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Repatriation of Ukrainian Prisoners of War from Austria (1918–1920): (In)Significant Others Amid the Crushing World¹⁰⁷

The article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the repatriation process of Ukrainian prisoners of war from Austria between 1918 and 1920. It examines the contributions of Ukrainian organizations, such as the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Military and Sanitary Mission, in evacuating Ukrainian POWs, delivering humanitarian aid, and organizing cultural and educational activities. The impact of foreign policy events, as well as the policies of the Central Powers and later the Entente, in delaying the full-scale repatriation of Ukrainian POWs is also explored. The article analyses various stages of repatriation, evacuation routes, and the living conditions of Ukrainian POWs during this period using descriptive, problem-oriented, chronological, and historical-comparative methods.

Keywords: repatriation, Ukrainian prisoners of war, Austria, military sanitary mission, First World War.

Репатріація полонених українців з Австрії (1918–1920): (Не)значущі Інші серед світу, що руйнується

У статті висвітлюється репатріація полонених українців з Австрії у 1918–1920 рр. Розглянуто роль українських організацій, зокрема Союзу Визволення України та Української військово-санітарної місії, у наданні полоненим гуманітарної допомоги та організації в їхньому середовищі культурно-освітньої роботи, налагодженні їх евакуації додому. Визначено роль політики Центральних держав, а згодом країн Антанти в затримці повномасштабної репатріації полонених українців, що було зумовлено широким залученням полонених до виконання примусових робіт (як під час Першої світової війни, так і в перший рік після її завершення). Разом з тим уряди європейських країн відмовлялися полоненим у негайній репатріації і через побоювання у тому, що репатріанти будуть використані більшовиками для посилення власного військового ресурсу. Проаналізовані різні етапи репатріації, евакуаційні шляхи й умови перебування полонених крізь призму описового, проблемно-хронологічного й історико-порівняльного методів. Перший етап репатріації кількох тисяч полонених українців відбувся після укладення Брестського мирного договору 9 лютого 1918 р. шляхом формування у Фрайштадті Сірожупанної дивізії. Після завершення Першої світової війни на хід репатріації полонених українців, що спрямовувалася Українською військово-санітарною місією в Австрії, впливала ціла низка чинників. До їх числа належали: заборона Міжсоюзницької комісії Антанти у справі полонених царської армії на проведення їхньої репатріації, складна військово-політична та фінансова ситуація, в якій опинилася Директорія УНР. Попри несприятливі обставини, військово-санітарна місія провадила дипломатичні перемовини для визначення евакуаційних шляхів і транспортних засобів, надавала гуманітарну, медичну й продовольчу допомогу полоненим українцям на облаштованих станицях і лікарнях в Австрії (м. Відень, Інсбрук, Лебрінг тощо). Більшовицька пропаганда й неможливість проведення повномасштабної евакуації зумовили самовідсторонення значної кількості полонених українців від українських місій та їх подальшу репатріацію більшовицькою дипломатією через території Латвії, Естонії та Фінляндії. Повоєнний період став надзвичайно складним випробуванням для української державності, в якому полонені українці опинилися заручниками зовнішньополітичних обставин. Проблема їхньої репатріації по-новому розкриває історію завершення Першої світової війни, повоєнних врегулювань і плекання української ідентичності в умовах полону.

Ключові слова: репатріація, полонені українці, Австрія, військово-санітарна місія, Перша світова війна.

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¹⁰⁷ This article was done during the author's fellowship at the Institute of Human Sciences (Vienna, Austria) in March-June 2024.

The repatriation of Ukrainian POWs of the Imperial Russian Army from the territories of Central Powers in the aftermath of WWI is a multifaceted research topic that touches upon a whole array of research problems — from large-scale resettlements, the radical shift of post-war international order, and state policies that impacted POWs to matters of national identity, instrumentalization of POWs by various state and non-state actors, and the degrees of human suffering due to forced labor, diseases and years of imprisonment with dimmed hopes for their release.

Ukrainian POWs were quintessential Others; they defined Otherness for either the detaining powers or their compatriots. The imprisonment of Ukrainians from the ranks of the Imperial Russian Army in German and Austro-Hungarian camps was defined not only by difficult living conditions in barracks and tiresome forced labor on industrial sites or agriculture but also their perception as a potential “weapon” in the warfare against the enemy¹⁰⁸. For both sides of WWI, the strategies to destabilize the enemies led to preferential treatment and even recruitment attempts among POWs¹⁰⁹. In Germany and Austria-Hungary, Ukrainian and Polish POWs from the czarist army received preferred treatment compared to the rest of the POWs, meant to incite them against czarist Russia. This led to their access to better housing, food rations, as well as better

educational offerings and leisure time activities in the camps¹¹⁰.

