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Nationalism Over Socialism in Galicia

In 1909, the oil wells of Galicia, Austria-Hungary were the third largest producers of oil in the world.¹ Galicia, a province in the northeast corner of the Hapsburg Empire, had the opportunity to exploit these oil resources and improve the impoverished condition of its populace. Socialist trade unions were promoted as a way to improve conditions for workers. Ethnic tensions grew and derailed these efforts. More powerful nationalist interests divided the socialist trade groups suppressing their constructive growth. The region was left little improved, the real oil wealth being made in Vienna, and beyond. Development of the Galician oil industry suffered from a lack of regulation, deep-rooted ethnic divisions, and the inability to break away from an agrarian mind-set.

Following the First Partition of Poland in 1772, the southern most provinces of Poland were incorporated into the Hapsburg Empire forming Galicia, the largest province of the Empire. Galicia had a picturesque landscape with rolling farmland, sprawling forests, mountain rivers, and old-fashioned peasant villages.² As it was bound to the south by the Carpathian Mountains, Galicia was distant and cutoff from the rest of the Hapsburg’s territory. In Vienna, on the southern side of the Carpathians, Galicia was not part of daily administrative affairs. This separation from the center of the realm led to a neglect of the peoples’ needs. The situation was exacerbated when, in 1867, with the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (Ausgleich), Galicia

² Frank, 27-28.
became an autonomous province within the Austrian Empire and was now both geographically and politically removed from her rulers in Vienna.³

A handful of Polish noble families owned 40% of Galician land. Known as Magnates, they were some of the wealthiest families in Europe. As the nobility controlled the land and sought to perpetuate a system under which they were so prosperous, reform and industrialization was seriously impeded.⁴ The magnates already controlled large shares of the economy and directed political power.⁵ Composed of 90% arable land, Galicia had an overwhelmingly agrarian populace that still used pre-modern farming methods. Between 1869 and 1919 the percentage of land used for farming barely changed (46%), despite the significant increase in population. The peasants still lived in wooden cabins, made their own clothes, and farmed by hand and horse.⁶ Education was so neglected in Galicia that, in 1887, a pole showed that 86% of village leaders were illiterate and the number was probably higher in the rest of the peasantry.⁷ The illiteracy rate of Galician Ukrainians was still almost 80% in 1910.⁸ The society of Galicia remained as simple as it was feudal.

Like so much of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Galicia was an ethnic mix. Poles held a preponderance of political power and formed a majority in the western half of the province. The Ukrainian population formed a majority in Galicia’s eastern half and was mostly peasant farmers.⁹ While Ukrainians suffered under Polish authority, the majority of Poles were also living under difficult circumstances. The remaining 10% of the population was mostly Jewish,

³ Frank, 14.
⁴ Frank, 39.
⁶ Frank, 28.
⁷ Frank, 39.
⁸ Polach, 241.
⁹ Frank, 32.
living in towns throughout the province, they where engaged in commerce.\textsuperscript{10} Having one of the densest rural populations in Europe, Galicia accounted for one fourth of the entire population of the Austrian Empire, excluding the Kingdom of Hungary.\textsuperscript{11} In 1867, Polish was made the language of the schools, in 1868 the courts, and finally in 1869 of the entire province. This led to the institutionalized marginalization of Ukrainians that perpetuated unsatisfactory social conditions and illiteracy in the national minority groups.\textsuperscript{12} In short, Galicia suffered from an antiquated economy that struggled to support its populace.

The Galician economy was dominated by agriculture, which employed eighty percent of the population. Neither the nobility nor the Austrian government had sought to make improvements.\textsuperscript{13} Though Galicia did have large amounts of natural and mineral resources they were poorly exploited until the province became connected to Hungary by a major rail line.\textsuperscript{14} Railroads were slow to penetrate Galicia because of the difficulty in traversing mountain ranges. With little industry in the province, there were few investors willing to risk the capital to breach the mountains, and because there were no railroads, there was little point in building industry. In 1873, there were only two railroad lines in Galicia.\textsuperscript{15} The engineering problem would be solved with newer technology allowing railroads to spread quickly. By 1997, the number of railroad lines had increased exponentially. With a newly developing oil industry, there was now plenty of motivation for industrialization.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{10} Polach, 253
\textsuperscript{11} Frank, 29.
\textsuperscript{12} Frank, 35.
\textsuperscript{13} Frank, 28.
\textsuperscript{14} Frank, 47.
Although the presence of oil had been known about for a long time, as it naturally emerged in various locations, but it was not a usable commodity until the early 1850’s. Two Poles, Jan Zeh and Ignacy Lukasiewicz, discovered how to refine it and invented a lamp that could burn it. This marked the beginning of the Galician oil industry. The industry would improve in fits as new technology was introduced but it would take another thirty years to truly take off.

