the Ministry of War since the summer of 1916 emphasized the differences between the "highly developed" Habsburg Monarchy and the "underdeveloped" Russian Empire. Considering the worsening situation in Austria-Hungary where resources were stretched thin and whose own civilian population was starving and the often miserable living conditions of POWs, propaganda along these contradictory lines was doomed to fail [14]

End of the War and Repatriation

Soviet Russia's withdrawal from the war and the peace agreement of Brest-Litovsk raised hopes among Russian POWs in Austria-Hungary for a quick repatriation. Yet, diplomatic friction between Vienna and Moscow regarding the permission of relief and repatriation missions to work within the Habsburg Empire and Soviet Russia prevented an immediate return home. Moreover, the various Austro-Hungarian authorities involved in POW affairs did not reach a consensus concerning the repatriation of Russian POWs.

While the Ministry of War was interested in keeping POWs as forced labourers, the High Command pressed to deliver prisoners home as soon as possible, though not without keeping precarious supply shortage in mind. Invalid and undernourished POWs who were unable to work were classified as "useless mouths to feed" and were to be repatriated first. Great contingents of "healthy" Russian POWs continued to be used by the Field Army during the offensive against Italy in June 1918.

Political interests in the Former Romanov Empire also influenced the repatriation of Russian prisoners. Viennese authorities were not interested in supporting the "Reds" or "Whites" or even the Entente powers that had decided to intervene. The Austro-Hungarian authorities hesitated to send home contingents of Russian POWs who they believed would take sides in the partisan struggle.

At the end of the war, only 60,000 Russian POWs had been repatriated. Waiting for their return, Russian POWs instigated several strikes after the peace treaty of March 1918 which they wrongly believed would lead to immediate transports to their home country. Soviet Russian relief missions which began their work in Austria-Hungary in August 1918 had little influence on controlled repatriation but did try to manipulate POWs to support Bolshevik ideology.

Russian soldiers' participation in the strikes of January 1918 that spoke to the Austro-Hungarian population's resentment of the slow pace of peace treaty negotiations in Brest-Litovsk and socio-economic hardships revealed another problem: Austro-Hungarian soldiers who had been assigned to watch over POWs showed a decreasing interest in fulfilling their duties. The local population where POWs were stationed complained of mendicant and prowling Russians, Italians and Serbians. Italian and Serbian POWs also took part in agitation and disobedience alongside their Russian counterparts.

After the collapse of the Danube Monarchy, POWs were no longer guarded. They moved freely and posed a threat to civilian safety. When the return home of Russian and Italian POWs was finally sanctioned, the process was chaotic. The Czechoslovak state which had been created on 28 October 1918 attempted to organize quick transportation because its government feared the dissemination of revolutionary ideas by Russian POWs. The Hungarian authorities failed to organize a systematic evacuation and POWs suffered from hunger and typhoid fever. Thousands left the camps or their places of work without waiting for organized repatriation efforts.^[15]

Memory and Captivity

After 1918, countries showed little interest in processing the fate of their compatriots in captivity during the First World War. During the war itself, Russian leaders were unconcerned with their soldiers who were captured by enemy states. In Russia, remembrance of the October Revolution superseded interest in the First World War as a whole. The Bolsheviks were solely interested in how returning POWs could be recruited for the Red Army. In the Stalin era, a climate existed in which POWs were considered to be traitors to their homeland. In this context, no commemorative culture concerning captivity could be established.

The experience of captivity was marginalized in Italy as well. During the war, there was little official relief for captured Italians in Austria-Hungary. Soldiers who were taken prisoner by the enemy were regarded as cowards and traitors. Only a few memoirs by former South Slav, Russian or Italian POWs held by Austria-Hungary were published in comparison with the many memoirs written by (German) officers of the Habsburg army who had been captured by Russian forces during World War One. The few memoirs written by POWs in Austria-Hungary concentrate on descriptions of living conditions within the camps and emphasize the image of prisoners of war as victims without rights. Some authors criticize the insufficient support provided by their native countries while others write about the useful help they got from home. Bearing in mind that the memoirs that were published after the end of the war usually were integrated into anti-capitalist or nationalist propaganda programs with specific political aims their objectivity is rather questionable. The degree to which POWs' countries of origin contributed to an improvement of living conditions in the camps and the extent of their interest in the prisoners still remains to be scrutinized by historians.