The historiography of this topic is relatively limited, with only a few scholarly works available. The research of Ukrainian scholars such as I. Sribniak¹¹¹, I. Pater¹¹², V. Trembitskyi¹¹³, and V. Holubko¹¹⁴ provides valuable insights into the imprisonment of Ukrainians and their repatriation from the Central Powers. In contrast, foreign historiography, represented by researchers, such as R. Nachtigal¹¹⁵, E. Willis¹¹⁶, H. Jones¹¹⁷, W. Moritz¹¹⁸, and others, has focused on the broader context of the imprisonment and repatriation of prisoners of the Imperial Russian army. A valuable collection of sources can be found in the National Archives of Austria¹¹⁹ and the Central State Archive of Higher Authorities and Administration¹²⁰.

Central Powers established separate camps solely for Ukrainians of the Imperial Russian Army — Freistadt and Jozefstadt in Austria-Hungary (approx. 40.000 Ukrainian POWs among overall 1.269.000 POWs of the czarist army), Rastatt, Wetzlar, Salzwedel, and Hannoversch Münden in Germany (approx. 70.000 among 2.8 million POWs of the czarist army)¹²¹. The Freistadt camp in Austria was the first example of high concentration of Ukrainians, czarist army soldiers imprisoned in WWI battlefields¹²².

These detention camps became the centers of Ukrainian national renaissance, fostered by the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine — the political organi-

¹⁰⁸ Davis, G. (1977). Prisoners of War in Twentieth-Century War Economies. *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 12, 623–624; Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, 1041, P.A.I., “Liasse Krieg” (56/38 Polen, 57 Litauen, 58 Ukraine), s. 3427.

¹⁰⁹ Privileged treatment of prisoners from Alsace-Lorraine in French captivity; better camps of European Russia intended for Slavs; attempt to recruit Poles by both sides; the establishment of a special prisoner-of-war camp at Limburg for Irish prisoners and Wünsdorf near Zossen for Muslims by Germany.

¹¹⁰ Jones, H. (2014). Prisoners of War. In: Winter J, ed. *The Cambridge History of the First World War*. The Cambridge History of the First World War. Cambridge University Press, 287–288.

¹¹¹ Sribniak I. (1999). *Poloneni ukraintsi v Avstro-Uhorschyni ta Nimechchyni (1914–1920 rr.)*; Sribniak I. (1999). Repatriatsiina diialnist ukrainskykh dyplomatychnykh i viiskovo-sanitarnykh ustanov u Yevropi v 1918 r., *Studii z arkhivnoi spravy ta dokumentoznavstva*, vol. 5, 259–263.

¹¹² Pater I. (2000). *Soiuz Vyzvolennia Ukrainy: problemy derzhavnosti i sobornosti*, Lviv.

¹¹³ Trembitskyi V. (1972). Sanitarno-medychna sprava v Ukraini (lystopad 1917 – berezen 1918). *Visti Kombatanta*, vol. 1, 29–32.

¹¹⁴ Holubko, V. (1997). *Armiia Ukrainskoi Narodnoi Respubliky. 1917–1918: Utvorennia ta borotba za derzhavu*, Lviv.

¹¹⁵ Nachtigal, R. (2008). The Repatriation and Reception of Returning Prisoners of War, 1918–22, *Immigrants & Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, 26:1–2, 157–184.

¹¹⁶ Willis, E. F. (1951). *Herbert Hoover and the Russian Prisoners of World War I: A Study in Diplomacy and Relief, 1918–1919*. Stanford [in English].

¹¹⁷ Jones, H. (2014). Prisoners of war. In: Winter J, ed. *The Cambridge History of the First World War*. The Cambridge History of the First World War. Cambridge University Press, 266–290.

¹¹⁸ Moritz, V. (2014). The Treatment of Prisoners of War in Austria-Hungary 1914/1915. In: G. Bischof, F. Karhofer, & S. R. Williamson (Eds.), *1914: Austria-Hungary, the Origins, and the First Year of World War I* (Vol. 23, pp. 233–248).

