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The Attitude of the Administration of Bessarabia Towards the Subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire Living in the Territory of Its Province During WWI

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Отношение администрации Бессарабии к проживавшим на территории губернии подданным Австро-Венгрии в годы Первой мировой войны

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Unlike the other Russian governorates, the territory between the Prut and the Dniester called Bessarabia which became part of Russia in 1812 was intensively settled (especially its South and North) by immigrants from the Balkans and the Moldavian Principality, including those from Bukovina annexed to Austria in 1774. After becoming permanent residents, many of the immigrants acquired Russian citizenship.

At the beginning of the 20th century, over, 250,000 Rusins lived in Bessarabia. Unfortunately, these are ballpark figures and they do not show the true number of migrants. Some researchers indicate that there was mass migration of Rusins from Austria-Hungary to Bessarabia before the Great War.

The situation of the Austro-Hungarian nationals in the territory of Bessarabia changed before and during the Great War when they automatically became citizens of the states being at war with Russia. This period is still one of the least studied pages in our history. Some useful light can be cast on the matter with the help of dossiers stored in such funds of the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova as

“The Office of Bessarabian Governor-General”, “The Bessarabian Police Administration” and “The Bessarabian Governorate Gendarme Police Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs”.

1,459,000 German immigrants (35.1% of the total number of migrants) and 888,000 Austro-Hungarian subjects (21.4%) lived in Russia from 1828 to 1915. Galicians, migrants from Bukovina, Poles and Czechs were the largest group. From 1911 to 1915, 59,000 German citizens and 41,000 Austro-Hungarian citizens immigrated to Russia. A number of immigrants eventually acquired Russian citizenship.

The results of the 1897 census showed that 0.5% of people out of 158,100 German subjects lived in Bessarabia. There were 121,600 Austro-Hungarian subjects in Russia, 13.2% of whom settled in Bessarabia. According to the 1897 census, in the Bessarabian Governorate there were 23,157 foreigners, including 15,994 Austro-Hungarian subjects (mainly, Rusins) or 69.1% of their total number, 1,267 Turkish subjects or 5.5%, 473 Prussian subjects or 2%, 330 German subjects or 1.4%, and 400 Bulgarian subjects or 1.7%. 12,014 people out of 21,687 subjects of the Russian Empire who were foreign-born but lived in Bessarabia, were born in Austria-Hungary.

Although the lists of foreign nationals living in the Governorate were made regularly, it was hardly possible to consider them complete. A lot of migrants from Austrian Bukovina lived with their families for several scores of years in the villages of Bessarabia. Local landowners and tenants took a great interest in those people and welcomed them. Similar cases became known quite by chance, just as in the case called “Information on the Austrian Subjects Living in Bessarabia” which was initiated on January 18, 1913, and completed on September 23, 1914, after the war had broken out. The case concerned the petition of 25 Rusins who were Austrian subjects (living in the village of Slobozia of Beltsy District in the north of Bessarabia). The Rusins and the members of their families applied for Russian citizenship. The investigation and proceedings revealed that some of the applicants had lived in Bessarabia for over thirty continuous years without any passports, residence permit or licences. Their children were born in Bessarabia. But all of them were deemed to be the citizens of Austria-Hungary.

The forcible resettlement of the Austro-Hungarian and German draft age citizens to the interior provinces began shortly before the declaration of war. Those whose loyalty was beyond doubt were permitted to stay on under police surveillance after signing the pledge not to leave their localities. To initiate mass deportations, the Ministry of Internal Affairs opened a number of centers in major cities throughout the Empire. Prisons, guarded barrack-type buildings or

hastily built temporary relocation camps were used as such centres. Groups of deportees were relocated under guard in sealed freight cars to the provinces pre-determined as their points of destination. In July 1914, Viatka, Vologda and Orenburg provinces were assigned as the places of exile. Since 1915 reservists and their families had been relocated to Saratov, Ufa and Kazan provinces and then to Perm and Yenisey governorates.

Despite the fact that all exiled Austro-Hungarian and German citizens were under police surveillance, they enjoyed freedom and were not subject to forced labour.

Though the State had undertaken providing sustenance for “civilian captives” and had been paying their rent, the allocated funds were not sufficient enough.

Austria-Hungary and Germany took similar measures in regard of the Russian citizens. At that time draft age men were seen as potential enemy soldiers who, in case of repatriation, were called up for military service in their native country. Such men made up the majority of the internees during the First World War. In the Russian Empire, the Slavs who were subjects of the hostile States were often not subject to deportation. On August 14, 1914, the Ministry of Internal Affairs took a resolution which allowed to exclude draft age men of the Serbian, Czech and Rusin origin from the deportation lists.

On August 25, the Bessarabian Governor-General issued a similar decree, Order Nr. 2640. According to this document, the German and Austro-Hungarian subjects aged from 18 to 45, though bound to military service, were exempt from it as being of Czech, Galician and of other Slavic origin, after signing a special written promise not to leave their places of residence. Those unfit or ineligible for military service as well as the Armenian Gregorians and the Armenian Catholics were also exempt from military service.

Quite often the civil administrative bodies approached the county military authorities and solicited for non-deportment of the persons who applied for the Russian citizenship (including Rusins who were Austro-Hungarian citizens). If such persons had been deported before obtaining the Russian citizenship, the query was sent about their current location for the delivery of the appropriate order.

At the same time, the Rusins (including those who were Russian subjects) suspected of espionage were exiled outside the governorate.

Keywords

Austro-Hungary, Rusins, Bessarabia, Slavs, WWI, deportation, foreign subjects.