Regulating the industry was difficult. The Hapsburg Empire had vague mineral rights laws with regard to the extraction of oil. When oil became important the Imperial government attempted to clarify its control of the resource. However, as Galicia was an autonomous province, it was exempted from the finance minister’s 1860 Resolution on oil. The worker’s safety, housing, insurance, technical education, and environmental protection, were all left to the prerogative of the landowners, who were often Magnates. Without centralized control, the industry became plagued by dozens (if not hundreds) of small companies drilling and selling oil wherever they could. The countryside was overrun by speculators in areas were oil had been located; derricks soon forested these locations. Galician laws of land ownership were also vague and with a rash of speculators, land prices varied. Henry Neuburger and Henri Noalhat witnessed the mercurial nature of investing in Galicia. Having purchased property for oil speculation in 1884, they observed prices multiply more than a “hundred fold” in 15 years. In addition, when they did strike oil they could not capitalize on it, as others, upon hearing of a

17 Frank, 58.
18 Frank, 59.
strike, moved in and set up in the same village.\textsuperscript{20} The remarks of their French engineer, Heurteau, invited caution; “It seems impossible to carry out effectively a serious business transaction with this hypocritical, thievish population of a country, where property is badly defined and its mode of transfer often uncertain.”\textsuperscript{21} Overproduction brought prices down. The many small companies lacked the capital to store oil and thus had to sell it as quickly as they got it leading to severely reduced prices. Smaller companies could not afford to institute proper safe guards for the workers or the oil extraction process thus accidents and environmental pollution were common.\textsuperscript{22} The lack of regulation prevented a safe and profitable growth of the region.

Work in the oil industry was both unhealthy and unpleasant for a majority of the unskilled workers. Refineries were filthy, overcrowded, unventilated, and subject to explosions.\textsuperscript{23} Safety conditions too were often appalling with workers being lowered straight down five hundred foot shafts with nothing more than a harness and a bucket to stand in. The mines and wells themselves were so poorly ventilated that air needed to be pumped into them, using hand pumps, if the miners wished to survive.\textsuperscript{24} The poverty of the oil worker was such that Ruthenian author, Ivan Franko, who spent his childhood in the oil town of Boryslaw, set many of his stories and conflicts in the Galician oil industry. Franko, an active socialist, collected statistics on the lack of industrial development and poverty in the region, how they were related.\textsuperscript{25} His writing describes the workers he saw as a child.\textsuperscript{26} “The oil and the clay made them look as black as ravens, they were dressed in pitiful rags, and there was no way of


\textsuperscript{21} Neuburger, 50.

\textsuperscript{22} Frank, 149.

\textsuperscript{23} Fank, 116.

\textsuperscript{24} Franko, 30.

\textsuperscript{25} Frank, 47.

\textsuperscript{26} Franko, 1.
telling whether the rags were actually part of them, or some ancient shreds of clothing; they reeked of filth, drinking, and corruption.”

The pay of an unskilled worker was so poor that they could not afford to replace or effectively repair their torn, oil soaked clothes. For this “pittance” the people worked two six-hour shifts or sometimes the full twelve-hour entirely underground in poorly ventilated mines that were prone to flooding.

In addition to the natural disinclination of employers to pay their workers well, foreign competition drove wages down even further. Thus, to economize, most buildings would be made haphazardly and with cheap material. “The shed of logs and planks rose above it (a paraffin wax mine) like a Gypsy tent.”

Period photos corroborate these observations by showing numerous wells, built of wood scattered throughout the foothills of the Carpathians. Franko’s protagonist in his novella *Boa Constrictor* was a Jew, “He was worth a million, but Herman Goldkramer never trusted others to oversee or pay out the wages for him.”

Goldkramer is depicted as a man consumed by avarice; “…once more he was forced to become what life had made of him—a cold, heartless profiteer who had no time to notice misery, want, or widow’s tears”. The unskilled worker, a Ruthenian in Franko’s view, was vulnerable to exploitation from everyone.