¹¹⁹ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, 1041, P.A.I., “Liasse Krieg” (56/38 Polen, 57 Litauen, 58 Ukraine); Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, 373, F36, “Krieg 1914–1918, Dep. 7 Friedensverhandlungen m. Ukraine, Finland”

¹²⁰ TsDAVO Ukrainy. F. 1078 “Holovne upravlinnia Heneralnoho shtabu Ukrainskoi Narodnoi Respubliky, m. Kyiv; z liutoho 1919 r. — m. Zhmerynka, m. Rovno, z chervnia 1919 r. — m. Kamianets-Podilskyi”. Op. 2. Spr. 20; TsDAVO Ukrainy. F. 3192 “Ukrainska viiskovo-sanitarna misiia v spravakh ukrainskykh polonenykh v Nimechchyni, m. Berlin”. Op. 1. Spr. 14–16, 22–24; Op. 2. Spr. 5.

¹²¹ Steuer, K. (2013). First World War Central Power Prison Camps. *History Faculty Publications*, 1, 36; TsDAVO Ukrainy. F. 3192. Op. 2. Spr. 5. Ark. 57.

¹²² Freistadt also became a collection point for POWs from other Austrian camps, such as Knittelfeld. Initially hosting 18,000 Ukrainian POWs in the spring of 1915, the numbers later swelled to between 30.000 and 40.000 POWs in total.

zation, founded in 1914 by Ukrainian emigrants from the Russian empire in Lviv (then part of Austria-Hungary). The Union cooperated with German and Austria-Hungarian governments and camp commandants to separate Ukrainian POWs and have the permission¹²³ to organize various educational and cultural activities among them to cultivate patriotism, reconnect POWs with their heritage after decades and centuries of Russification (through history, language courses, theatrical performances, workshops with the help of Ukrainian educators who traveled to Central Powers' camps¹²⁴ or educated POWs who voluntarily joined these initiatives)¹²⁵.

Alongside this, in the light of Ukraine's independence aspirations, the whole new phenomenon emerged — the recruitment of paramilitary units among Ukrainian POWs within Austria-Hungarian and German camps. Coordinated by the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine, this phenomenon became the precursor for the recruitment of the regular army throughout the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921. Such recruitment strategies among POWs were not unique solely to Ukrainians¹²⁶ — Polish Committee for the Care of Polish POWs also recruited their compatriots in German captivity to the ranks of Polish Legions¹²⁷.

Emerging from POWs sports clubs (i.e. "Sich" at Freistadt camp), a Blue-Coaters division (in Germany) and Grey-Coaters division¹²⁸ (in Austria-Hungary) were recruited between February and March 1918¹²⁹. Given the revolutionary events and ultimate demise of the Russian empire, the aspirations for Ukraine's autonomy and, ultimately, independence, have found a response

in the hearts of an increasing number of POWs¹³⁰; moreover, cultural and educational work of Union's representatives also yielded tangible results in prisoners' patriotic upbringing¹³¹.

The significance of Ukrainian paramilitary POWs unit establishment within camps is also predetermined by its interconnectedness to the first instances of repatriation on a larger scale, not limited merely to the evacuation of sick and wounded. The ratification of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between the Ukrainian People's Republic and Central Powers on February 9, 1918, radically changed the fate of the Ukrainian territories and nation. As the first international legal act that recognized the UPR as a subject of international law, its Art. 6 also determined the prisoner exchange with the requirement of the "immediate release" with the establishment of special repatriation commissions from both sides (with four members each) to facilitate POWs transportation¹³².

Right after the ratification, the recruitment for the Ukrainian POW divisions were significantly intensified. The grave danger of the Bolshevik offensives into Ukrainian territories in the first half of February 1918 required urgent military reinforcement, leading to the decree by Ukraine's parliament (Central Rada) (on February 12, 1918), urging to join Ukrainian armed forces. Germany agreed to provide the UPR with financial support (1 million German marks) and arm two Ukrainian POW divisions. Consequently, on February 17, 1918, Bohun regiment (with 800 POWs) departed from German camp Rastatt to Kyiv, on March 3 — Vyhovskiy regiment (1.200 POWs). Ultimately, the Blue-Coaters division was comprised of 4 infantry

¹²³ On October 10 and 27, 1914, the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine received the permission from the Austria-Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to organize national and political work among Ukrainian POWs. The Union created a special questionnaire to form lists of POWs with questions about their biography, stance on Russian mobilization, Central Powers, etc.

¹²⁴ The Union for the Liberation of Ukraine involved teachers and other intellectuals in educational work; there were 12 people in the Freistadt camp, including 8 Galicians (V. Simovych, R. Dombchevsky, J. Ostapchuk, O. Okhrymovych, V. Levytsky, M. Holubets, V. Pachovsky, M. Chaykovsky), one Bukovynian (O. Beznalko), and 3 people from Dnipro Ukraine (O. Turula, O. Hnidy, and M. Havrylko).

