

Galicia from the Point of View of Two Empires: An Analysis of Austrian and Russian Newspapers during World War I

Elisabeth Haid

PhD Program "Austrian Galicia" (2010-2013)

Galicia was one of the most important theaters of war between the Russian and the Austrian Empires in World War I – not only at the battlefields, but also in wartime propaganda.

While Galicia was a key issue in the relations between Austria and Russia already in the pre-war period, attention even increased when it became a battlefield during the war. Galicia suffered hostilities and destruction, espionage hysteria, multiple boundary changes and occupation. The war caused the flight of thousands of Galicians to Vienna as well as Russian cities.

Against this backdrop, Galicia became well-known to a broad audience. While Galicia was generally little known in pre-war Russia, it was present mainly in terms of stereotypes of periphery and underdevelopment in pre-war Austria. At the beginning of the war, however, many books, brochures and press articles about Galicia emerged, both in Russia and in Austria, aimed at informing the people of both countries about this remote province. Another objective was to support propaganda, which highlights the importance of Galicia in the war.

Battle in or for Galicia

From a military point of view, Galicia was frequently seen as a theater of war only. Any success in Galicia was solely regarded as a success against the enemy's army. At the same time, Austrian and Russian newspapers presented the defense or conquest ("liberation") of Galicia as an important war aim. They stressed both the importance of Galicia and the benefits for Galicia of being part of one's own empire. Newspapers often emphasized the mission of their own country to liberate Galicia from a "foreign yoke."

The Galician players in the war

When arguing in favor of one's own mission to liberate Galicia, the point of view of the "liberated" people plays an important role as well. Thus, many press articles point out the positive attitude of the different Galician population groups towards Russia or Austria. At the same time, the political activities of Galicians and especially of Polish and Ukrainian political organizations only partly fit with these arguments. So in general, newspapers tended to limit the expression of political opinions which contradicted their propaganda strategies. But sometimes also an entire population group was slandered.

I investigate and compare the images of this border province and its inhabitants in the capitals of the two belligerent empires, based on the reporting in representative newspapers of different political orientation.

Newspapers were used as an important propaganda tool. Despite the restrictions imposed by wartime censorship and state orders, the coverage of the various newspapers differed in several aspects, depending on the paper's political background.

The increasing interest for Galicia also offered opportunities for action to various pressure groups in Galicia. Their arguments influenced the reporting of the newspapers of the capitals.

In my thesis, I outline the main aspects of press reporting on Galicia during World War I and compare different argumentations in the context of ideological background, pre-war stereotypes, conditions of the war, and the needs of propaganda.

The country and its people(s)

Throughout the war, and especially in times of military offensives, Austrian and Russian newspapers reported frequently about the country, its history, nationalities, culture and economy. The large number of articles not only satisfied the increasing interest of Austrian and Russian readers in this embattled province and its inhabitants, but also created mental maps based on arguments of inclusion and exclusion which justified Russian or Austrian claims on the region.

A scene of destruction or a clean slate

As the war progressed, Galicia came to be seen not only as an area of concern, as a strategic or political factor, but also as a region affected by casualties of war and economic hardship. Simultaneously, some authors interpreted the war not only as a setback for Galicia, but also as a chance for a new beginning, and developed visions for the future of Galicia after the war.

