



Conflicted Loyalties: Austro-Hungarian Immigrants in Michigan and the Great War

Robert Goodrich

Northern Michigan University

On 1 July 1918, US Army PFC Mario Ruconich of 2nd Division, 23rd Infantry Regiment, Company L was killed by German machine gun fire near the village of Vaux, France. He had volunteered for the US Army in January 1917, mustering at the Columbus Barracks in Ohio, where he listed his home as Michigan. His military service record listed his nationality as “Austrian.”¹

Ruconich, though, had disappeared from the records in 1914. He had been a sailor, drawn from a nearby island to the booming industrial port of Trieste on the Adriatic in Austrian Istria. There, he served as a crewmember aboard the passenger steamship *Argentina* of the Austro-American Line, making runs from Trieste to North America. He was apparently a crewmember when the *Argentina* arrived in New York on 16 July 1914 with only 291 passengers. War fever had gripped Europe, and the crossing was the last for the Austro-American Line. Indeed, a British blockade, conversion of passenger ships to wartime use, and the rise of submarine warfare brought passenger service from the Central Powers and thus Austro-Hungarian immigration to a virtual halt. And when the *Argentina* eventually returned to Trieste, however, Ruconich was not on board.² The next time he appears on any known historical document came with his military induction. In effect, he was one of the last immigrants to the United States from Austria-Hungary.

Of course, this leaves open the question of how Ruconich made it to Michigan. As a young man seeing the writing on the wall for the coming war, he may simply have jumped ship and entered the US illegally (there is no record for him at Ellis Island), which was not hard for crew members, who generally were allowed shore leave. From there, he could have made his way to Michigan along with other Istrians looking for work, perhaps on the ships of the Great Lakes. As for joining the military, we have no idea of his motives, either. Certainly by 1917 the prospect of returning to Istria and inevitable conscription there could not have been appealing, but there was no draft in the US until later that year, and the US was still neutral when he joined. No other record exists, however, between his service in the Austrian merchant marine on the *Argentina* and his enlistment in the US military. The case of Mario Ruconich exemplifies how difficult documentation of an immigrant history in Michigan can be, especially given the transitional nature of many immigrants’ tenure in Michigan and the chaos of Central Europe after 1914. Ruconich left no discernible mark

¹ For the family history, I am grateful for the personal correspondence with Renzo Rocconi, great nephew of Mario Ruconich, now living in Venice. Part of the story is available on-line: <http://www.worldwar1.com/itafront/rocconi.htm>, accessed October 2012.

² The *Argentina* found no further use as a passenger ship. However, it next saw service in April 1918, when it was requisitioned as a hospital ship (*Spitalschiff VI*) for evacuating the wounded from the Albanian front.



in Michigan, the state he listed as home in 1917. We find no further connection with Michigan from his family, either.

Yet does that make his story irrelevant for Michigan and our questions about World War One? Far from it. In fact, his story illuminates critical aspects of Austro-Hungarians and their relationship to Michigan. His life offers a picture of how random some events are that led immigrants to Michigan. The broader Ruconich family history also sheds light onto roads travelled by those who did not come to Michigan but came from the same background as those who did. And Ruconich, as a fallen US veteran and an Austro-Hungarian who listed Michigan as his home, explains questions about Austro-Hungarian identity and loyalty in Michigan during the Great War. But to understand, we have to step back into a now vanished and largely forgotten world of non-nationalist identity.

Understanding the Austro-Hungarian Empire

For modern political sensibilities, Ruconich’s homeland is not easy to label, let alone define. He was from Istria, now part of Croatia, previously Yugoslavia until the 1990s, before that Italy until after World War II, and before that until 1918 part of the Austrian crownland of the Austrian Littoral in the Cisleithanian part of Austria-Hungary. And Austria-Hungary was not even the name of the state that provided his citizenship. Its official name is so long that no one ever used it: “The Kingdoms and Lands Represented in the Imperial Council and the Lands of the Holy Hungarian Crown of St. Stephen.” Despite its cumbersome nomenclature, and equally formidable bureaucracy, this hereditary, overarching entity had existed for six hundred years (in one form or another) under the same ruling family – the Habsburg dynasty – and was the largest land empire in Europe outside of Russia.³

In this complex multi-national empire, there was no single national majority. Neither Germans nor Hungarians were the largest group, and the more numerous Slavs were divided between half a dozen different groups—Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenians, Serbs, and Croats. Though German was the lingua franca of trade and bureaucracy and Roman Catholicism enjoyed the favor of the court, no single language or religion united the empire. In fact, the Habsburgs actively encouraged various groups to move and settle freely within their lands, leading to some of the most demographically diverse regions in Europe.

Among the lands that belonged to Austria-Hungary were Austria and Hungary, but also all of what are now the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. It also included significant portions of what is now Poland (Galicia), Romania (Transylvania), Serbia

³ Numerous histories of Austria-Hungary exist, but the complexity of the empire has daunted most historians from tackling it as a unified whole. The language requirements alone all but mandate a team effort. Nonetheless, for significant reappraisals of the empire see, Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Harvard: Belknap Press, 2016); or Mark Cornwall, ed., *The Last Years of Austria-Hungary: A Multi-National Experiment in Early Twentieth-Century Europe*, 2nd Ed. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002); or R.J.W. Evans, *Austria, Hungary, and the Habsburgs: Central Europe c. 1683-1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); for the dated seminal work on politics and diplomacy see, A.J.P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809-1918: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary*, 2nd Ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1964).



(Banat), and Ukraine (Bukowina), and lesser parts of Italy (Trieste and South Tyrol) and Montenegro. A large number of Jews, especially Hasidic Orthodox Jews, and Roma and Sinti came from those lands. These groups often went under names we rarely encounter today: Rusyns, Oberlander, Bohemians, Swabians, and many more.

Today, however, who identifies as Austro-Hungarian? Who hangs a picture of honor of Emperor Franz Josef on their living room wall or hoists the Black and Yellow flag of the House of Habsburg on August 18th to celebrate his birthday? Who advocates for the canonization of Charles I, last Habsburg emperor? Who even remembers that Austria-Hungary was until 1918 the leading and still expanding power in Central Europe? If we want to understand identity and loyalty for most of Central and Eastern Europe, we must first understand that our ancestors came from a world and mindset that was neither American nor nationalist. They came from multi-national empires with roots in the Middle Ages—a place and time when nationalism did not exist as we think of it and ethnicity was not even a concept. This heritage is almost entirely forgotten, or at best remembered in an utterly distorted fashion, even though millions of Michiganders are products of one of the most resilient states in European history that sent more immigrants to the US than any country except the British Isles, Germany, and Italy.⁴

Ruconich migrated to Michigan from this region during the peak of emigration from Central and Eastern Europe (1870–1920). This time period coincided with the last manifestation of the Habsburg Empire—the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (1867–1918). Therefore, to figure out underlying assumptions of loyalty and identity for migrants such as Ruconich, we need to grapple with a confusing array of terms used to identify this monarchy and its components (territories, administrations, and languages) to underscore how fluid ethnic identities were during the era of mass immigration.⁵

In fact, the Austro-Hungarian Empire makes little sense without its medieval past. This is not to argue that it was anti-modern, hostile to all changes, rigid, medieval, or any other such thing. The fact that the Habsburg dynasty ruled for six hundred years meant that it had weathered every imaginable crisis: repeated sieges by the Ottoman Empire; international intrigue to unravel its possessions; the Reformation and the Thirty Years War; internal divisions within the dynasty that led to multiple branches; revolutions and rebellions; an intense rivalry with Hohenzollern Prussia and Bourbon France; the Napoleonic Wars; the dramatic changes in society and economy with the growth of industrialism; and every other stress to which a state was subjected since the Middle Ages. Few dynasties or states proved as equal to the task as the dynamic Habsburgs.