¹²⁵ Sribniak, I. (1999). *Poloneni ukraintsi v Avstro-Uhorschyni ta Nimechchyni (1914–1920 rr.)*. P. 41–71; Pater I. (2000). *Soiuz Vyzvolennia Ukrainy: problemy derzhavnosti i sobornosti*. Lviv. Pp. 275–283.

¹²⁶ Jones, H. (2014). Prisoners of War. In: Winter J, ed. *The Cambridge History of the First World War*. The Cambridge History of the First World War. Cambridge University Press, 288; Nachtigal, R. (2008). The Repatriation and Reception of Returning Prisoners of War, 1918–22, *Immigrants & Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, 26:1–2. P. 163.

¹²⁷ In the Russian empire, anti-Habsburg military units were also mobilized from within the prison camp system. The largest of these units was the Czech Legion, made up of 40.000 Czech and Slovak POWs. Later (in May 1918) the Czech Legion became embroiled in the burgeoning civil war between Reds and Whites.

¹²⁸ 1st Ukrainian Rifle Cossack Regiment (consisting of three battalions and a machine gun unit) which was later planned to enforce the newly established division in Volodymyr-Volynsk on the territory of Ukraine.

¹²⁹ Holubko, V. (1997). *Armiia Ukrainskoi Narodnoi Respubliki. 1917–1918: Utvorennia ta borotba za derzhavu*. Lviv. Pp. 190–193.

¹³⁰ Telegram from POWs to the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine in March 1918: the plead to be relocated to the Freistadt camp and join the divisions with aspirations to protect native lands from the Bolshevik threat.

¹³¹ Pater, I. (2000). *Soiuz Vyzvolennia Ukrainy: problemy derzhavnosti i sobornosti*. Lviv. Pp. 295–298.

¹³² Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, 373, F36, "Krieg 1914–1918, Dep. 7 Friedensverhandlungen m. Ukraine, Finland", "Ukrainko-avstro-uhorskyi dodaktovy dohovir do myrovoho dohovoru mizh Avstro-Uhorschynoiu, Nimetchynnoui, Bolharietiu i Turechynnoui z odnoi, a Ukrainskoiu Narodnoi Respublikoiu z druhoi storony"; Sribniak M. (2021). Ukrainian diplomacy in the process of repatriating Ukrainian prisoners of war from the territories of Germany and Austro-Hungary (1918–1919). *Facta Simonidis 14 (1)*. Pp. 241–242.

regiments (each comprising with 1.200 people) under the lead of former POW, general Viktor Zelinskyi¹³³.

It was followed by Austria-Hungary — on March 27, 1918, the Austro-Hungarian Ministry of War provided a monthly quota of 3.000 Austrian crowns to continue the recruitment campaign among Ukrainian POWs, establishing the Hetman Petro Doroshenko Regiment (approx. 4.000 men¹³⁴); in May 1918, it was deployed to the 1st Cossack Rifle Division (under the command of Lieutenant Colonel I. Perlyk), consisting of four infantry and cannon regiments. These Ukrainian units, manned with POWs, were recruited on a voluntary basis; their patriotism was a crucial criterion for joining their ranks¹³⁵.

The Union also gave paramount importance to the recruitment of czarist army officers who identified themselves as Ukrainians. They were grouped into separate officer camps (i.e., Jozefstadt, Theresienstadt in Austria, Hannoversch Münden in Germany) and at first, most of them were alien to the Ukrainian cause due to their conservatism and continued loyalty to the Russian empire. However, ultimately Union's activists succeeded in their efforts, Ukrainianizing approx. 40 officers from the Theresienstadt camp between 1917 and 1918, followed by approx. 100 in Jozefstadt. Many Ukrainian communities for imprisoned officers were organized across Central Powers camps (30 POWs in Reichenberg, 120 POWs in Hannoversch Münden) in 1917–1918, giving fruitful results¹³⁶ — changed allegiance of some officers led to their expert help in Ukrainian POWs' military training¹³⁷.

The repatriation of those Ukrainian POWs within the regiments from Germany and Austria-Hungary coincided with political turmoil, namely Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi's Uprising. The regime (deemed more authoritative, conservative, and having little support among the vast majority of Ukraine's population) was

not particularly appealing to hundreds of repatriates, predominantly UPR supporters. They might have also been perceived as dangerous Others, prone to cause social unrest, particularly within the army units. The perceived threat associated with Ukrainian POWs (and generally the Ukrainian army recruitment) was also inherent for Austrian authorities which could influence the delayed deployment of POW units to Ukrainian-controlled territories¹³⁸.