The successor states of the Habsburg Empire were little concerned about POWs' fortunes either in Austro-Hungarian or enemy captivity. Unlike in post-war Germany, former POWs were excluded from the debate about war guilt. As a result, nobody felt responsible for a (self-) critical dialogue concerning the treatment of POWs in Austro-Hungarian captivity. The historiography of Austria-Hungary's role in World War One was written by the historians of the successor states which disavowed their heritage from the collapsed monarchy. After 1918, the new nation-states preferred their own narratives which were constructed to strengthen "national awareness." No overarching narrative about Austria-Hungary's role in the war or its treatment of POWs emerged across the successor states.

In the Austrian Republic after 1918, a few officers of the former Austro-Hungarian army presented some short accounts of the fate of POWs in the Habsburg state. Yet, these authors described the relatively ideal living conditions of enemy soldiers in Austro-Hungarian POW camps while failing to mention that thousands of POWs died from poor sanitation. The impact of food shortages and the use of POWs as forced labourers in the context of Austria-Hungary's labour crisis from 1916/17 onward were also ignored. Moreover, a nostalgic view of the Habsburg Empire flourished during the interwar period and continued to dominate Austria's conception of its history after 1945. Thus, a critical debate concerning the wartime practices of the Austro-Hungarian Army towards POWs was

suppressed. This stance made it difficult for historians to examine the status of POWs in Austro-Hungarian captivity and a critical approach to this topic only began to develop the 1990s.^[17]

Conclusion

The experience of prisoners of war in Austria-Hungary during the First World War was shaped by various factors. Above all, it was of great importance if the interned were rank-and-file soldiers or officers. Nationality also had a strong impact on their fate in captivity.

Forced labour as a characteristic feature of captivity in the Habsburg Empire and the importance of POWs in the Austro-Hungarian wartime economy remains to be examined in detail. This is also true for research work concerning violence against prisoners and humanitarian relief programs for POWs. The ongoing debate about continuities or discontinuities between World War One and Two must also take captivity into account.

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Notes

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- 3. † Leidinger, Hannes/Moritz, Verena: Verwaltete Massen. Kriegsgefangene in der Donaumonarchie 1914-1918, in: Oltmer, Jochen (ed.): Kriegsgefangene im Europa des Ersten Weltkriegs, Paderborn 2006, pp. 35-66; Moritz, Verena/Leidinger, Hannes: Zwischen Nutzen und Bedrohung. Die russischen Kriegsgefangenen in Österreich 1914-1921, Bonn 2005; Walleczek, Julia: Hinter Stacheldraht. Die Kriegsgefangenenlager in den Kronländern Oberösterreich und Salzburg im Ersten Weltkrieg, Dissertation Universität Innsbruck 2012.
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- 5. ↑ Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914-1918, Bd. VII: Das Kriegsjahr 1918, Wien 1938, p. 45; Weiland, Hans / Kern, Leopold (eds.): In Feindeshand. Die Gefangenschaft im Weltkriege in Einzeldarstellungen, Bd. 2, Wien 1931, pp. 173, 214.
- 6. ↑ Moritz/Leidinger, Zwischen Nutzen und Bedrohung 2005, pp. 193-195.
- 7. † Scheidl, Franz J.: Die Kriegsgefangenschaft von den ältesten Zeiten bis zur Gegenwart, Berlin 1943, p. 97.
- 8. † Leidinger / Moritz, Verwaltete Massen 2006, p. 38.
- 9. † Walleczek, Hinter Stacheldraht 2012, pp. 193-199.
- 10. ↑ Ibid., pp. 147-255.
- 11. ↑ Moritz/Leidinger, Zwischen Nutzen und Bedrohung 2005, pp. 14-22, 35-48.
- 12. † On the question of POWs as migrants and the civilian-military correlation see the forthcoming article by Walleczek-Fritz, Julia: "Von 'unerlaubtem Verkehr' und 'Russenkindern'. Überlegungen zu den Kriegsgefangenen in Österreich-Ungarn als 'military migrants', 1914-1918", in: Rass, Christoph (ed.): Militärische Migration. Vom Altertum bis in die Gegenwart [Studien zur Historischen Migrationsforschung, 31], Paderborn (forthcoming 2014).
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- 16. ↑ Moritz/Leidinger, Zwischen Nutzen und Bedrohung 2005, pp. 35-48, 317-325; Procacci, Fahnenflüchtige jenseits der Alpen 2006, pp. 194-195.
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