One need only think of the contentious history of two rival examples: France and Germany.

⁴ For a historiographic review of the memory of the monarchy see, Jonathan Kwan, “Review Article: Nationalism and All That: Reassessing the Habsburg Monarchy and its Legacy,” *European History Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2011): 88–108. For a review of interwar Polish memory of the monarchy see, Adam Kozuchowski, *The Afterlife of Austria-Hungary: The Image of the Habsburg Monarchy in Interwar Europe* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press; 2013).

⁵ For a broad survey of published sources on Austro-Hungarian population statistics see, Christel Durdik, *Bibliographischer Abriß zur Bevölkerungs- und Sozialstatistik der Habsburgermonarchie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Wien, 1974).



France in the 18th century was a multi-national dynastic state ruled by the House of Bourbon. That dynasty fell to revolution in 1792, replaced by the First Republic. That government reinvented itself numerous times before Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself Emperor of the French in 1804, which in turn was replaced in 1814 (and again in 1815 after Napoleon's brief return to power) by the restoration of the House of Bourbon. Soon, however, the July Revolution of 1830 ousted that monarchy for the House of Orleans, a dynasty that would only last until 1848 when a new revolution created the Second Republic. That republic, in turn, lasted all of four years until 1852 when Napoleon's nephew established the Second Empire. Not surprisingly, that empire soon collapsed and was replaced in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 by a Government of National Defense that lasted until it was drowned in blood and replaced with the Third Republic in 1871. That entity lasted until 1940. In effect, if we compare the 120 years of Habsburg vs. French history since the late 18th century, we see that France experienced almost a dozen distinct governments, separated by coups, wars, or revolutions.

And Germany? No such state existed until 1871. Before that the territory was a collection of sovereign states (by some counts somewhere around 1,800 prior to the French Revolution), most, but not all of which, were under the umbrella of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, itself an elected entity, which coincidentally, was ruled almost uninterrupted since the 15th century by Habsburgs whose lands were deliberately excluded from the new Germany. Prussia was but one, albeit one of the largest, of these states. A centralized Germany finally came into existence only after the Franco-Prussian War as an attempt to prevent the spread of nationalism from overthrowing the Hohenzollern dynasty of Prussia. Even then, it only lasted two generations until 1918, collapsing at the same time as the Habsburg Empire.

In short, the Habsburg Empire, though ever changing, proved to be singularly stable and long lived. Ironically, however, the very success of the empire in adjusting to modernity meant that its pre-modern tendencies were able to survive. At the top, the royal court persistently believed in its divinely inspired purpose and in its patrimony for future generations of the dynasty, which placed strong limits on how far it could compromise. The nobles and most of the emerging middle-class elites, with whom the dynasty shared power especially at the local level, proved consistently loyal to the Habsburgs. Even among the commoners, support for the multi-national empire persisted into the 20th century, as evidenced by the willingness of its constituencies to fight for the empire until the bitter end in 1918. Thus, the national identities as understood in the era of nation-states of the 20th century made little sense to most Austro-Hungarians. Modern nationalism was simply not a lived experience for the overwhelming majority.

Perhaps, in part, we are blinded to this reality by subsequent history, a history that is inseparable from nationalism. The 20th century, especially the period 1914 to 1989, a time bracketed by the First World War and the Cold War, proved disastrous in many ways for Central Europe. Once known as a coherent *Mittleuropa*, this region bore a heavy burden in the fighting of World War One, which concluded with the collapse of all the regional empires, resulting in decades of civil war and genocides.⁶ All of the large multi-national empires of the region – Habsburg, Romanov, Ottoman, and even Germany – disappeared, to be replaced by a patchwork of small nation-states,

⁶ For an engaging argument that treats *Mittleuropa* as a coherent historical entity see, Lonnie R. Johnson, *Central Europe: Enemies, Neighbors, Friends*, 3rd Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).



most recently Kosovo, officially recognized in 2012. It is no coincidence that this region also was the epicenter of most of the horrors of World War Two, from the major battles to the Holocaust. Would it surprise us to learn that the 1993 film *Schindler's List* took place entirely in lands previously part of the empire (Krakow, Moravia, Auschwitz), and that almost all of the characters were prior to 1918 subjects of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy? The SS commandant Amon Goeth was from Vienna; Oscar Schindler was from Zwittau; Itzhak Stern and most of the “Schindler Jews” were from Galicia.

This area was then the frontline of the Cold War, including the redrawing of frontiers, massive ethnic cleansing, rebellions, the stationing of short range nuclear weapons, and generally accepted battle scenarios that, had they been realized, would have left Central Europe more destroyed than any previous war. Following the Cold War, the last spasm of war and genocide in Europe during the Yugoslav successor wars of the 1990s took place primarily on former Habsburg soil.

This history blinds us to the vitality of the Habsburg Lands before the bloody 20th century and the full unleashing of the now overwhelmingly dominant but all too often revanchist and racialized nationalism. At the risk of distorting the record of the Habsburg Lands into one of praise when compared to the past one hundred years, we nonetheless need to be aware of the relative peace and prosperity as well as immense creativity of this pre-nationalist area preceding World War One. The period around 1900 in fin-de-siècle Vienna especially has garnered an almost mythical quality.⁷ Culturally, Vienna, as the heart of the Habsburg Empire and a crossroads of Europe, reached a degree of vitality that rivaled any other city of that epoch. It was the fourth largest city in the world with a dynamic multinational population. To name only a few of the creative minds in Vienna alone we must mention Sigmund Freud, Karl Jung, Gustav Mahler, Oskar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele, Richard Strauss, Anton Bruckner, Arnold Schönberg, Johann Strauss II, Gustav Klimt, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Adolf Loos, Otto Wagner, Stefan Zweig, Hugo von Hoffmansthal, Arthur Schnitzler. All came out of this Habsburg milieu that mixed religions and languages and cultures into a vibrant cocktail.

A unique artistic variation of Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, flourished outside of state sponsorship with its sumptuous art and architecture decorating not just public spaces but shaping the domestic sphere as well. At the same time, the Habsburg state continued to promote its skilled but staid craftsmen and artists in the Academic Style and Historicism, preferring grandiose buildings that glorified past achievements (Neo-Gothic, Neo-Renaissance, Neo-Classical). The creative energy was linked to an excellent education system that promoted scientific inquiry, particularly in the social sciences, and the arts, and a surprisingly tolerant culture.

In short, Austria-Hungary at the time of mass emigration and Ruconich's arrival in the United States was far from moribund. Certainly, it faced significant crises, but so did all of the Europe. That it collapsed was neither inevitable nor unique. Instead, it provided a viable alternative for confederative identities that deeply influenced those who emigrated from it prior to 1918 and even those who lived in its successor states, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia being the prominent examples.

