

THE GENEVA AND HAGUE CONVENTIONS AND THE CASE OF FIRST WORLD WAR SERBIAN POWS IN HUNGARY

1 Introduction

The World War can be justifiably called “the great seminal catastrophe”¹ of the 20th century, because the war that should have ended every further war just disseminated the seeds of another cataclysm. Until today numerous works have been published on the subject of the First World War. Most of these deal in detail with the stimulating and devastating effects of war, the battlefields, and sometimes the everyday struggles of the hinterland, but only briefly describe the development of international law and the tribulations of prisoners of war. Due to the neglect of the topic, the views of Rudolphe Archibald Reiss relating to Austria–Hungary case still prevail in most Western and Serbian literature. In the case of the latter, we can encounter criticism on the annihilating endeavors of the “Huns” of Austria–Hungary.²

The reasons outlined above justify a scientific examination of the prisoner of war issue. Our study aims to provide a scientifically sound response to the Serbian criticisms based on primary and secondary sources. We are set to answer whether the military leadership in Hungary during the First World War treated Serbian prisoners as poorly as appears in the Serbian literature to this day. First, we try to answer whether separation of the prisoners based on ethnicity occurred in the Austria–Hungarian or not; if yes, whether it commenced because the military leadership wanted the complete physical destruction of

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¹ Kennan, George F.: *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1979, 3. (hereinafter: Kennan 1979).

² Gorcsa, Oszkár: Csanád vármegyei szerb hadifoglyok a Nagy Háborúban. In: *Délvidéki Szemle* 5 (1). 2018, 32. (hereinafter: Gorcsa 2018a).

the Serbian nation. In light of these focus points, we evaluate whether the view of some Serbian historians claiming that the Monarchy was the first in the world to establish a network of modern concentration camps, which almost functioned as extermination camps, is valid. Furthermore, we compare the treatment of prisoners of war in Serbia and the Austria–Hungarian with the hope that we will get a more nuanced picture and a proper understanding concerning voiced criticisms. To do this, it is necessary to present the international measures taken to mitigate the wars and the circumstances which the Geneva and Hague Conventions were composed in by comparing the text of the laws with archival and press sources to highlight their shortcomings. These legal imperfections and unclearities in the text might be indirect causes for the violation of international military law.

2 The evolution and development of international laws of war before the Great War

The emergence of and aspirations for nation-states, which broadly defining the 19th century, resulted in extensive military conflicts. As a result of frequent wars mass armies emerged, which combined with the technological advances in military dramatically increased the number of POWs and internees. This was a pressing problem mainly because until the 19th century, the international law of war had not been regulated. As a result, each state treated the wounded and POWs in their own fashion.³

The idea of regulation and humanization of warfare was first embraced by intellectuals, who openly raised their voices against the unnecessary sufferings of war. Aware of the legitimacy of the above theses, an international meeting convened in 1864 in Switzerland to adopt an international convention regarding these affairs. However, as the emphasis was on improving the situation of the wounded and

³ Gyalókay, Jenő: A világháború előtti korszakok. In: *Hadifogoly magyarok története*. Budapest: Athenaeum Irodalmi és nyomdai r. t., 1930, 1–42. (hereinafter: Gyalókay 1930).

sick, the issue of the POWs had not been discussed then. Nevertheless, as the convention allowed medical personnel and priests to continue their service or retire after a hostile occupation, the idea of regulating the POW issue gradually came to the fore in the upcoming decades.⁴

Due to the shortcomings of the Geneva Convention of 1864, a revision of the conference and the idea of codifying the laws and customs of war were soon planned. The first experiment took place in 1874 when the Russian Tsar, Alexander II convened an international conference with the presence of fifteen states in Brussels. One of the inherent features of the Russian initiative was mutual distrust which left its mark on the dealing of conference and prevented the ratification of the resolutions also known as the *Brussels Declaration*.⁵

Despite its weakness, the Brussel Declaration was a significant step forward as it stated for the first that time that if the civilian population of an attacked state resisted the occupation forces, they should be treated as a prisoner of war – if captured – similarly to professional army soldiers. The declaration also emphasized that the execution of those who surrendered was strictly prohibited, while individuals who concealed from the occupying power could be considered spies.⁶ At the same time, the document dealt with the question of POWs as highlighted in the following:

“Prisoners of war are lawful and disarmed enemies. They are in the power of the enemy’s Government, but not of the individuals or of the corps who made them prisoners. They should be treated humanely. Every act of insubordination authorizes the

⁴ Krivokapić, Boris: Ženevska konvencija o poboljšanju sudbine vojnih ranjenika u ratu (1864). Povodom 140 godina od pristupanja Srbije konvenciji. In: *Strani Pravni Život* 1 (1). 2016, 13–14.

⁵ Ibid. at 16.; Karkis, Kornél: A legújabb kor nemzetközi intézkedései. In: *Hadifogoly magyarok története*. Budapest: Athenaeum Irodalmi és nyomdai r. t., 1930. 43–44. (hereinafter: Karkis 1930).

