

An Oversimplified History of Galicia - Steve Stroud

Most of us know quite well the situation in North America at the time of the American Revolution. We know how the colonists fought the British with the help of the French and the Poles and how the British employed the Hessians to help their fight. Yet most of us see the Europe of that time in a contemporary way. We think of the same powers existing there then as they are now, but the situation was radically different. We think of England as a mighty power, but the country had over-extended itself. Goods in the colonies were priced by law at the same price as they were in the homeland. Considering the costs of transportation, this was a totally unrealistic concept, and this led to taxes being imposed on the American colonists, which in turn led to the revolution. England's power at this point was on the wane as it had expended a great deal of its resources to fight a futile battle against the American colonies.

France was a power that had seen better days. Its royal families had been on a spending spree for years, building magnificent edifices dedicated to its former glories. It was a country on the eve of a revolution, which would leave it crippled for years. The glories of the French Empire were past and its colonies were so loosely connected to it that they were very nearly independent states.

Germany as a country did not exist. There were two major empires, Prussia and Bavaria, but the rest of what is now Germany was made up of various city-states, duchies, palatinates, and other semi-autonomous governmental bodies. It wasn't until the time of our own civil war that Germany became a real country, consolidating many of the smaller states into one nation. The language of German was only established as the national language in 1905. Prior to that, there were many other varieties of German spoken throughout the land. If you look at the church records for a German speaking church in the US from the very early days, you will not find people's place of birth listed as Germany, but rather, you'll find places like Hesse, Saxony, Prussia, etc. This can make your genealogical search more difficult, because some of the areas that were Germanic are no longer German, but belong to other countries.

Italy, as a country, also did not exist. Parts of it belonged to France, but for the most part, it was, like Germany, composed of smaller states.

Spain and Portugal, which had been extremely active in previous years, had become stagnant and were no longer counted among the world powers.

There are always super-powers in the world, and when one of them stagnates or is defeated, there are always new

ones that move in to fill the void. With the decline of Western Europe, Central Europe moved in to fill that void. Countries that had missed out on the grab for colonies came to power. This was the era of colonialism, and without colonies, these countries felt less than super-powers. The Russian Empire was one of these countries. It expanded its borders to the East and to the South. It grabbed smaller countries in Central Europe that could not defend themselves, such as Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Finland.

Another major power was Prussia. This is the country that most people think of as Germany when doing historical or genealogical research. Prussia was unable to expand in any direction, but was able to expand its influence in the rest of Europe.

The third major power, and perhaps the one we're most interested in, was Austria, or the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This country was also interested in colonies, and absorbed smaller countries to the south and east. It became a multi-national state, which eventually led to its end.

These three super-powers were allied in many ways for their own protection. At one point, they decided that they all needed more space and buffer zones as protection from one another. The hapless victim of this expansion was Poland. The Poles had built major cities that rivaled any in Western Europe, but in the hinterlands, the people lived in abject poverty. The arable land was being used poorly and the lands that could become arable were ignored. The people lived a subsistence life, many in homes that were much like the native Americans had. Homes were without windows or chimneys, and filled with smoke for half the year. The three powers saw this as a waste of productive land, and saw fit to divide this land among themselves. I'm sure that the American expression "We're from the government and we're here to help you," was very appropriate at this time.

The super-powers saw it as their duty to improve the lives of these people. That's what colonialism was all about. It was a misguided notion that the colonialists knew what was best for people, then proceeded to force it upon their colonies.

The super-powers split up Poland, leaving a small portion of what they considered "civilized" under its own power. Prussia expanded from the West, Russia from the East and Austria from the South. The Austrian part of Poland became Galicia, and this is our area of concentration.

Austria and Russia felt the need for experienced artisans and farmers to help civilize the country. Both advertised in the Palatinates for colonists to come to the newly opened areas. They extended offers quite similar to the concept in the US, where "40 acres and a mule" was

the lure to colonize the west. Austria and Russia offered quite similar lures, promising land, tools, livestock and other incentives to come to their colonies. Russia offered eternal exemption from military service as one additional incentive. Austria wanted to limit its colonists to Catholics only, since Austria was at least nominally Catholic. This requirement was circumvented at first and was later withdrawn. The new colonists were provided transportation from their homelands to a point of registration and departure. In the case of Galicia, this was Vienna. It was from the records in Vienna that Schneider developed his lists of colonists.