⁷ For a seminal work on this era see Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).



Emigration from Austria-Hungary to Michigan: Some Generalizations

With a few notable exceptions such as Bohemians, immigrants from the Habsburg Lands came relatively late to North America. They had no overseas colonies to encourage early emigration. Prior to 1790, virtually no emigration to the New World aside from certain Protestant groups and isolated individuals came from Central Europe.⁸ For the future US, the demographic consequences were long lasting. Early immigrants came overwhelmingly from the British Isles, and Germans started to come from continental Europe in large numbers after the Thirty Years War and the ensuing economic dislocations. In 1709 alone, some 15,000 German peasants and artisans set out from Germany for the North American colonies so that by 1766 German immigrants in the English colonies numbered around 200,000 persons. The Irish came in large numbers in the early 19th century to escape rural overpopulation and consequent impoverishment, greatly accelerated by the long-term consequences of the Great Famine of 1846–1847. As a result, these three groups—British, Irish, and German—made up the bulk of immigrants for over two hundred and fifty years and settled most of the farming land east of the Mississippi.

During this first period of immigration, official US figures in 1850 listed only about 1,000 “Austrians.” Between 1851 and 1880, only 2.5% of immigrants came from the Habsburg Monarchy. Mass migration from continental Europe shifted in the course of the 19th century, however. By the second half of that century, a “first wave” brought Germans and Scandinavians, mostly settling in the remaining farming regions of the Midwest. The “second wave” shifted geographic focus. Italy, Russia, and Austria-Hungary became the new source as these homelands suffered from a complex interplay of tradition confronting modernization—economically and politically. However, from the start we are confronted with the diversity of Austria-Hungary, and generalizations are dangerous for this eclectic nation.

The changes in Austro-Hungarian emigration to the US were dramatic over time. For example, in one survey of passenger lists, between 1876 and 1885, over half came from Bohemia. Yet by 1910, almost 70% came from Galicia (though mixed between Poles, Ruthenians, Jews, and Germans).⁹ That sort of regional shift was also accompanied by demographic differences as well. For example, male and female Bohemians emigrated in roughly equal numbers, but around 70% were single, implying both a high number of families as well as well as young singles of both

⁸ On early transatlantic migration from Habsburg Lands see, Michael Kurz, ““Nun ist die Scheidestunde da...” Die Emigration aus dem Salzkammergut im 19. Jahrhundert nach Nordamerika” (unpub. MA thesis, Salzburg, 1999); for religious fugitives see, Heinz Duchhardt, “Glaubensflüchtlinge und Entwicklungshelfer: Niederländer, Hugenotten, Waldenser, Salzburger,” in Klaus Bade, ed., *Deutsche im Ausland - Fremde in Deutschland: Migration in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Munich: 1992); on political refugees after 1848-94 see, Gerda Neyer, “Auswanderung aus Österreich: Ein Streifzug durch die “andere” Seite der österreichischen Migrationsgeschichte,” in Traude Horvath and Gerda Neyer, eds., *Auswanderungen aus Österreich: Von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur Gegenwart* (Wien-Köln-Weimar: 1996).

⁹ Josef Ehmer, Annemarie Steidl, and Hermann Zeitlhofer, *Migration Patterns in Late Imperial Austria: KMI Working Paper Series: Working Paper #3* (Vienna: Kommission für Migrations- und Integrationsforschung: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2003), 21.



sexes.¹⁰ Galicians that same year were overwhelmingly single men. Bohemians were highly artisanal but Galicians were largely from agricultural laboring and servant groups.¹¹ Even by gender, we can discern that men tended to re-migrate but women to settle in the US.¹² The table below also exposes how variable immigration was based on national background.¹³

Austro-Hungarian National Groups and Immigration Rates, 1906–1910

	Absolute Numbers	Migration Rate per 10,000 People of a Given Group					
		1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1899–1910
Germans	12,085,447	29	34	23	17	22	221
Czechs	6,435,983	20	21	15	10	12	153
Poles	4,967,984	88	120	53	74	122	871
Ruthenians	3,948,301	40	60	31	39	70	369
Serbians	1,831,979	24	40	41	20	25	194
Italians	768,422	25	20	14	15	24	255
Hungarians	8,753,275	49	68	27	32	31	381
Croatians	2,935,044	147	161	67	66	148	1,148
Romanians	3,074,594	35	60	28	24	44	250
Slovaks	2,417,402	151	173	66	93	133	1,550
Jews	2,159,941	69	87	71	39	61	840
Total	47,218,431	56	72	36	36	55	492

Czechs stayed at home; Slovaks left. Yet they directly neighbored each other. The same difference applied to Italians and Croatians. Also, while Germans stayed, Jews left, even though both lived in scattered enclaves throughout the Monarchy. The table indicates that every national group in the Empire followed its own dynamic, though all were drawn into the process of migration.

Economically, modernization of farming, stimulated by the end of serfdom, and industrialization created surplus rural populations that could not be supported in the countryside but also were no longer either tied to that land or possessed the right to reside there. As late as 1869, up to 80% of the population of Austria-Hungary still possessed the right of residence in their home villages as a vestige of serfdom. That number had fallen to 65% by 1890 and would continue to drop.¹⁴ Mass migration thus first occurred from the countryside to the cities, but the still developing industries

¹⁰ Franz v. Meinzingen, “Die Wanderbewegung auf Grund von Gebürtigkeitsdaten der Volkszählung vom 31. Dezember 1900,” in: *Statistische Monatsschrift*, NF 8 (1903), 140.

¹¹ Richard v. Pflügl, “Die überseeische Auswanderung in den Jahren 1899-1901,” in: *Statistische Monatsschrift*, NF 8 (1903): 496-532.

¹² For a sampling from 1910 see, Josef Ehmer, Annemarie Steidl, and Hermann Zeitlhofer, *Migration Patterns in Late Imperial Austria: KMI Working Paper Series: Working Paper #3* (Vienna: Kommission für Migrations- und Integrationsforschung: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2003), 17.

¹³ Table from, Leopold Caro, *Emigracja i polityka emigracyjna ze szczeg?lnym uwzgl?dnieniem stosunk?w polskich* (Poznan, 1914), 26.

¹⁴ Heinz Faßmann, “Migration in Österreich, 1850 - 1900. Migrationsströme innerhalb der Monarchie und Struktur der Zuwanderung nach Wien,” in: *Demographische Informationen* (1986): 23.



of Austria-Hungary could not absorb this migration.¹⁵ Indeed the internal migration of Austria-Hungary most likely exceeded international migration. At the same time, though, larger and faster steam-powered transatlantic ships, with drastically lower fares, began to advertise aggressively for passengers, promising easy prosperity in new lands. With few prospects, millions migrated abroad. We should remember that the US was not the only destination. Migrants went wherever there was economic opportunity—a chance to escape the poverty of home, and hopefully return once enough money had been earned. Thus, it was not the promise of opportunity that in the first instance began to draw millions of Austro-Hungarians to the US. Instead, it was the push of rural poverty.