⁶ O’Neil, Patrick M.: Brussels Declaration. In: *Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment*. Ed. Vance, F. Jonathan. Millerton: Grey House Publishing. 2006², 53–54.; Karkis 1930, 27–28.; Lóránt, Ármin: A hadifogoly-kérdésről. Budapest: Hedvig Imre könyvnyomdája. 1915, 27–28. (hereinafter: Lóránt 1930).

necessary measures of severity to be taken with regard to them. All their personal effects except their arms are considered to be their own property.”⁷

The declaration also stated that the Detaining Power might utilize the labor of those prisoners who were physically fit, but prohibited using them for heavy, “inhuman” and unbearable physical work. Lastly, the declaration mentioned that prisoners were expected to give their names and rank to assist the compilation and exchange of POW lists. Regardless of the faults of the Brussels Declaration, overall, it was a significant improvement in the field of the law of war, as it laid the foundations for the treatment of POWs.⁸

Following the meeting in Brussels, once again on the initiative of Russia, the International Conference in the Hague was held on 6 April 1898, where the issue of the Geneva law was again discussed. The meeting led to the first international itemized regulation of captivity. The provisions of the convention relating to prisoners of war were set out in Annex II: Chapter IV–XX. (A few include sections were adopted almost verbatim in the Second Hague Convention of 1907.) The participating states signed the declaration on 29 July 1899, although in Hungary, it was only ratified on 8 August 1913. In 1906, Switzerland retook the initiative and decided to convene a new Geneva meeting to revise the Geneva Convention of 1864. The text of the new agreement, which dealt more thoroughly the question of the POWs, was soon adopted.⁹

The Hague Conference of 1899 concluded with the desire that the convention’s text should be supplemented by the experience gained by the participating states in the meantime. For the next conference, the participants did not have to wait for long: it commenced on 15 June

⁷ *Project of an International Declaration concerning the Laws and Customs of War*. Brussels, 27th August 1874.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Gorcsa, Oszkár: Hadifoglyok és a Nagy Háború. Hadifogság az Osztrák–Magyar Monarchiában. In: *Belvedere Meridionale* 30 (1). 2018, 59. (hereinafter: Gorcsa 2018b)

1907, and 44 states were represented. Thirteen conventions were made at the meeting, four of which deal with prisoners of war.¹⁰

Articles on POWs in the Hague Convention of 1907, and their general issues.

Analyzing the text of the Hague Convention of 1907, which was in force during the First World War and was accepted by most belligerent states, we can conclude that despite deliberations of about half a century, many shortcomings in the law have not yet been remedied. It is worth reviewing the contents of the most inaccurate articles of law and comparing the theory with its practical applicability, in our case the Serbian prisoners of war. It should be stated the Article IV emphasized that

“prisoners of war are under the control of the enemy Government, not the individuals or team bodies who take them captive,”¹¹ and that “prisoners of war must be treated humanely,”¹²

but most essentially, it did not define who could be considered a POW. Furthermore, the article emphasized that the “hostile government”¹³ also had to protect the prisoner from all unnecessary ill-treatment and torture. Application of this became a severe issue due to the massive numbers of captured POWs, the spread of epidemics, the food shortages, propaganda, and mostly as there was a relative inexperience regarding the situation.¹⁴

In Article V elaborated on the issue of the internment of prisoners of war, but here too, we can only find half-measures, as the convention

¹⁰ Ibid. at 59–60.

¹¹ *Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land*. The Hague, 18th October 1907. Annex to the convention: regulations respecting the laws and customs of war on land section I: on belligerents chapter II: prisoners of war regulations: art. 4 (hereinafter Convention IV).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

stated that “prisoners of war may be interned in a city, castle, camp,”¹⁵ but there were no specific explanations regarding how POW camps should look like and where they should be located. (To this day, there are altering criteria set for POW camps.) As a result of the inaccuracies concerning what constitutes a POW camp, some Serbian historians interpret the conditions prevailing in the camps of the Monarchy as a conscious violation of the conventions.¹⁶

The direct consequence of the mass armies used in the Great War was the mass number of POWs the belligerent states received. As the High Command of Austria–Hungary was unprepared for an enduring “total” war, Monarchy faced issues to support the large number of POWs as evidenced by reports on the low reception capacity and semi-readiness of POW camps. The first and most crucial issue to be regulated concerning prisoners of war was the transportation to the POW camps. To prevent the plotting of prisoners of war, the military leadership considered it necessary that already during their transportation the prisoners of war of different nationalities should only be transported separately, not together. The first group of prisoners arrived in Hungary in September 1914, mostly Serbs and Russians. However, with the escalation of the war, a relatively large number of Italian and Romanian prisoners of war soon appeared. In addition, albeit in small numbers, other ethnicities were also present. As a result of the protracted war, in January 1917, 852,853 Russians, 97,712 Italians, 97,072 Serbs, 38,327 Romanians, 5,595 Montenegrins, 465 French, and 31 English, a total of 1,092,055 prisoners of war were in the register of the Monarchy.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.; Đuković, Isidor; Nađmeđer: *Austrougarski logor za srbe 1914–1918*. Beograd: Signature. 2002, 71–132. (hereinafter: Đuković 2002).

¹⁷ Miklós, Tamás: Első világháborús hadifogolytábor Esztergom-Kenyérmezőn. In: *Nagy Háború Blog*. 2012. (hereinafter: Miklós 2012). Vemić, Mirčeta: Pomor srba ratnih zarobljenika i interniranih civila u austrougarskim logorima za vreme prvog svetskog rata 1914–1918. In: *Zbornik Matice Srpske za Društvene Nauke* 147 (2). 2014, 201–233. (hereinafter: Vemić 2014).; Moritz, Verena: The Treatment of Prisoners of War in Austria–Hungary 1914/1915: The Historiography of Prisoners of War in the Late Habsburg Empire. In: *1914: Austria–Hungary, the Origins and the First Year of World War*

Prisoners of war were held in large prisoner of war camps such as Brüx, Josefstadt, Mauthausen, Arad, Dunaszerdahely, Somorja, Esztergom-Kenyérmező, Ostffyasszonyfa, but there were also several smaller ones. Alongside them, there were also internment camps for civilians.¹⁸