However, in 1918, not political but economic incentives were decisive in long-term delays in POWs repatriation¹³⁹. Despite the proclamations of immediate prisoner exchange, stated in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, detention of tens of thousands of Ukrainian POWs in Central Powers camps continued for months and even years afterward. The reason behind this was the overwhelming significance of POWs as cheap forced labor for German and Habsburg industrial and agricultural sectors. No agreements were made for POWs transportation to their homeland despite the diplomatic efforts of newly established Ukrainian repatriation commission.

The first Ukrainian repatriation commission — Permanent Commission for the Affairs of Prisoners of War — was founded on April 17, 1918, within the War Ministry of the Ukrainian People's Republic. Initially its primary tasks concerned the POW registration and their separation from Russians, humanitarian aid, cultural and educational work among POWs, diplomatic negotiations with Central Powers to organize repatriation, drafting legislations on Ukrainian POWs. As it was impossible to ensure full-scale evacuation of Ukrainian POWs, the Commission focused on providing medical and sanitary aid, food supplies, clothes to Ukrainian detained in camps in Germany and Austria-Hungary. However, between April 22 and May 13, 1918, the Commission managed to organize successful evacuation of wounded and sick Ukrainian POWs

¹³³ Holubko, V. (1997). *Armiia Ukrainskoi Narodnoi Respubliki. 1917–1918: Utvorennia ta borotba za derzhavu*. Lviv. Pp. 190–193.

¹³⁴ Between April and May 1918, Ukrainian POWs (200–300 men daily) departed from the camp Freistadt to Volodymyr-Volynskyi in Ukraine. In mid-May, there were 20.000 soldiers in the division.

¹³⁵ Pater, I. (2000). *Soiuz Vyzvolennia Ukrainy: problemy derzhavnosti i sobornosti*. Lviv. P. 296.

¹³⁶ Sribniak, I. (1999). *Poloneni ukraintsi v Avstro-Uhorschyni ta Nimechchyni (1914–1920 rr.)*. P. 130–139.

¹³⁷ Though all officers who voluntarily joined the divisions, had to complete the so-called “propaganda school” and only those deemed reliable and in favor of Ukrainian independence ideas, could commence their service; this could prolong and complicate the recruitment process.

¹³⁸ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, 1041, P.A.I., “Liasse Krieg” (56/38 Polen, 57 Litauen, 58 Ukraine), Abt.10/Kgf., Hr. 43461.

¹³⁹ According to The Hague Convention on War of 1907, captive military personnel were not supposed to carry out any activities which had a direct connection with war efforts. In fact, however, many enemy soldiers controlled by the opposing troops were even employed near the front. Generally, the question arose for some countries as to whether the ‘foreign military persons’ had not become indispensable from an economic viewpoint. The repatriation or exchange of prisoners of war following the armistice with the Soviet government on March 3, 1918 was thus seen as a risk for the German and Austro-Hungarian elites in particular. Germany could not expect even 200.000 of its soldiers back home, yet had to give back more than a million ‘Russians’. ‘That would have to lead to the collapse of our entire economic life’, was the judgement of the Prussian generals. Although Austria-Hungary could receive back a larger ‘labour reservoir’ in this context than it had lost, yet one remained cautious in the Habsburg army, too. On the territory of the former Romanov Empire there were fears of difficulties with evacuation and transport, especially with the background of revolutionary events. The so-called ‘great exchange’ was seen as a heavy economic burden for the Danube Monarchy from this perspective, too.

with sanitary trains through Volochysk and Holoby stations¹⁴⁰.

The demise of the UPR and subsequent establishment of Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi's Ukrainian State led to changes in the organizational efforts for POWs repatriation. The most notable shift was the establishment of separate military and sanitary missions in states where Ukrainian POWs were detained. In early July 1918, the Hetman government sanctioned the establishment of a special military-diplomatic institution — the "Ukrainian Military-Sanitary Commission for Prisoners of War in Austria-Hungary" (led by Kostiantyn Novohatskyi), subordinate to the War ministry of the Ukrainian State¹⁴¹. Ukrainian commissions encountered numerous obstacles from Central Powers that hindered full-scale repatriation (and alienated many Ukrainian POWs who were more sympathetic to the UPR policies); however, they succeeded in evacuating approx. 40.000 POWs from Germany and 1.600 POWs from Austria¹⁴² (mostly people with disabilities)¹⁴³.