Politically, continental European states began to reconsider their previous restrictions on emigration at this moment. Contrary to Britain, during the 18th century, Austria had banned emigration in the spirit of mercantilism, which viewed the populace of a state as its backbone and the source of its welfare. The French economist, Jean-Baptiste Say, claimed, “If 100,000 persons leave a country with 10 million Florins, that is the same as if 100,000 fully equipped and armed soldiers go across the border and perish there.” In this spirit, Emperor Joseph II tightly regulated emigration in 1784 with what amounted to a ban. In 1832, Emperor Francis Joseph I issued another emigration patent that recognized “legal emigration” but with the loss of citizenship. However, the obvious economic success of liberal Britain, Belgium, France and the Netherlands by the middle of the 19th century forced a sea change. Despite its deep conservatism, Austria-Hungary recognized that it could not compete militarily without a modern economy after a series of defeats in the 1850s and 1860s culminating in the loss of Northern Italy to the French and humiliation at the hands of the Prussians. The Imperial conclusion was that economic policies must be modernized. In 1867 freedom of movement was legalized; the only restrictions applied to conscripts.

The net result was a dramatic shift in immigration patterns to the US. At the start of the era, as the first tentative steps towards the deep changes in Central Europe were occurring in the 1860s, Josef Schmidt, Commander of Vis (Lissa), an island off the Dalmatian coast of the Adriatic, reported on 6 October 1860, “All the young people have left, more than a hundred to America and Australia, while many others are on the Lloyds and other cargo steamships...” Dalmatia proved the tip of the spear in the 1860s and the 1870s, even though emigrants from the Habsburg Monarchy still numbered only several thousand per year. By the 1880s, though, more Austro-Hungarian observers were aware of the extent of emigration. Yet there were no efforts to staunch it. Many regarded it as an essential part of economic liberalism that would strengthen the Empire, others as part of political liberalism that would lead to positive reform of the state.

Nonetheless, the extremely Slavic and Magyar nature of the emigration led many Magyar nationalist and Slavic Pan-nationalists to worry. In 1904, the Pan-Slavic people’s tribune and peasant leader, Stjepan Radić, wrote in *Modern Colonization and the Slavs*,

Under the circumstances, we should not dwell on theoretical questions about the pros and cons of emigration. Here I would like to reiterate and stress: recently, we, the Slavs, have not been

¹⁵ For the similarity with developments in Germany see, Steve Hochstadt, *Mobility and Modernity: Migration in Germany, 1820-1989* (University of Michigan Press, 1999).



emigrating from our homeland, we have been fleeing from here in desperation. When I say ‘we,’ I have in mind primarily the backbone of our nation: our peasants and workers.¹⁶

Indeed, the economic recession of the 1880s stimulated overseas emigration from the Austrian part of the Empire, rising sharply to 20,000 persons per year—a level below which it would never fall again. In 1892, the number of emigrants reached 50,000 and in 1904 as many as 100,000. In the Hungarian part of the Monarchy, the numbers were even greater. As late as 1890, 82% of immigrants to the US came from traditional areas of North and Western Europe. From 1891 to 1920, however, that number dropped to 25%, with a corresponding rise in immigrants from East, Central, and South Europe, who now made up 64% of immigrants. Between 1871 and 1915, emigration from Austria-Hungary totaled 4,383,000. For a country of forty million people, to have over four million leave in less than a single generation is staggering.

If we look at the extended era of mass migration, lasting from the Napoleonic wars until World War II (1815 – 1940), we see that one in ten European immigrants came from the Habsburg Lands. After Great Britain (11.4 million), Italy (9.9 million) and Ireland (7.3 million), this represented the fourth largest source of emigration. We should note, though, that almost all of the Central European immigrants came between 1880 and 1919, making this mass movement even more phenomenal. If we look at one dramatic year, 1907, we see that 338,452 Austro-Hungarians came to the US, almost a third of all US immigrants that year. If we consider one decade, 1901–10, we find that 2,145,266 Austro-Hungarians arrived in the US, 24.39% of all immigrants in that period, more than any other country. More than half of all emigrants from Habsburg territory who had emigrated during the century between the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War to the US arrived in America during that single decade.

This concentration, however, will allow us to make some generalizations since the compact time-frame meant many shared conditions despite the diversity of Austria-Hungary. We must be cautious about these generalizations, however. Consider education. Obligatory free public education had been introduced in the predominantly German-speaking crownlands and the Czech Lands by 1880 where 95% to 99% of school-aged children attended school. In the Kingdom of Hungary proper, the rate was lower at 82%. In Cisleithanian Dalmatia the number was 67%; in Bukovina 36%. In the Condominium of Bosnia and Herzegovina the rate was 15%. This educational gradient followed other economic developments. The peasantry of the east was still partially mired in debts to previous feudal lords (emancipation had only occurred in 1848 and under conditions favorable to the lords, not the peasants). Austria had exacerbated the problem by developing a conscious policy of not industrializing the largest and most populous state, Galicia, in order to keep it as a hinterland source of food and military recruits. Industry was concentrated therefore in the west or in a few select urban areas such as Trieste or Budapest.

Until the 1860s much of the east lived in conditions that would have been considered feudal. Even as late as 1897 one report made by a physician to the Hungarian Medical Society noted, “The elementary conditions of the lives of the working people in many parts of the country are below

¹⁶ See, Mark Biondich, “Stjepan Radić, Yugoslavism, and the Habsburg Monarchy,” *Austrian History Yearbook*, 27 (1996): 109-131, doi:10.1017/S0067237800005841; Stjepan Radić, *Modern Colonization and the Slavs* (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1904).



the biological minimum necessary for survival.”¹⁷ The grinding rural poverty and indebtedness of some regions meant that crime reached endemic proportions. Important roads, such as those connecting the center of Hungary with Fiume, remained under the watch of entire army companies in the middle of the 18th century. Military courts, which summarily hung the guilty, operated in certain areas through the 1860s.

We should not, however, conclude that the poorest were the ones most likely to emigrate. In fact, the poorest stayed, lacking the resources or motivation to leave. Consider the statistics of Austrian Vice-Consul Jtizef Schwegel located in Cleveland for 1902–03 when he looked at the composition of Austro-Hungarian immigrants in the US:¹⁸

Poles	37,499	Rusyns	9,819
Slovaks	34,499	Czechs	9,577
Croats and Slovenes	32,892	Bulgars, Serbs, and Montenegrins	4,227
Magyars	27,113	Romanians	4,173
Germans	23,597	Italians	2,170
Jews	18,759	Dalmatians, Bosnians and Herzegovinians	1,723

His numbers were back of the envelope calculations at best and grossly undercounted, but they provided an impressionistic assessment from the point of view in the US of the Austro-Hungarian state.

Several aspects emerge by looking at the Vice-Consuls numbers compared to the earlier table. Firstly, the national terms, while similar, are not identical. The Vice-Consul counted numerous smaller groups separately, and used a different term for the Ruthenians; one links Croats, Slovenes, Dalmatians in one group; and Serbs, Bulgars, and Montenegrins in another; the other does not. These differences reflected clearly differing views of what constituted a national group.