The following year – which shows exceptionally well the rapid swelling in the number of prisoners of war –, on 1 January 1918, there were already 1,309,394 prisoners registered; most of them were of Russian nationality. For their safe-custody, the Hungarian Royal Népfelkelés' twenty-six and the Royal-Imperial Landsturm's fifty-one battalions were responsible. With their affairs, the Imperial and Royal Ministry of War's 10th, the Royal Hungarian Ministry of Defense's Mg.a and Mg.b departments, and later on, the Main Group "D" of the Hungarian Ministry of Defense, and the XIII. POW Group's 54th division, and the Major Group "C" of the People's Security Commission.¹⁹

Serbian prisoners of war arrived at camps of the Monarchy in three phases. The first phase lasted from August to December 1914, that is to say until the end of the Potiorek-offensives.²⁰ A large number of Serbs captured at that time were transported to Esztergom-Kenyérmező. In addition to the semi-finished camps, Dalibor Denda's opinion is that their situation may have been aggravated by hatred caused by war propaganda. The start of the second phase was approximately the autumn of 1914, when the Serbs invaded the Hungarian land of Szerémség, while the third phase started in the winter from 1915 to 1916 during the occupation of Serbia. The transport of prisoners

I. Ed: Bischof, Günter – Karlhofer, Ferdinand – Williamson R., Samuel. Louisiana, USA: University of New Orleans Press. 2014, 237–240. (hereinafter: Moritz 2014).

¹⁸ Gorcsa 2018b *op. cit.*, 64.

¹⁹ Hadtörténelmi Levéltár [HL] HM 1918. Mg/B eln. 155–524. a. sz. Quotes: Blasszauer, Róbert: Hadifoglyok Magyarországon az I. világháború idején. In: *Ad Acta A Hadtörténelmi Levéltár Évkönyve*. Szerk.: Lenkefi Ferenc. Budapest: Hadtörténelmi Levéltár, 2002, 21. (hereinafter: Blasszauer 2002).

²⁰ Denda, Dalibor: Srpski ratni zarobljenici u Velikom Ratu. In: *Prvi svetski rat. Srbija, Balkan i velike sile*. Beograd: Istorijski institut – institut za strategijska istraživanja, 2015, 271. (hereinafter: Denda 2002).

of war to the camps also caused difficulties for the Monarchy. Due to the unprepared administration and the military leadership, the transportation of enemy prisoners to the hinterland was highly chaotic. Many traveled in cattle cars for days, resulting in frequent deaths, sometimes even before arriving to the camps, as many of the prisoners carried lethal viruses or pathogens, but health measures left much to be desired. This is perfectly illustrated by the fact that there were not enough medical personnel in the POW camps, as most doctors were serving on the front lines.²¹

As for the general condition of the POW camps, it can be stated that in the initial period, until the late autumn of 1914, they were undeveloped, did not have sufficient accommodation, and there were few doctors available. The common characteristics of the camps were that some of them were organized in marshy areas, wherein some cases even malaria spread,²² and this factor, together with the initial poor hygiene conditions, contributed to the spread of epidemics and high mortality rate.²³

In Esztergom-Kenyérmező, there was so little accommodation initially that most of the prisoners had to lay on the bare ground. Two large circus tents were erected for the Serbs, and those for whom there was no room left were placed along the water supply channel leading to the fishpond. The population also felt the gravity of the situation, and the locals of Esztergom criticized the conditions on a weekly bases:

“[...] The unfit authorities were not prepared to house the prisoners of war, they were particularly unprepared for the cold rainy weather, when without captivity even a captive game would have to suffer a lot.”²⁴

²¹ Gorcsa 2018b *op. cit.*, 64.

²² Hollaender, Hugo: *A malaria elterjedése Magyarországon*. Budapest: M. Kir. Belügyminisztérium. 1907, 30–33, 46–50. (hereinafter: Hollaender 1907).

²³ Vemić 2014 *op. cit.*, 205.

²⁴ Quotes: Miklós 2012 *op. cit.*, 1.

The area of the camp was fenced with barbed wire, and the situation was eerily similar in the Nagymegyér prisoner of war camp, with the difference that only the guardhouses were initially built here. Therefore, the prisoners remained in the open air until November 1914.²⁵

As a result of all these harsh conditions, cholera and typhoid fever became widespread at the end of 1914 and took most of its victims in the spring of 1915. However, the Monarchy sought to draw lessons from the situation, thus from 1915, camp barracks, epidemiological hospitals, and pharmacies in the camps became an essential requirement. As time passed, the Monarchy were successful in eliminating the issue regarding camps, which led to improved conditions as exemplified by the case of Esztergom-Kenyérmező where by the very end of 1914 the placement of prisoners of war was solved. Conclusively, the Monarchy tried to abide by the conventions, but the first two years proved to be trying due to unpreparedness and inexperience of the army and administration.²⁶

Article VI allows prisoners to be included in the economy, stating that

“the state may employ prisoners of war, with the exception of officers, in accordance with their rank and ability. Such work shall not be excessive and shall not be connected with military operations.”²⁷

The leadership and diplomacy of the Monarchy had been preparing for a possible war for years. However, the state's economy had not been prepared for a lasting conflict, and even the preparation for war placed limits on the economy. The usual French loans fell short, leading to stagnation in the economy. The leading circles of the Monarchy

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. at 2-4.