The assignment of POWs as forced laborers, though impressive in numbers, was no efficient solution to the lack of domestic farm laborers conscripted to the armed forces. Food shortages, social and internal political crises, and war losses approached the defeat of Central Powers, marked by the ratification of the Compiegne Armistice. This meant the beginning of a new era for Ukrainian prisoner-of-war repatriation. At first, it boosted spontaneous and unregulated waves of POWs in desperate endeavors to reach their homelands on their own as quickly as possible amid wretched chaos and weakened security at camps¹⁴⁴. Ukrainian military and sanitary missions, now facilitated under the UPR Dyrektory's lead, took hold of the regulation of POWs relocations, humanitarian and medical care.

The spontaneous arrival of repatriates greatly complicated the work of Ukrainian reception and distribution centers, and by the end of 1918, temporarily paralyzed them altogether. At first, the repatriation infrastructure proved unable to effectively deal with

the huge mass of returnees, as it was not originally designed to receive tens of thousands of repatriates simultaneously. Despite the initial disarray, the UPR military and sanitary mission in Austria established its operations in short terms in cooperation with the UPR ministries and embassy in Vienna, ensuring proper distribution of food rations and medical aid among repatriates¹⁴⁵.

Vienna became a crucial transit and assembly point for hundreds of thousands of POWs and displaced persons. It was in stark contrast with the role of the First Austrian Republic as a small state which bore no resemblance to the former Habsburg empire and retained only a small number of POWs from the czarist army (overall approx. 120.000 men) (as opposed to approx. 1.200.000 Russian POWs in Germany) and hampered serious organizational chaos in Austria's hinterland, impacting technical preconditions for the repatriation.

Ukrainian transit points accommodated not merely Ukrainian POWs from the czarist army but also Galicians from the Imperial and Royal Army, mostly returning from Italy. The duality also concerned the repatriation organization and care for POWs after the establishment of the separate mission from the West-Ukrainian People's Republic which operated independently until the Unification Act of January 22, 1919, and its accession to the UPR¹⁴⁶.

In early 1919, Ukrainian POWs (approx. 40.000 in Germany and 2/3.000 in Austria) faced yet another challenge in their release from camps and subsequent repatriation. Under the threat of Bolshevik offensives and the spread of Communism westward¹⁴⁷, the Allies (in the framework of the special Inter-Allied Commission on Russian POWs) suspended all evacuation of POWs from the Imperial Russian Army to their homelands, rigorously supported by Ferdinand Foch and Lloyd George. This status quo with prisoners' forced detention lasted until September 1919¹⁴⁸, making them victims of fear, negligence, and shifting political interests. Though the treat of forced recruitment of POWs by Bolshevik forces was used as a pretense for this decision, Allies did not shy

¹⁴⁰ Sribniak, M. (2021). Ukrainian diplomacy in the process of repatriating Ukrainian prisoners of war from the territories of Germany and Austro-Hungary (1918–1919). *Facta Simonidis 14(1)*. P. 242.

¹⁴¹ The staff included doctors, office clerks, and translators. The commission was also designated with 100.000 Ukrainian karbovantsi for aiding POWs.

¹⁴² TsDAVO Ukrainy. F.1084. Op.1. Spr. 7. Ark. 316; F. 3077. Op.1. Spr. 5. Ark. 5.

¹⁴³ In particular, Rastatt — 9.000 repatriated POWs, Wetzlar — 11.000, Salzwedel — 8.000, Rubelen — 652, Puchheim — 1.400, Schneidemühl (Piła) — 2.900.

¹⁴⁴ Steuer, K. (2013). First World War Central Power Prison Camps. *History Faculty Publications, 1*, 38.

¹⁴⁵ Sribniak, M. (2024). Ukraińska Wojskowo-Sanitarna Misja w Austrii i na Węgrzech w latach 1918–1919 (na podstawie materiałów Centralnego Państwowego Archiwum Wyższych Organów Władzy i Zarządzania Ukrainy), *Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis. Folia Historica, 115*. Pp. 54–57.

¹⁴⁶ TsDAVO Ukrainy. F. 3192. Op. 1. Spr. 6. Ark. 17, 25, 29.

¹⁴⁷ Later pinnacled by the establishment of short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic (March-August 1919), led by former POW Bela Kun.

¹⁴⁸ Willis, E. F. (1951). *Herbert Hoover and the Russian Prisoners of World War I: A Study in Diplomacy and Relief, 1918–1919*. Stanford. Pp. 16–30.

away from using Russian (and Ukrainian) POWs in military interventions, notably in the Baltic theatre in 1919¹⁴⁹.

This phenomenon was accompanied with POWs being torn between White and Red ideologies, as White commissars and Communist propaganda agents fought for their sympathies with promises of their repatriation in exchange for their allegiance and joining army ranks. Some POWs genuinely bought into the propaganda, while others were primarily motivated by a desire to escape prolonged imprisonment and return home as quickly as possible, even if it meant facing significant risks to their lives and health on the battlefield¹⁵⁰.