Still, a comparison between the emigration of Magyars and other nationalities in the Hungarian-half of the Empire shows that most emigration occurred from non-Magyar areas. The tie between emigration and industrial development, as seen by comparing the agricultural Slovak (Upper Hungary) and industrial Czech areas (Bohemia) is clear. Approximately four times as many Slovaks emigrated as did Czechs. Magyars migrated more than Czechs. These differences become even more dramatic when one compares the total number of members of one group to another. There, a weighted comparison shows clearly that the less developed areas constituted a disproportionately high amount of emigrants in contrast to the industrialized areas.

In general, few migrated from the large cities, the neighboring villages, prosperous commercial farmlands, or industrial developed regions (largely in the Austrian parts). In contrast, the

¹⁷ Cited in Ervin Dubrović and others, eds. *From Central Europe to America, 1880-1914* (Rijeka; New York: City Museum of Rijeka, 2012), 12.

¹⁸ Cited in E. Wilder Spaulding, *The Quiet Invaders: The Story of the Austrian Impact upon America* (Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag für Unterricht, Wissenschaft und Kunst, 1968), 70; in Ervin Dubrović and others, eds. *From Central Europe to America, 1880-1914* (Rijeka; New York: City Museum of Rijeka, 2012), 27.



borderlands of the east (Galicia and Bukovina in Austria; Subcarpathia and Banat in Hungary) were over-represented. In fact, just five counties in Hungary from those regions accounted for one quarter of all Hungarian emigrants 1899–13.¹⁹ Even without a listing of their occupations, we can conclude from their origins that they were largely hard-pressed peasants – most likely the younger sons unlikely to inherit or those seeking to pull themselves out of debt.

However, the fact that every national group participated in emigration brings us to the phenomenon of chain migration both within and between groups.²⁰ For example, about two-thirds of Hungarian emigrants to the US were non-Magyar (even though Magyars were over half the population). Certain regions suffered depopulation while others saw almost no impact.

Migration began on the western borders—Bohemians and Moravians followed the migrations of Germans; they were followed by Slovaks of Upper Hungary whose successes attracted Polish and then later Ruthenian Galicians, finally reaching all the way to distant Bukowina and the rest of Hungary. What must be understood, along with the more common use of chain migration to describe kinship networks drawn into migration, is that chain migration also worked inside Austria-Hungary across nationalities.²¹ What we see in Michigan is a pronounced tendency of “neighbors” in Austria-Hungary to remain neighbors in Michigan. The Poles of Detroit set up their first homes with the Germans, even using the same parishes until their numbers had grown. Ruthenians and Hungarians then initially set up their homes amongst the Poles. Since Austrian Galicia and the Kingdom of Hungary were so diverse, even at the village level, such connections should not surprise us. However, the mistake is to assume that these neighboring ethnic enclaves were created in Michigan based solely on local conditions (cheap housing, proximity to employers, etc). Instead, they were as much predicated on the experiences in the homeland and the connections reinforced rather than eroded in the process of migration.

Michigan as Destination

Naturally, neither the US nor Michigan were the sole destinations of emigrants from Austria-Hungary. Since the motives were economic, they went where economic opportunity was available. Many remained inside the Empire, usually in the cities or in sparsely populated regions where farmland was available such as Bosnia-Herzegovina; large numbers also went to neighboring countries for work, often seasonally, in Romania, Serbia, Germany and Russia.²² The majority,

¹⁹ István Rácz, “Attempts to Curb Hungarian Emigration to the United States before 1914,” *Angol Filológiai Tanulmányok / Hungarian Studies in English* 7 (1973): 8.

²⁰ See, Juliana Puskás, “Some Results of My Research on the Transatlantic Emigration from Hungary on the Basis of Micro- and Macro-Analysis,” in Juliana Puskás, ed., *Overseas Migration from East-Central and Southeastern Europe, 1880-1940* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990).

²¹ See, for example, Dorota Praszalowicz, “Overseas Migration from Partitioned Poland: Poznan and Eastern Galicia as Case Studies,” *Polish American Studies* 60, no. 2 (Autumn, 2003): 59-81.

²² As one example, in the years 1906-1911, nearly three million migrated from Austria for seasonal work in Europe. See, Ewa Morawska, “For Bread with Butter: Life-Worlds of Peasant-Immigrants from East Central Europe, 1880-1914,” *Journal of Social History* 17, no. 3 (Spring, 1984): 388. In another estimate, in 1910 alone the number of seasonal labor migrants from the Austrian part of the monarchy crossing state boundaries inside Europe was estimated at 330,000. See, Lars Olsson, “Labor Migration



however, crossed the Atlantic, though not exclusively to the US but also Brazil, Canada, and Argentina.

For Michigan, then, its ability to offer either income or land determined who came. The various waves of immigrants consequently largely followed patterns of economic opportunity beginning with the first French fur trappers, traders, and missionaries, followed by the homesteaders of the 19th century, to those coming for the various mining booms and the industrial promise of the automotive industry. Even the aboriginal populations experienced migratory patterns of settlement and displacement prior to European contact and later settlement. Thus, Michigan has always been a land of immigrants. And therefore automatically one of emigrants, too.

Indeed, we cannot understand the problems in dealing with a history of immigration to Michigan without first understanding its necessary prerequisite—emigration. Every immigrant is ipso facto also an emigrant. And it is precisely the experience of emigration that ultimately draws our attention. Why? Because most of us who look at the history of immigration to Michigan are interested in our roots. We want to know who our ancestors were, which means their origins in some foreign land; why they came to Michigan, which means why they felt compelled to leave that foreign land; and what they brought with them as our heritage, which means their native culture founded in that foreign land. Michigan is about emigration from a specific place as much as immigration to this state.

The problem is that, generally, we tend to think that our ancestors had simple, even simplistic identities. We usually assume that their native language sums up who they were. They were Hungarians if they spoke Magyar, or Germans if they spoke German, or Italians if they spoke Italian, or Slovenes if they spoke Slovene, etc. And we then tend to identify that linguistic identity with a national identity—an identity tied to a modern nation state (for the examples just given, Hungary, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia). In fact, we make this identification even if no such nation state existed at the time of emigration or even exists today. We just assume that every linguistic group is a natural cultural community that instinctively wants to and ultimately succeeds at creating a nation state. But is this assessment fair? The question of loyalty, especially in a time of war, challenges this conclusion for Austria-Hungary.

Austro-Hungarian Conscription of Emigrants

In Austria-Hungary's multi-national state, the military served as one of two key unifying institutions (the other being the monarchy itself).²³ Since the *Ausgleich*, it was one of the few K.u.K. ministries with jurisdiction throughout the entire Empire. All recruits took the same oath of loyalty to the Emperor, and the rank of officer served as one of the most important markers of social status for nobles and the middle class. The military's function for maintaining the Empire, therefore, was less about defense (or expansion) of the borders and more about social integration. Indeed, the military was one of the only means in which loyalty to the Emperor, and thus the

as a Prelude to World War I," in *International Migration Review* 33 (1996): 875-900; Franz Markitan, *Auswandererverkehrswege in Österreich* (Wien, 1912).

²³ For an overview of the military see, Richard Bassett, *For God and Kaiser: The Imperial Austrian Army, 1619–1918* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2016).



dynastic state, could find concrete expression.²⁴ No wonder, then, that Austria-Hungary engaged in all the pomp and circumstance of some of Europe's best uniformed troops. The Emperor himself, along with most social elites, rarely appeared in public without a military uniform, giving the Empire a highly militarized appearance. And compulsory conscription was a defining facet of life for the young men who made up the bulk of emigrants.