²⁷ Convention (IV), art. 6.

expected a solution to the economic stagnation from the war, but no professional drafts were made to solve it.²⁸

The war also resulted in an agricultural boom, as the army was in constant demand for agricultural goods. However, labor shortages did not spare this sector of the economy either. As a result, agricultural production had been declining year by year. However, due to the mass military calls, there was a vast shortage of laborers in the country, therefore the employment of prisoners of war in the Hungarian economy commenced.²⁹

The Hague Conventions expressly prohibited the use of prisoners of war for military purposes, nevertheless this part of the law was handled flexibly by the belligerent parties. An excellent example for this is France: German POWs were used to dig trenches for the French army.³⁰ In response, the Germans commanded their Polish and French POWs for similar work in both Western and Eastern front. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy followed suit: some prisoners worked in the Škoda factory, some were utilized behind the front lines, while others might have been even employed as minesweepers. All these cases were severe violations of international law.³¹

According to Article VII, “prisoners shall be maintained by the Government to which they have come under authority.”³² In Hungary, the competent POW camp was responsible for the treatment of POWs in practice. In most cases, it was possible to deal with the situation without

²⁸ Hajdu, Tibor – Pollmann, Ferenc: *A régi Magyarország utolsó háborúja 1914–1918*. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó. 2014, 159–163. (hereinafter: Hajdu – Pollmann 2017); Rauchensteiner, Manfred: *Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie 1914–1918*. Wien – Köln – Weimar: Böhlau Verlag. 2013, 202. (hereinafter: Rauchensteiner 2013).

²⁹ Hajdu – Pollmann 2013 *op. cit.*, 163.; Rauchensteiner 2013 *op. cit.*, 207.; Gorcsa 2018b *op. cit.*, 69–70.

³⁰ Ferguson, Niall: *The Pity of War 1914–1918*. London. 1999², 371–372. (hereinafter: Ferguson 2013).

³¹ Moritz, Verena – Walleczek-Fritz, Julia: Prisoners of War (Austria-Hungary). In: Daniel, Ute – Gatrell, Peter – Janz, Oliver – Jones, Heather – Keene, Jennifer – Kramer, Alan – Nasson, Bill (eds.): *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014.

³² Convention (IV), art. 7.

any particular difficulties. However, there were also irregularities, especially in the last two years of war, which resulted in shortages of clothes and sometimes even food.

Article IX emphasized:

“Every prisoner of war shall, if asked to do so, state his real name and rank and, in the event of a breach of this rule, shall deprive himself of the benefits accorded to prisoners of war of the same rank.”³³

Throughout the First World War, the distorted recording of names was a serious problem, making it almost impossible at times to notify relatives. A Hungarian example goes as following:

“A name in the lists, such as Korgel Schwepzer proved to be Kornél Schweitzer; Migul Bicsant, Erdi-Zuckane, Veredetraschy peeled out the names of the well-known Hungarian localities of Büdszentmihály, Erdőcsokonya and Veresegyháza.”³⁴

Article XX emphasizes that “prisoners of war shall be returned to their homeland as soon as possible after peace has been reached.”³⁵ In the case of Serbian POWs in Hungary, this happened mainly by October 1918.³⁶

³³ Convention (IV), art. 9.

³⁴ Lóránt 1915 *op. cit.*, 64–65.

³⁵ Convention (IV) art. 20.

³⁶ Gorcsa 2018a *op. cit.*, 51.

3 Concentration camps³⁷ in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy?

To date, there have been several attempts to explain the basic idea of Nazi Germany's concentration camps based on the precedent prisoner of war camps in the Great War.³⁸ This is exponentially true for some Serbian historians. According to Isidor Đuković, the prisoner of war camps were a network of mass destruction systems, the primary purpose of which was to work and starve the enemy to death. In brief, he believes there were death camps in the Monarchy. Mirčeta Vemić expressed a similar opinion, but such articles and trail of thought can also be found in a large number in the Serbian press.³⁹ The former base their views on a 1919 statistic prepared for the peace conference, according to which there were about 300 camps in Austria-Hungary. However, this statement is not valid, as we know from official state documents that "only" about 50 camps could have been established in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Approximately 20 of them operated in Hungary.⁴⁰ Reviewing their research findings of the above-mentioned Serbian scholars, it seems most likely that the internment camps were confused with the POW camps. However, 300 camps still seem a high number, therefore we have to assume that larger settlements with permanent prisoner of war workers were also included in the statistics. Our hypothesis can be supported partially by Paksy's explanation that

³⁷ A penal colony established to isolate and detain a section of a state's population or different ethnic groups in conquered countries. First, the Spanish colonists created a concentration camp for those captured in the struggle for independence in Cuba (1867-78), then the English in South Africa during the Boer War (1899-1902). The concentration camps of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union became infamous, where millions were destroyed. Markó, László: *Általános történelmi fogalomgyűjtemény*. Budapest, 2004, 113.

³⁸ Đuković 2002, 71-172.; Vemić 2014, 201-233.; Pastor, Peter: Introduction. In: Williamson, Samuel -Pastor, Peter (eds): *Essays on World War I: Origins and Prisoners of War*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1983, 113-117. (hereinafter: Pastor 1983).

³⁹ Svetozar Crnogorac: Zaboravljeni logor smrti u doboju: Mjesto u kome je izvršen prvi genocid nad srbima u 20. vijeku. In: *Jadovno 1941*. Source: www.jadovno.com, or Dobojski logor je prvo organizovano masovno stratište Evrope. In: *Jadovno 1941*. Source: www.jadovno.com, accessed: 2021.11.06. B. Subašić: Planovi Austrougarske: Za Srbe logori i odredi smrti. In: *Jadovno 1941*. www.jadovno.com.