“Slippery and go-getting elements penetrated into every nook and cranny, like water at flood-time, they swarmed like thousands of maggots, worming their way into every place they were least expected. These people had the upper hand over

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27 Franko, 1.
29 Franko, 28.
30 Franko, 29.
31 Segal, 1.
32 Franko, 1.
33 Franko, 52.
the German capitalists and other businessmen, for they knew the plain villagers closely, knew how to exploit them, and cheat them constantly in petty matters.”34

While Franko’s work is fiction, documents and newspaper articles corroborate the basis.35

In 1890, 73.77% of Poles and 94% of Ruthenians relied on agricultural labor for a living.36 There were 1,200,000 surplus agricultural workers that could not be supported by the land. The only option for these people was to work in industry or to emigrate. A growing oil industry could have provided jobs for the surplus agricultural worker, as Galicia had little other opportunities.37 Only 8.6% of Poles and 1.4% of Ruthenians in Galicia depended on industry for work in 1890.38 Railroad expansion allowed workers to become migratory, farmers could work seasonally in the coalmines of Austrian Silesia or in the oil fields of Galicia to supplement their income. The growing base of industrial workers encouraged the formation of socialist trade unions.39 Worker’s organizations could negotiate to improve the conditions of workers but had little appeal because of the small numbers of full time employees. The official employment figure for the oil and wax industry was only 11,944 workers in 1897. The unofficial total would include several thousand more day workers.40 With the Roman Catholic Church actively opposing industrialization and socialism, the organization of Poles was particularly hindered.41

Labor organizations were needed in the Galician oil industry to protect the workers and the environment. In 1904, a strike in the Galician oil region responded to the notoriously

34 Franko, 28.
36 Polach, 248.
37 Polach, 249.
38 Polach, 248.
39 Frank, 111.
40 Frank, 109.
41 Polach, 248.
dangerous and unhealthy working conditions in combination with long work hours.\textsuperscript{42} Eight thousand workers struck causing a work shortage for several months.\textsuperscript{43} Small companies, mostly Jewish owned, suffered while larger corporations were able to take advantage of price increases resulting from short supplies.\textsuperscript{44} The unions demanded improvements in working conditions and hours. While some issues were attended to, but basic concerns such as shelter, clean water, and personal hygiene facilities were unaddressed.\textsuperscript{45}

Galicia’s endemic ethnic conflicts would hinder the trade union movement. With a limited number of people to sustain workers organization, the early associations were multi-ethnic and provided workers with aid and education.\textsuperscript{46} By 1910, the Social Democratic Party that advocated for worker’s rights was dominated by Poles.\textsuperscript{47} Ruthenians broke away, forming their own Ukrainian Social Democratic Party. The Ruthenians tended to be land poor and developed a loathing for large estate owners who were primarily Polish. As part-time workers, who were first and foremost, agrarian farmers, they were unable to detach themselves from the land.\textsuperscript{48} While Ruthenian issues could be addressed, the already small number of industrial workers was now divided. The fracturing continued when Jews, who managed the majority of tenancies in the oil fields, also sought an independent movement that would recognize their needs and language.\textsuperscript{49} In addition to the ethnic divide, unions found it hard to bridge the gap between a starving proletariat and a well-paid skilled worker. These socialist unions gained little

\textsuperscript{42} Polach, 251.  
\textsuperscript{43} Puchowicz, 87.  
\textsuperscript{44} Puchowicz, 87.  
\textsuperscript{45} The Social Conditions of Boryslaw.  
\textsuperscript{46} Polach, 250.  
\textsuperscript{47} Polach, 250.  
\textsuperscript{48} Polach, 252.  
\textsuperscript{49} Polach, 254.
traction with the workers and faltered.\textsuperscript{50} Both ethnicity and class divided workers and splintered the movement into arguing factions.

The oil industry had the potential to alleviate some of Galicia’s poverty. Lack of regulation led to waste and exploitation. Unions formed to address workers needs. Galicia, plagued by ethnic divisions and by an agrarian mentality, divided and undermined socialist reforms. The workers could never organize around class issues. National interests would supersede socialist affiliations and dampen any chance of an organized labor movement. The vast majority of oil workers, however, were migrant workers who still thought of themselves as farmers and worked in the oil fields to supplement their income. In the end there national and their attachment to the land prevented loyalty to the industry or to unions.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} Frank, 162.
\textsuperscript{51} Frank, 108.
Bibliography