In many ways the military reflected the Empire. The officer corps, while dominated by Germans in 1900, nonetheless revealed no discrimination in its promotions, in fact being over-represented by certain groups such as Jews.²⁵ Promotion required mastery of more than one language spoken in the realm, with the assumption of fluency in German. By 1904, the bi-lingualism of the officer corps was considerable, and the General Staff kept close records on this development, showing its importance.²⁶

Officers Able to Speak a Second Language in 1904

Reflecting the linguistic reality of the Empire, regiments were organized along those lines, though German was the language of command. The linguistic make-up in the enlisted ranks in 1906 broke down as follows: 26.7% German, 22.3% Magyar, 13.5% Czech, 8.5% Polish, 8.1% Ruthenian, 6.7% Croatian and Serbian, 6.4% Romanian, 3.8% Slovakian, 2.6% Slovene, and 1.4% Italian. Thus, the army roughly reflected the demographic make-up of the Empire. Even though the army sought to keep units linguistically homogenous, mixing inevitably occurred. The Army responded by creating a specialized language, Army Slav (German: *Armee-Slawisch*), as a vocabulary of about eighty words related to the most important commands. Even though many officers feared disloyalty and possible mutiny based on national divisions in the Empire, during World War One the forces of Austria-Hungary performed loyally and competently until the collapse of the Empire in the autumn of 1918.²⁷ For all the nationalist vigor of the Czech Legion that ended up fighting against Austria-Hungary, that unit proved exceptional rather than representative.

Language	Percentage
Czech	47.0
Magyar	33.6
Polish	19.3
Serbocroatian	15.3
Romanian	8.8
Italian	8.5
Ruthenian	7.8
Slovene	7.3
Slovak	6.9

²⁴ On state efforts to cultivate loyalty see, Maria Bucur and Nancy M. Wingfield, eds., *Staging the Past: The Politics of Commemoration in Habsburg Central Europe, 1848 to the Present: Central European Studies* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2001); and Laurence Cole and Daniel L. Unowsky, eds. *The Limits of Loyalty: Imperial Symbolism, Popular Allegiances, and State Patriotism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy*. New York: Berghahn, 2007.

²⁵ For a study of Jews in the Habsburg military see, Erwin A. Schmidl, *Habsburgs Jüdische Soldaten, 1788-1918* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2014).

²⁶ On the officer corps generally see, E. Gunther Rothenberg, "Nobility and Military Careers: The Habsburg Officer Corps, 1740–1914," *Military Affairs* 40, no. 4 (1976): 182–186.

²⁷ For a review of the historiography of the war by German-speakers from the former monarch see, Hannes Leidinger, *Historiography 1918-Today (Austria-Hungary)*, in *1914-1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014), DOI:



Unlike the US, which had a small military system in times of peace, Austria-Hungary followed the model of other European states and maintained a standing army and navy with compulsory service of three years (four in the navy) and ten years reserve. In practice, only about one in five young men were called into service; many were sent on leave after two years. Yet so many young men were leaving Austria-Hungary that military authorities began to worry. While it is not true that most immigrants were trying to evade conscription as their primary motivator, the resulting loss to the military was nonetheless significant. Hungarian authorities tightly regulated its port at Fiume to find draft dodging emigrants but could do little when its citizens easily crossed the border into more liberal Austria. Military authorities in Carniola noted the “disappearance into the thin air” of many military age men due for recruitment. In 1905 the Slovenian Carniolan politician Fran Šuklje informed the Parliament in Vienna about the disappearance of 5,240 recruits from just three areas. He cited a remark by a local official, “Our best bet would be to send the recruitment board to America. Our recruits are there and not here!”²⁸

Austria-Hungary did try to summon men liable for military service from abroad, which proved ultimately unenforceable. In 1906, a Ferenc Schmal, a Magyar living in the US, wrote a letter to his draft board in Tolna County, Hungary: “Most Honored Sir, why did you even bother to send me a call-up? This correspondence is in vain: I do not intend to return because I feel fine in America...Thank you for your effort to turn me into a soldier, but I am totally indisposed to wearing the black and yellow uniform.”²⁹ The “black and yellow” refer to the Hapsburg colors used by the K.u.K. military. Without a coercive apparatus on the ground in Michigan, the state could only rely on patriotic appeals to citizens abroad. And we have seen that such appeals were of spurious effect.

Given the slowness of the Monarchy to recognize the importance of Michigan, its military recruitment efforts there began correspondingly late. The Cleveland consulate set up sessions to muster its citizens in Michigan, especially in the Delray district of Detroit, starting in 1912. During the registration sessions of 1913 in Delray, vice-consul Pelenyi noted that only Magyars showed up, not the more numerous Poles, causing the consul Ludwig to order afternoon sessions in Polish Hamtramck.³⁰ Still, only nineteen Magyars took the medical check-up at the 10 May 1913 session required for mustering. Nineteen Poles were mustered that afternoon in the *Polonia Hall*. All deemed fit swore their oath of allegiance to the Emperor on the spot. All told, then, on that one day sixty-one Austro-Hungarians registered: From Austria, 3 Germans, 19 Poles, 1 Czech (6 were

10.15463/ie1418.1032. See also, Alan Sked, “Austria-Hungary and the First World War,” *Histoire Politique* 1 (2014): 16-49.

²⁸ Unpublished text on Slovene emigration by Marijan Drnov, by Institute for Slovenian Emigration 33, no. 236 (14 October 1905), in Ervin Dubrović and others, eds. *From Central Europe to America, 1880-1914* (Rijeka; New York: City Museum of Rijeka, 2012), 139.

²⁹ Ferenc Szilli, letter published in Tolnavarmegye newspaper (11 November 1906), in Ervin Dubrović and others, eds. *From Central Europe to America, 1880-1914* (Rijeka; New York: City Museum of Rijeka, 2012), 139.

³⁰ The Poles were always a particular concern for Austria-Hungary, and many indeed ended up volunteering for the Entente. See, Joseph T. Hapak, “Selective Service and Polish Army Recruitment during World War I,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 10, no. 4 (Summer, 1991): 38-60.



deemed fit for service); and from Hungary: 19 Magyars, 9 Romanians, 8 Germans, 2 Serbs (16 were deemed fit for service). The numbers were disappointing given the estimate of up to 80,000 citizens in the area. Still, it was a start and served as evidence for the need to open a separate permanent consular office in Detroit.

The problem became acute with World War One, however. As the case of the Ruconich family (see below) reveals, Austria-Hungary soon conscripted every available son. For immigrants, fear of conscription was weighed against patriotic support for Austria-Hungary once war started. Here, in the last moments of the Habsburgs' multi-national empire, the results were at best ambiguous. Remembering that the US had a policy of strict formal neutrality and did not enter the conflict until the spring of 1917, Austria-Hungary had the formal right to call up its citizens living in Michigan. In practice, though, it could do little to reach them. Also, coordinating any large-scale return to its ports was all but impossible due to the British blockade which had bottled up the Adriatic and North Sea ports; France and Italy in 1915 were belligerents, cutting off all other possible avenues of return.