⁴⁰ *The Austro-Hungarian POW Camps*: www.Austro-Hungarian-army.co.uk.

there were larger camps in the Monarchy for the permanent guarding of prisoners, where thousands of people were detained. In addition, there were camps for the guarding of prisoners in unique situations with small numbers of detainees. They also included quarantine bases that did not officially qualify as camps.⁴¹ What makes the situation interesting is that Paksy confirms our view that the prisoners were held in accordance with international laws, the treatment was adequate, the officers were placed in separate camps, and they could not be forcibly detained for manual labor, among other things, they also received a monthly salary.

We must also investigate the claim whether Austria–Hungary was the first in the world to invent modern concentration and extermination camps. If so, there are two possible consequences in regard to the effectiveness of the Hague Conventions. The first is that

“the Hague Conventions played a negligible role in influencing the treatment of prisoners of war, as they could not prevent atrocities, the humanization of warfare. The other possibility was that the Hague Convention played a significant role in prescribing treatment, but the document itself was flawed, and this allowed for the emergence of newer types of repressive camps.”⁴²

The above line of reasoning was formulated by Peter Pastor concerning the Russian POW camps, but it is worth comparing his theory with the Austro–Hungarian treatment. It is necessary to highlight the main elements of Pastor’s prototype theory and compare them with the conditions prevailing in the Monarchy and Serbia, respectively. The main elements of Pastor’s prototypical explanation for Russia are as follows:

⁴¹ Paksy, Zoltán: Hadifogolytáborból internálótábor. A traumák nyomán átalakuló Magyarország új intézményei. In: *1916 – a fordulat éve? Tanulmányok a Nagy Háborúról*. Szerk. Egry Gábor – Kaba Eszter. Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó. 2017, 157-159. (hereinafter: Paksy 2017).

⁴² Pastor 1983 *op. cit.*, 113–117.

1. qualitative selection between different camps,
2. intentional discrimination by “purpose,”
3. the use of prisoners in large construction projects in hostile environments,
4. using propaganda to defeat enemy soldiers.

The essence of the first element was that there were intentional differences in quality between the camps. The best were located in the European part of Russia, reserved for the Slavs who were expected to cause no trouble or to switch sides in the long run. In contrast, prisoners described as unreliable were placed among the worst found in Siberia and Central Asia. German, Austrian and Hungarian soldiers were placed in such camps. Thus, ethnicity determined the quality of care in Russia.⁴³

Second, the gravity of the situation shows that even in the Russian prisoner of war camps in Europe, survival was not granted, which means that the treatment was very different than outlined in and expected by the Hague Conventions. Pastor claims that the Russian POW camps were an independent breed and exponentially worse than the camps elsewhere. Furthermore, he believes that the practice of the Russian military authorities in other belligerent states has not been matched.⁴⁴ Reinhard Nachtigal interpreted the situation in Russia in a similar way describing the prison camp in Tockoye using the word of Ernst von Streeruwitz as a “*Totenlager*.” At the same time, it is crucial to state that Streeruwitz’s wording should be understood in contemporary context, aiming to describe mass mortality. According to Pastor, the third element was the use of prisoners on large-scale construction sites in a hostile environment. This is crucial because, in Pastor’s view, the treatment was similar to that of the Stalinist era, where the “*zeks*” died en masse due to disease, malnutrition, and work accidents. To illustrate this, he mentions the construction of the Murman Railway, which was 1,400 kilometers long, and 70,000 prisoners of war were used for its

⁴³ Quotes Rachamimov, Alon: *Pows and the Great War. Captivity on the Eastern Front*. Oxford-New York: Berg Publishers. 2002, 80. (hereinafter: Rachamimov 2002).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

construction from July 1915 to October 1916. The fourth element of Pastor's thesis is winning hostile prisoners through propaganda. He believes that while this was common practice for most belligerent states, showing "loyalty" to Russia was a matter of life or death.⁴⁵

Following Pastor's line of reasoning, it is clear that the treatment of prisoners in Russia left the most to be desired. Furthermore, we can also state clearly that if we compare the above elements with the situation in Hungary, we have to report much better treatment. Namely, in Hungary, but also in the whole territory of the Monarchy, there was no example of qualitative selection between the camps. Nor can we talk about discrimination by purpose unless we include the plan to organize separate nationality camps at the beginning of war, which had never been executed due to the arrival of large numbers of prisoners. We consider it essential to emphasize that the only primary purpose of ethnic selection was to prevent the organization and mutiny of prisoners of war. As for Serbia, ethnic segregation initially prevailed as the military leadership grouped the POWs in three categories:

1. South Slavs,
2. Other Slavs,
3. Non-Slavs.

In the first and second groups, treatment was better to make the recruitment of prisoners to the gendarmerie and the border guard possible. Those in the third group could, by implication, be penalized by the worst treatment. However, the situation quickly became unsustainable due to the arrival of the masses and the chaotic conditions.⁴⁶

Furthermore, according to the sources uncovered so far, the prisoners were not employed in large construction projects in the Austria-Hungarian, and – similarly to most belligerent states – they

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Delić, Nino: Austrougarski vojnici češkog porekla u srpskom zarobljeništvu 1914-1915. Različita iskustva i viđenja. In: Krstić, V. Petar (ur.): *Država i politika upravljanja (18-20. vek)*. Beograd: Istorijski institut. 2017, 259. (hereinafter: Delić 2017).