Even after the Allies lifted the suspension in September 1919, a range of obstacles continued to hinder or completely halt Ukrainian repatriation efforts. The Directory of the Ukrainian People's Republic grappled with complex military and political challenges that threatened the survival of an independent Ukrainian state. By late 1919, the Ukrainian People's Army, encircled by Bolshevik, Polish, and Denikin's White Guard forces (the latter supported by the Allies faced severe difficulties in managing full-scale repatriation. This situation was exacerbated by reduced financial support¹⁵¹.

Representatives from Ukrainian military and sanitary missions had to negotiate with German and Austrian governments for transportation means, such as trains or ferries, and for the opening of borders. Amid the political chaos in Central-Eastern Europe following World War I, countries like Poland, Romania, and Hungary closed their borders, further complicating the missions' efforts to organize the transportation of Ukrainian POWs. The mission representatives negotiated some repatriation routes (i.e. Vienna — Budapest — Stanislaviv — Tarnopol — Volochysk — Zhmerynka; Lavochna — Stryi — Ternopil — Volochansk — Proskuriv — Vinnytsia) via Hungary¹⁵² but external obstacles prevented the implementation of full-scale repatriation and an extensive network of evacuation routes¹⁵³.

Despite these challenges, Ukrainian activists and diplomats in Germany, Austria, and the successor states remained committed to supporting Ukrainian POWs and continued to provide care and engaged in diplomatic negotiations on their behalf. Under the lead of otaman Andrii Okopenko, Ukrainian military and sanitary mission in Austria — in Vienna and other assembly points (i.e., Innsbruck, March-Grenk, Badwill, Lebring) — accommodated 53.320 repatriated Ukrainians by giving them food (405.604 food parcels), clothing (6.798 shirts, coats) and shoes (1.399 pairs)¹⁵⁴.

In early June 1919, the Vienna point, located in the artillery barracks on Laerstraße (referred to as «станіція» — “stanytsia”), hosted 70 sick Ukrainians and 50 requiring treatment; mission representatives also cared for 650 repatriates in various hospitals in Vienna (overall, thanks to the assistance of the Mission, more than 1.000 Ukrainian POWs received qualified medical assistance). For the needs of this category of POWs, the Mission organized and maintained a small hospital with a shelter for sick Ukrainian repatriates who received regular food parcels (in total, 6.635 rations were issued)¹⁵⁵. In the summer of 1919, approx. 700 people stayed in the hospital every day (their number was constantly changing), they also received food parcels thanks to humanitarian assistance from the International Red Cross¹⁵⁶.

Food rations in Viennese hospitals was insufficient due to the difficult economic situation in post-war Austria. The Mission also provided the necessary parcels to all Ukrainians in need who received treatment here (approx. 1.300 POWs). The Mission provided returning individuals with small cash allowances for food during their journey home, covered medical treatments in emergency situations, and assisted with transit arrangements for those who faced extended delays in transportation back home¹⁵⁷.

Despite the significant care provided to POWs by Ukrainian military and sanitary missions, the Ukrainian government's failure to organize a full-scale repatriation along with extensive propaganda

¹⁴⁹ Williams, R. C. Russian War Prisoners and Soviet-German Relations: 1918–1921. Canadian Slavonic Papers, 9:2. 1967. P. 272.

¹⁵⁰ TsDAVO Ukrainy. F. 3192. Op. 2. Spr. 5. Ark. 46; Williams R. C. Russian War Prisoners and Soviet-German Relations: 1918–1921. Canadian Slavonic Papers, 9:2. 1967. P. 272.

¹⁵¹ TsDAVO Ukrainy. F. 3192. Op. 2. Spr. 5. Ark. 47–48.

¹⁵² From Germany, there were three ways to evacuate prisoners: 1) from Hamburg by sea through Gibraltar to Odesa or Mykolaiv; 2) from Regensburg by the Danube to Brail, Odesa, or Mykolaiv; 3) by rail through the Czech Republic and Romania or Poland.

¹⁵³ Sribniak, M. (2024). Ukraїnska Wojskowo-Sanitarna Misja w Austrii i na Węgrzech w latach 1918–1919 (na podstawie materiałów Centralnego Państwowego Archiwum Wyższych Organów Władzy i Zarządzania Ukrainy) [Ukrainian military and sanitary mission in Austria and Hungary in 1918–1919 (based on the documents of the Central State Archive of Higher Authorities and Administration of Ukraine)]. *Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis. Folia Historica*, 115, P. 49–66.