In 1914 Austria-Hungary nonetheless tried to call up its reserves abroad and offered immigrants in the US who had evaded military service full “rehabilitation” if they returned and served for the duration of the war. The US government interpreted this action as a violation of its neutrality policy, which forbade any US citizen, no matter how long they had resided in the US, from actively taking sides in the war.³¹ Austria-Hungary, however, pointed to its 1871 treaty with the US that regulated matters of citizenship and specifically addressed the matter of draft dodging, precluding the right to claim that one had become a US citizen as a release from duty: “In particular, a former citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy who... is to be held as an American citizen, is liable to trial and punishment, according to the laws of Austro-Hungary, for non-fulfillment of military duty.”³²

The international court cases of Max Fox (formerly Fuchsbalg) and Alexander Tellech revealed the complexities of conscription and migration.³³ Each case reflected how fluid identities were, even at the formal level of citizenship. They also present an Austrian Czech and a Hungarian Magyar whose families moved back and forth between the US and Central Europe.

Fox sued the successor states of Austria and Hungary to recover damages alleged to have been sustained during his enforced military service in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War

³¹ For a history of diplomatic relations between the US and the monarchy see, Nicole M. Phelps, *Sovereignty Transformed: U.S.-Habsburg Relations from 1815 to the Paris Peace Conference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³² “Naturalization Convention between the United States and Austria-Hungary,” Article II, September, 20 1870, in *Treaties, Conventions, International Acts and Agreements Between the United States of America and Other Powers 1776-1909*, compiled by William M. Malloy (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910).

³³ Max Fox (United States) v. Austria and Hungary, (May 25, 1928. Pages 73-74), in Reports of International Arbitral Awards, Vol VI (New York: United Nations, 2006), 249-250; Alexander Tellech (United States) v. Austria and Hungary, (May 25, 1928. Pages 71-73), in Reports of International Arbitral Awards, Vol VI (New York: United Nations, 2006), 248-249.



One. He was born in the US in 1896 to Magyar immigrants, but, like so many other Magyar immigrants, his parents returned to Hungary when Fox was three. His mother died in Hungary and his father returned to the US, leaving Fox in Hungary to be raised by relatives. At the outbreak of World War One, Fox, then twenty, was called up for military service. Fox's lawsuit claimed that he protested that he was a US citizen and therefore not subject to military services in Austria-Hungarian. Nonetheless, in May 1915 he was compelled to report for duty. He applied to the US embassy in Budapest for support but his application was denied. Serving on the Eastern Front, he was hospitalized for several months from a flesh wound in October 1916. His education, however, led to his promotion to lieutenant and he continued in active service until the Armistice was signed. He returned to the United States in 1920. Yet in 1928 he sued Austria and Hungary on the claim that he only took the oath of allegiance to the Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary under duress. He lost his suit on the basis that, according to Austro-Hungarian law at the time of his conscription and international treaty, he was also a citizen of that state by parentage and thus possessed "dual nationality," making him liable to all duties as a citizen.

Alexander Tellech was born to Czech immigrants in the US in 1895 and was thus a US citizen, but when he was five years old he accompanied his parents to Bohemia, where he continued to reside. In August 1914, the now nineteen-year-old had become involved in pan-Slavic politics. At the start of World War One he was arrested on the Galician border with Russia for spreading pro-Russian propaganda. He was sentenced to sixteen months internment, after which he was impressed into the Austro-Hungarian army after taking the obligatory oath of allegiance. He appealed in 1915 to the US for his release, but his application was denied. In July 1916, he deserted and escaped to Russia, where he was arrested and held by the Russian army as a prisoner of war. However, with the Russian revolutions of 1917, he was released and after the war returned to Prague, where he opened a medical practice. In 1928 he sued Austria and Hungary for time lost and for alleged suffering and privation. Similarly to Fox, the international court decided that he was an Austrian citizen accordingly to Austrian law, to which he had voluntarily subjected himself. The Austrian and the Austro-Hungarian authorities were therefore well within their rights in dealing with him as they did.

World War one and The End of the Great Wave of Immigration

In the US, the Dillingham Commission, a bipartisan special committee of Congress operating 1907–1911, presented the best thinking of the day on immigration. Looking at records since 1819 through 1910, the Commission reached several empirical conclusions that then led to some rather unempirical conclusions. Firstly, it recognized a clear shift in immigration patterns. Prior to 1880, immigrants from Western and Northern Europe comprised more than 95% of all immigrants. In the first decade of the 20th century, however, immigrants from Central, Southern and Eastern Europe amounted to 77% of all immigrants. Secondly, the Commission recognized that emigration had its source in economic rather than political or religious sources. Thirdly, the new wave of immigrants, especially those from Southern Europe, intended to return to their homelands rather than settle permanently. Fourthly, the Commission concluded that the US was attracting the healthiest, hardest working, and most enterprising from Central Europe, even if they faced greater difficulties in integrating.

With this baseline, the Commission then fit this data into the racially oriented Social Darwinistic paradigm of the times. Simply put, Central Europeans were deemed inferior to those of Germanic



stock. The Commission therefore made a single proposal to filter immigrants. To keep out poor Eastern peasants, literacy had to become a standard of admission.³⁴ But when it was recognized that literacy rates had been rapidly rising in Central Europe, new arguments were made to base immigration quotas explicitly on race, creating a new hereditary barrier that could not be overcome. Indeed, drawing upon legislative precedent in the Chinese Exclusion Act and the so-called "Gentlemen's Agreement" aimed at the Japanese, the Commission's overall findings were used a decade later to support the 1920s immigration reduction acts, including the Emergency Quota Act of 1921. The quotas of the 1920s were based on the percentage of each group in the immigration contingent of 1890, plotted against the number of immigrants in 1910. The year 1890 had been deliberately chosen. It represented one of the last years before the dramatic shift in origins away from Germanic north-west Europe. The result was a quota that set maximums as low as 3% for less desirable groups. In effect, the quota system, combined with dramatic changes in Europe ended mass immigration from Central Europe.³⁵

By that time, though, Austria-Hungary had disappeared. Europe was entering the Great Depression and the era of chauvinistic nationalist warfare that culminated not only in civil wars and World War Two, but in relentless genocide and ethnic cleansing ranging across all of the former lands of the Habsburgs. World War One had effectively ended the Great Migration. Many who had planned to emigrate could not, and quickly became caught up in the dramatic events of war and its consequences. For Austro-Hungarians in Michigan, over half of whom had planned to return to the homelands, this option simply disappeared. Four years of war, intense US propaganda against Austria-Hungary, fear of conscription, and then the reality of political instability from 1918 onwards permanently altered the pattern of migration and return. The Austro-Hungarians in Michigan had lost their citizenship since their state no longer existed. Overwhelmingly they chose the easiest option and simply stayed in Michigan and became US citizens. Assimilation now became an even stronger imperative and the preservation of the old identities became hyphenated to American.

Mario Ruconich: The Last Austro-Hungarian immigrant?