were employed in compliance with the laws of war, also receiving payment for their work. The latter did not apply in all cases in Serbia, as the amount earned, mainly for the care of prisoners, was mainly withdrawn from prisoners. Prisoners often walked the streets without food and money, begging.⁴⁷ As for the last element, Hungary, like Serbia, used intense propaganda to win prisoners over, but – contrary to Russia – switching sides was not a matter of life or death.⁴⁸

The analysis and description of the above are significant because, based on Pastor's views, it is clear that the treatment of prisoners in Hungary was better than in Russia, where the first types of concentration camps operated. It should be mentioned that Rachamimov's work partially clarifies and partially overturns Pastor's conclusions.⁴⁹ According to Rachamimov, we cannot talk about prisoner of war camps at all in First World War Russia. In our opinion, this is true for most of the belligerent states in the first two years of the war because the concept of the camp itself was a poorly defined institution, and often prisoners accommodated in freestanding military buildings.⁵⁰ In Serbia a camp network system could not have developed due to the frequent invasion, and eventual occupation of the Balkan state. This can be best demonstrated by the fact that the Serbian Ministry of War did not order the establishment of a prisoner of war command until 11 November 1914.⁵¹

Based on the above, we can state that the prisoners were initially accommodated similarly to each country's own soldiers. The life of the officer prisoners was slightly better as they were placed in separate officer camps, received payment, and they had the right to have furniture, servants, good food etc. Officers often lived better in captivity than the belligerent state's own citizens. Subsequently, the POW camps reflected the 19th century's the hierarchical way of thinking and did

⁴⁷ Gorcsa 2018a *op. cit.*, 44.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Rachamimov 2002 *op. cit.*, 123.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Delić 2017 *op. cit.*, 253–254.

not represent a prototype of concentration camps.⁵² The fact that the Monarchy spent 2,5% of its total military expenditure on maintaining prisoners in 1916–1917 – a higher amount than was spent on motorized vehicles, explosives, and airplanes combined – confirms this.⁵³

4 Examples of the treatment of Serbian POWs in First World War Hungary. A comparative analysis

4.1 The feeding and clothing of POWs

In connection with the feeding and clothing of POWs, the military leadership of the Monarchy received numerous criticisms from the Serbian side. Until today, the focus of these criticisms has increasingly shifted to the leaders of the Hungarian state during the First World War. Concerning the question of feeding the POWs, Isidor Đuković formulated the harshest criticism. According to him, the leadership of the Monarchy tried to provide the prisoners with as little food as possible, which was exponentially true in the case of POW labor squads, and the goal of all these efforts was to deliberately starve the Serbian POWs to death.⁵⁴

However, our sources do not support this claim but prove the contrary. In reality, prisoners of war had to be provided with three meals a day. All this had to be accurately reported to the guardian commanders of the POW labor squads.⁵⁵ The meal may have varied from place to place, but the specified caloric intake was the same for every POW. This was also confirmed by Isidor Đuković's monograph, which was mainly based on the recollections and letters of the Serbian prisoners of war in Nagymegyér. According to this, there were three meals a day in the Nagymegyér POW camp that included mashed

⁵² Rachamimov 2002 *op. cit.*, 123.

⁵³ Davis H., Gerald: Prisoners of War in Twentieth century War Economies. *Journal of Contemporary History* 12 (4). 1977, 629. (hereinafter: Davis 1977).

⁵⁴ Pastor 1983 *op. cit.*, 106–115.

⁵⁵ MNL CSCSML SZL IV. B. 402. I. Reggeli jelentés [IN] [HN] 1916. április 18–26.

potatoes, cabbage, beets, beans, 100 grams of meat once a week, fish slices every two weeks, and poor-quality margarine instead of lard.⁵⁶

As for the clothing of the POWs, including Serbs, our most valuable sources are the morning reports of the soldiers in charge of guarding prisoners. It is clear from these medical examinations – with simultaneous clothing examinations – were carried out weekly. Often the employers did not wait for the examinations to take place but asked for clothes for their prisoners beforehand. The largest issue in regard clothing was the lack of underwear, as it proved to be the fastest to wear out.⁵⁷

4.2 Work, working hours, and wages of Serbian prisoners of war

Regardless of their nationality, prisoners of war were sent to farms, towns, and villages, which disregarded the Ministry of Defense's 7598/1915. pres. A. no. circular decree that aimed for the segregation of POWs.⁵⁸ The workplaces had to be far away from busy settlements to minimize contact with the civilian population. The work time was 12 hours a day, and according to the regulations of the Minister of the Interior in 1915, only healthy POWs could be sent to work in agriculture or to perform other earthwork. The POWs had to undergo medical examinations every five days for the first two weeks before and after they were put to work, which dismantles Đuković's claim that the POWs had to work even if ill.⁵⁹

The POWs put to work had a day of rest on Sunday, which all employers were obliged to secure. The exception to this rule was if there were significant disruptions in field of work, but in this case, the POWs had to be paid higher wages. Another exception occurred if the

⁵⁶ Gorcsa 2018a *op. cit.*, 38.

⁵⁷ MNL CSCSML ML V.72. C. 1917/1144; MNL CSCSML SZL IV. B. 402. I. Jelentés: Dombiratos 1917/VI.2.

⁵⁸ 7598/1915. H. M. eln. A. sz. körrendelet (1915. június 11.) In: *Belügyi Közlöny* 20 (33). 1915. 661.