¹⁵⁴ TsDAVO Ukrainy. F. 3192. Op. 1. Spr. 22. Ark. 56–60.

¹⁵⁵ Between March and May 1919, the Mission spent 1 million Austrian crowns on supporting and transporting POWs. The delay of the UPR government in providing a new package for the Mission's activities urged A. Okopenko to ask both embassies (ZURL i URL) for a loan, which he obtained (80 and 30 thousand Austrian crowns).

¹⁵⁶ TsDAVO Ukrainy. F. 3192. Op. 1. Spr. 22. Ark. 26.

¹⁵⁷ TsDAVO Ukrainy. F. 3192. Op. 1. Spr. 25. Ark. 36zv.

efforts by Soviet agents led many remaining Ukrainian POWs in Austria and Germany to shift their allegiance to Soviet Russia. This change was particularly influenced by the creation of an evacuation route from Stettin to Revel and promises of a swift return to their homeland. By mid-1920, support for the Ukrainian government was rapidly declining, especially due to propaganda agents, urging many POWs to alienate from Ukrainian organizations and align with the communist movement¹⁵⁸.

From the latter half of 1920 into 1921, the evacuation of Ukrainians under Soviet leadership commenced. Initially, Austria and the successor states of the Habsburg Empire viewed Soviet repatriation missions with skepticism, suspecting them of prioritizing political agitation and dubious financial activities over genuine repatriation efforts.

However, further repatriation agreements were facilitated by the International Red Cross and notably, with the active involvement of Fridtjof Nansen, the League of Nations High Commissioner for the Repatriation of Prisoners of War, who served as a mediator in negotiations with Estonia, Latvia, and Finland with evacuation routes established through the ports of Narva and Riga¹⁵⁹. Ultimately of particular significance also were the concessions made by the Soviet Union, which had conquered its opponents in most regions of the former Romanov Empire, and had reached bilateral agreements with various European states, including the Republic of Austria, at the beginning of the 1920s¹⁶⁰.

This brief overview of Ukrainian POWs of the czarist army and their repatriation from Central

Powers (with special attention on Austria) sheds light on a unique and multifaceted aspect of WWI and post-war upheaval in Central-Eastern Europe. Ukrainian POWs, deprived from years of imprisonment and harsh treatment, yearned for the release and return to their homeland but appeared on the crossroads of major geopolitical shifts that directly impacted their lives. The negligence of major geopolitical powers to the problems of POWs from the czarist army turned latter into insignificant Others, oftentimes relegating them to mere bargaining chips for economic and political interests.

For Ukrainian organizations and state institutions, however, these POWs represented a beacon of hope amid the nation's emerging statehood. Ukrainian activists and officials consistently provided them with humanitarian assistance, medical care, and uniquely, education and cultural activities to preserve their national identity. Despite financial limitations and numerous obstacles from key geopolitical players who controlled the prisoners' fates, Ukraine's efforts in organizing POW repatriation were relentless. The care for these POWs continued with all available means until the end, even as POWs loyalties and sympathies evolved.

Thus, the phenomenon of Ukrainian POWs repatriation is not just about the logistics of their transportation — it is a complex issue where the camps and assembly points for POWs became centers of national renaissance and aspirations for independence amid the crushing world and tumultuous shifts of international borders and interests.

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¹⁵⁸ TsDAVO Ukrainy. F. 3192. Op. 1. Spr. 24. Ark. 46.

¹⁵⁹ Housden, M. (2007). When the Baltic Sea was a 'bridge' for humanitarian action: The League of Nations, the Red Cross and the repatriation of prisoners of war between Russia and Central Europe, 1920–22, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 61–83.

The International Committee of the Red Cross agreed that the League's involvement had been invaluable and its expertise over finances indispensable. It had enabled 427,886 people, drawn from at least 26 national groups, to be returned home.

¹⁶⁰ Leidinger, H., & Moritz, V. (2007). Die Repatriierung der k.u.k. Kriegsgefangenen 1918 bis 1922. In: *Politicum*, 28. Jg., Nov. 2007, 102: 1918 – Der Beginn der Republik, 53–56. It was under these conditions that initially 100,000 'new Austrians', i.e. citizens of the young First Republic, returned home from Italy, mainly. Between January 1920 and March 1922, nearly 120,000 former Austro-Hungarian soldiers then came back from Soviet territory, of which 25,000 were 'new Austrians'. On the part of the government in Vienna, the return of prisoners of war was thus considered finished. From 1922/23 onwards, responsibility for repatriation of late returning men lay with the Ministry of the Interior, and subsequently the Federal Chancellery.

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