Once the new colonists were registered, they were transported to a point near their new homes. In general, they were transported along the rivers in something like a covered barge, then in wagons something like a stagecoach or Conestoga wagon. Once they had arrived at the drop-off point, they had to proceed on foot to their new homes. They were given directions, but no guides. Since none of the new colonists could speak the local languages, they were totally on their own in a strange place. Eventually, most colonists reached their final destination. Once they had arrived, the local government representative made arrangements for housing and deliverance of their incentives. In the early years, many of these new colonists died from the hardships they endured. Life expectancy was very short for those first few. In time, homes were built, land was cleared or drained, and the people settled down in their new homes. As they established themselves, they began to enjoy the fruits of their labors. They had little contact with the government and lived their lives as farmers and farm related professions. As their lives improved, so did life expectancy. Where once there might have been a dozen births in a family, with only one or two surviving to adulthood, now the dozen births produced a dozen adults. It took nearly a hundred years to reach this point, that is, nearly three generations since the first colonists, but once it had reached this point, land became scarce as the population increased. Sons were sent to apprenticeships to learn new trades and some went to the larger cities of Galicia to work in manufacturing jobs. This was not a land of opportunity for many, and these chose to leave the area for greener pastures. Some went to other areas of the Austrian Empire to work in steel mills in Croatia, some went to Bohemia to work in the chemical plants, and others made a decision to move on.

The greatest period of exodus from Galicia occurred from about 1890 to 1910. Many of these people needed a new home and chose to try North America as their new home. Factories in the US were in need of workers and some had connections to Galicia. These factories would recruit among the Galicians, and in some cases paid their passage to the new world. Once the first settlers had established themselves, they would then send for family and friends, sponsoring them and assisting in their passage. For this reason, we find large pockets of

Galicians in certain towns in the US and Canada. At one point, there were more people from Hohenbach, Galicia, in the US than there were still in Hohenbach. This was true for many of the small towns. After 1910, the tide of emigration slowed down, and with World War I, the flow diminished to a trickle. Life in Galicia changed. The German ethnics no longer had the independence that they had had under the Austrians, but for the most part, they continued life in their normal way. The Polish government tried to get them to assimilate, but with the Lutheran groups, this was a difficult task. The Catholic Galicians had already assimilated to some degree, since they did mingle with the Catholic Poles and had at least religion in common with them. The Lutherans staunchly resisted integration, as that would cause them to lose their identity. Life went on, but it was more difficult.

In 1939, the world changed forever. An agreement was reached between the Soviets and the Germans that would divide Poland once more into two parts. Those German ethnics who lived in the Soviet zone of influence would be resettled into the German zone. At this time, registration of the German ethnics in the Soviet zone was carried out, and records exist for all these people. They were removed from that area and resettled in the German zone, often taking over the homes of Polish nationals at a moments notice. This created hardships for the Poles, and of course did not improve their feelings for the Germans. The German troops continued their registration, even after they had taken over the Soviet zone, so we have a record now of every German ethnic that lived in Galicia in 1939/40.

During World War II, life for the Galicians did improve a little. Electricity and telephones were brought in, roads were improved and most of the people in what had been the German zone were allowed to live as they always had, with little interference from the Nazis. Those who had been resettled from the Eastern area were forced to live in camps, and spent the war years living in camps reminiscent of the internment camps the US set up for the ethnic Japanese in the Western states of the US.

As the war drew to a close, and the Soviet troops drew closer, the Galicians fled from their homes and the camps. They knew that the Soviets would not distinguish them from any other German, even though they had lived their entire lives there, and could count several generations as their ancestors in the same homes. The Galicians fled to the German homeland that none had ever known. In some cases, the young men were drafted into the army to fight the Soviets, and many of them were killed or captured and later died in Soviet prison camps.

At the end of the war, most of the Galicians had arrived in the German homeland and struggled for years to establish themselves there. As they settled in and began to work in their new land, they regretted the loss of the ethnic cohesiveness that they had known for generations.

The young people were forgetting their old language, customs, etc. Unfortunately, many of them were settled in what was for years East Germany, and thus, many lost their religion as well. When the wall came down, many were able to re-unite with their families and friends, but many had left for Canada and the USA.

There were once more than 500,000 Galicians and now there are only descendants of Galicians. This is our heritage.