⁵⁹ MNL CSCSML ML V. 72. C. 1459/1916.

prisoner of war followed the Islam faith: Friday was the day of rest for them instead of Sunday. In addition, the Ministry of Defense's decree No. 44509 prisoners of war could not be sent to work during major religious holidays. Thus,

“Greek Catholic and Greek Oriental (Orthodox) prisoners of war are exempted from all work on the afternoon of 6th January, and on January 7, 8, and 19, respectively.”⁶⁰

In light of this, it can be said that Mirčeta Vemić's claim that POW workers had to work without a break, even on the most significant holidays, does not hold true.⁶¹

The POW workers daily wage was 50 fillér⁶² regardless of nationality. This amount was increased by wage supplements paid to improve work ethic. Thus, until 1917, the maximum wage for agricultural and industrial workers could be one crown. According to Isidor Đuković, this amount was a hundred times less than what the citizens of the Monarchy received. However, if we study the *Agricultural Wages in Hungary* published annually by the Minister of Agriculture, last published in 1914, we get to different conclusions: in the last year of peace, the average daily wage of agricultural workers was 235 fillér or 2,35 crowns. This means that prisoners of war earned on average five times less than the agricultural workers of the Monarchy.⁶³

On the other hand, if we take into account the daily care costs of POW workers, a very different picture emerges, as “the total daily costs of a prisoner – even if the construction of an apartment does not have to be taken care of – was between 170 and 180 fillér's”.⁶⁴ To this amount, if we add the daily earnings, we get 220 to 230 fillérs. Thus,

⁶⁰ MNL CSCSML ML V. 72. C. 9/1916.

⁶¹ Vemić 2014 *op. cit.*, 205.

⁶² Pence.

⁶³ Đuković 2002 *op. cit.*, 104.

⁶⁴ Gorcsa 2018a *op. cit.*, 41.

in our opinion, the earnings of prisoner of war workers did not differ much from those of local workers, who had to provide for themselves.⁶⁵

In short, it is necessary to outline wage developments in Serbia, as the Monarchy has been severely criticized in this area, thus it may be worth comparing the two countries. In Serbia, prisoner of war workers in state-owned enterprises were paid between ½ and 2 dinars a day.⁶⁶ This was a value of a maximum of 2 crowns per day, but wages were not paid in most places, as these sums were mostly deducted from them, mainly for their benefits.⁶⁷ Only the doctors were able to carry out their work professionally as prisoners of war. Thus, Dr. Róbert Schatz earned 183 dinars a month, which he regularly received until October 1915. In this light, it becomes clear that prisoners of war in the Monarchy could live in better conditions in terms of accommodation and wages. However, in Serbia, the prisoners had no reason to complain if they could carry out their previous work professionally even after their imprisonment.

4.3 Treatment of prisoners of war: accommodation and punishments

The treatment of prisoners of war has also been the subject of numerous criticisms from the Serbian side. These reviews are worth looking at the basis of the following points: accommodation, punishments, and wages. Most POW workers were housed in villages or towns near factories to make their control easier. The only significant disadvantage of this was the overcrowding of the accommodations. In the case of factories, the proximity of the workplace was to the detriment of hygiene conditions. It is safe to say that the placement of prisoner

⁶⁵ Ibid. at 104.; Gorcsa 2018a *op. cit.*, 41.

⁶⁶ The value of 1 dinar corresponded approximately to the value of 1 Austro-Hungarian crown.; Faragó László: A Balkán-félszigeten. In: *Hadifogoly magyarok története*. Budapest: Athenaeum Irodalmi és nyomdai r. t. 1930, 100. (hereinafter: Faragó 1930).

⁶⁷ Ibid. at 108.

workers was not impeccable but not as critical as it appears in Serbian historiography. Prisoner workers were housed like seasonal workers, mainly in empty barns or other large buildings. The floor was covered with straw in the shelters, but a separate straw bed was typically not provided. These conditions can be said to be tolerable in mild weather. The occurrence of winter was the biggest problem, as some of the buildings could not be heated.⁶⁸

The situation of prisoners in Serbia was similar to that of the soldiers sent to work and the camp dwellers, as most of them were crowded into barns, and lice were bustling everywhere in their accommodation. Moreover, it cannot be neglected that the prisoners of war, in most cases, lay on the ice-cold ground.⁶⁹ Thus, it can be stated that the accommodation of prisoners of war encountered severe difficulties in both states. However, due to the poverty caused by wars, Serbia provided a worse environment and accommodation for its prisoners. Thus, allegations from the Serbian side that the destruction of Serbian prisoners of war with poor accommodation and meals would have been the ultimate goal of the Monarchy are unfounded. It provided Serbian prisoners of war with the same accommodation as their own seasonal workers.

The punishment of prisoners of war is another controversial point. According to Đuković, Serbian prisoners had to endure inhuman punishments for every small mistake. Such methods of punishment were caning, hog-tying, hanging, food deprivation, multi-week confinement. Hog-tying was a form of punishment accepted in the Hungarian part of the Monarchy until 1917, when the last ruler of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Charles IV⁷⁰ banned the use of it.⁷¹ The

⁶⁸ Ibid. at 42.

⁶⁹ Ibid. at 59–62.

⁷⁰ In the Austrian half of the empire: Charles I.