All of this leads us back to Ruconich. His narrative, and that of his family, exemplify these patterns. Ruconich came from a large peasant family (fifteen children) in Ossero, on the Adriatic islands of Cherso-Lussino, Istria in the Austrian Littoral.³⁶ His parents, Domenico and Caterina Gercovich-Gerconi, were illiterate Roman Catholics who spoke Istrian (the local Italian dialect)

³⁴ Immigration Commission, *Abstracts of Reports of the Immigration Commission, with Conclusions and Recommendations and Views of the Minority*, Vol 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 48.

³⁵ See, Katherine Benton-Cohen, "The Rude Birth of Immigration Reform," *The Wilson Quarterly*, (Summer 2010); Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Inventing the Immigration Problem: The Dillingham Commission and Its Legacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); John M. Lund, "Boundaries of Restriction: The Dillingham Commission," *University of Vermont History Review* 6 (1994); James S. Pula, "American Immigration Policy and the Dillingham Commission," *Polish American Studies* 37, no. 1 (1980): 5–31; and Robert F Zeidel, *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics: The Dillingham Commission, 1900-1927* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004).

³⁶ Now Osor, Cres Island, Croatia.



as well as Croatian. Their children attended a compulsory state school but were free to choose from the Istriot, Croatian, and German schools. The family was relatively comfortable, having moved just before the war from the impoverished village of Trsich on the same island, owning sheep, goats, chickens and a horse and supplementing their diet and income as fishermen.

Mario was the third of the four oldest brothers (Domenik, Johan, Mario, and Anton). As citizens of Austrian Istria, the brothers were all liable for military conscription. They were loyal Austrians, showing no tendency towards any of the political currents undermining Habsburg authority. They were not attracted to Italian Irredentism, pan-Slavism, or socialism. When World War One began in August 1914, the family saw all of its military-age sons fight; all but the youngest died in combat. Mario, as we know, died in France in 1918 fighting the Germans as an American. Domenik, the oldest, was killed in action in 1915 on the Isonzo Front fighting the Italians—that is, fighting those who spoke his native language. Johan disappeared on the Eastern Front; there are no records of him as a prisoner of war or killed in action, but this was in the wake of the chaotic Russian Revolution. Anton also served on the Eastern Front but survived despite multiple wounds, being taken prisoner and a three-month odyssey that took him from Odessa on the Black Sea back to home.

The family that survived the war saw the nationalist consequences as Istria became a bone of contention between Italy and Yugoslavia. The family name was forcibly Italianized in 1926 by Italian Fascism to Rocconi.³⁷ After World War Two, though, the name was forcibly Slavicized by Communist Yugoslavia to Rukonic. The family now has relatives with all three versions. Almost the entire family ultimately emigrated. The Ruconich story is thus highly representative and simultaneously exceptional. It reinforces our understanding of some basic patterns of immigration and conflicting loyalties, but also cautions us against generalizations. While this paper turned several questions about migration on the axis of military service, we can draw numerous tangential conclusions.

Firstly, Mario's roots as a farmer facing economic pressure from overpopulation and limited economic opportunity fits the most powerful "push" factor for Austro-Hungarians to migrate. However, his search for work initially in an urban part of the Empire (the bustling port of Trieste) was just as typical as emigration. Indeed, relatively few Triestine immigrated. The local economy was powerful enough to offer ample employment locally. As was the case elsewhere in Europe, when local industrial capacity could absorb the excess rural population, those people chose to remain in the cities of their homeland rather than leave. His older brothers also had not left the area, which is why they were caught up in military service.

Secondly, the Istrian family that stayed showed the demographic consequences of the collapse of Austria-Hungary. They lived in a mixed border land that Italian Irredentists claimed for Italy, annexing it after World War One but losing it after World War Two. Various waves of ethnic cleansing and mass migrations, especially the Istrian Exodus of the late 1940s, created a more homogeneously Croatian population, including on the once predominantly Italian islands of Cherso-

³⁷ For the actual law see, Regio decreto legge 10 Gennaio 1926, n. 17: Restituzione in forma italiana dei cognomi delle famiglie della provincia di Trento.



Lussino.³⁸ Today, the demographic composition of much of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, including Istria, has altered considerably. The family, like the region, was forcibly Italianized and then Slavicized, in successive efforts to purge them of their multinational Habsburg identities. The only one to preserve the original family name was a younger brother who was a sailor in the 1920s and constantly at sea and thus avoided the forced Italianization before he later emigrated to the US.

Thirdly, migration was complicated, even in a single family. Different members often revealed divergent attitudes towards migration. Some refused to migrate, some left only once a family connection had been established. Some migrated with the intention of returning, others planning never to return. Mario presents yet another reason: contingency. Sometimes unusual and unpredictable circumstances determined migration. Indeed, the ending of the great migration came with World War One, a global event that few had predicted and that had dramatic consequences for emigration and immigration. As for the rest of the family, a few migrated to the US: a younger brother of Mario, Gaudenzio, migrated to New Jersey under the Italian fascists; and a niece, Janine, left for the US after marrying in the 1960s and settling first in New York and then California. The rest of the family, except one son, Joseph, left with the Istrian Exodus for Italy after the Communist took possession of the island.

Fourthly, Mario's apparently itinerant life was typical of the single young males who comprised the bulk of Austro-Hungarian emigrants. Michigan's mines, forests, and later industries of the late 19th and early 20th century attracted young single men more than any other group. These men moved from camp to camp, or mine to mine as they heard of new opportunities. Most planned a return home; after 1914 most stayed, cut off from home by the war. These men often only appear in the records of the shipping companies and their employers, occasionally on the police records for drunk and disorderly charges as they celebrated after payday. The numerous Austro-Hungarians who fit this category in Michigan often did not set roots in the state, but they established Michigan's economic foundations nonetheless.

Fifthly, Mario's personal experience of immigration based on a likely illegal entry was certainly atypical. Entry to the US prior to the 1920s was well regulated but not prohibitive. Like Mario, all Austro-Hungarians came by ship, many using the same port and shipping company for which he worked. There was little reason for most immigrants to "jump ship." With \$20 in the pocket, an address of someone in the US, tolerable health, and a willingness to swear that one was neither a polygamist nor an anarchist, just about anyone who made it to a US port was admitted.

Lastly, on our question of identity, loyalty, and the important reality of compulsory military service, Austro-Hungarians seem to have reached a complicated equilibrium as long as external factors did not disrupt the delicate balance. While the monarchy stood, men overwhelmingly served loyally in the imperial army (Mario's brothers); some emigrated to avoid such service (perhaps the case for Mario); and a very few, under extenuating circumstances, served the enemy (certainly the

³⁸ Gustavo Corni, "The Exodus of Italians from Istria and Dalmatia, 1945–56," in Jessica Reinisch and Elizabeth White, eds., *The Disentanglement of Populations: Migration, Expulsion and Displacement in Post-War Europe, 1944–9* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 71-90; for a general discussion of ethnic cleansing in Europe after World War II see, Pertti Aho and others, *People on the Move: Forced Population Movements in Europe after World War II and its Aftermath* (New York: Berg, 2008).



case for Mario, though his motives are unclear). In any event, conscription was a factor in decision making about emigration for the young men of the monarchy, but there is no evidence that it made them either less loyal to their homeland or to their adopted homes. Only the unexpected convulsions unleashed by World War One forced immediate reconsideration of traditional loyalties and migration patterns.



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