⁷¹ Speidl, Zoltán: A „számkivetett”, és a „mesebeli” király. IV. Károly és fia, Ottó – legitimista „legendák”. In: *„A királyhűség jól bevált útján...”: rendi és nemzeti kötődések szimbolikus változásai 1867 és 1918 között.* Szerk.: Glässer, Norbert – Zima András – Nagyillés Anikó. Szeged: Néprajzi és Kulturális Antropológiai Tanszék. 2016, 423–444. (hereinafter: Speidl 2016).

punishment of food deprivation was indeed present in the Great War. However, it was only until 1917, as the Military Command of Temesvár on 23 March 1917, instructed all military bodies under its jurisdiction to abolish the punishment by fasting. As for the punishment of POW workers by hanging in the realm, there are no proofs in archival sources and recollections. Furthermore, due to the severe military punishments, the crew did not dare to try illegal punishment methods because every suspicious death or punishment was the subject of grave investigations.⁷²

As for the sentences in Serbia, they were reported to be more severe, according to reports from Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war. In places where officers were not present, abuse was common. Dr. Emil Brezovsky, a prisoner of war and a reserve colonel, witnessed such cases:

“In Szvriljg [...], the military commanders and inspectors also treated the prisoners cruelly. They were punished for every trifle, beaten. On one occasion, I saw a Serbian lieutenant take the stick out of the inspector’s hand because he had not hit him hard enough and he carried out the punishment, after which he even kicked the unfortunate in the face twice with his boots, leaving bloody stains in the nails.”⁷³

He also witnessed another case in Kragujevac:

“It happened that one of our soldiers, who complained to him about his illness in Hungarian, shouted at him, “You can only speak Serbian here! I will not listen to your complaint until you learn Serbian!”⁷⁴

⁷² Đuković 2002, 102.; MNL CSCSML SZL IV. B. 402. I. Cs. és Kir. KPT, M. A. Nr. 13099. Abschaffung der Strafe des Anbindens für die Kgf. (1917).

⁷³ Faragó 1930 *op. cit.*, 100.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

On the other hand, it is a fact that such extreme treatment was not standard everywhere, as for Dr. Viktor Rosenzweig, a prisoner of war colonel in the case of Paraćin, he reported good treatment. However, Charles Vopicka, the U.S. Ambassador to Bucharest, had stated the opposite. Given the above, it can be concluded that all violations in the Monarchy were taken much more gravely than in Serbia, which may also be because the control of soldiers in the hinterland had not been destroyed by the war was more manageable than in Serbia.⁷⁵

5 Conclusions

In our study, we overviewed and assessed the significant international measures taken to mitigate the negative consequences of wars, also prioritizing the issue of prisoners of war. Although these measures had been ratified by the signatory states before the outbreak of the First World War, nonetheless the inclarities and shortcomings of the conventions opened up a space for interpretation, resulting in different approaches exercised by the belligerent parties towards POWs. These miscellaneous approaches often characterized by eventual mismanagement or unprederedness contributed to and deepened war trauma, which was even more exacerbated by the fragmentation of Central and Eastern Europe after the First World War. As a result, the division in Europe intensified during the 1920's and 1930's with former belligerent neighboring states blaming each other for the outbreak and damages of the Great War.

The issue of prisoners of war also fits into this narrative framework. The correspondences of POWs attest accounts and personal interpretations on the prevailing treatment in a particular camp. It is necessary to make a marked distinction between officer prisoners and crews because the formers' way of life in captivity changed only to the extent of their freedom of movement being restricted. In contrast, crew prisoners had a much more difficult fate, as they had to take their share

⁷⁵ Ibid, 109.

of the country's economy almost without exception. Although they were given a statutory wage for their assigned jobs, depending on their social status some found these humiliatingly low-class. Among other factors, criticism on food and accommodation may be traced back to the social standing of POWs. However, we cannot ignore that the Monarchy's average citizens lived their daily lives in similar circumstances.

The complaints of prisoners of war were particularly strong in the first two years of the war. They wrote en masse about many deaths, the lack of doctors, poor housing conditions, and possible punishments. This can be explained by the fact that the prisoner of war network was formed in the first two years of the war, and only then did the epidemic normalize. Although the Monarchy tried to curb epidemics and mass deaths with superhuman force, the prisoners in the system were unaware of these attempts. The situation was only exacerbated by the use of prisoners as labor for undeveloped camps. This made some Serbian internees and prisoners, especially intellectuals, to believe that the Monarchy's military leadership had only one goal, that is the destruction of imprisoned. The survivors often published their war accounts, which were imbued with propaganda, and sometimes with ideology. These works are also used as primary sources and being often cited by today's historians, who rarely accesses the official state documents of the former Habsburg Empire, but solely rely on these accounts. (Prisoner of war documents can be accessed at the Viennese military archives.) Without primary sources from the Monarchy, the operation mechanism of the POW camps' network, and the treatment of prisoners of war cannot be fully understood. In our opinion, this may have led some scholars to make claims on POW camps of Austria-Hungary during the First World War being almost similar to extermination camps.

Examining the works of Isidor Đuković and Mirčeta Vemić, it can be stated that they are based almost exclusively on letters and recollections of former Serbian POWs in Hungary. Other documents found outside Serbian archives, including Hungary and Austria, were not used and are probably unknown to them. As a result, the conclusions of their work

are highly questionable. However, as research on the topic of POWs has not been popular in the past, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, very few researchers have dealt with it so far, and some views – such as the two scholars’ – have not yet been adequately revised.

Based on the above, we can conclude that a number of misconceptions on the subject have not been readdressed to date, and that the general treatment of the Serbian POWs in Hungary was mainly satisfying. This can be also attested by the fact that most of the captured POWs were able to return home at the end of the war. In contrast, in the case of Hungarian soldiers captured in Serbia, unfortunately, this cannot be stated: due to a number of epidemics the numbers of captured soldiers alive dropped to 35,000 from 80,000. After the occupation of Serbia, the survivors were transported to Asinara by Serbian soldiers and sadly only 6,000 of them returned home.

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