

Exploring the Origins of Japanese-Yugoslav Relations during World War I through the Case of Yugoslav POWs in Japan¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine Japan's attitudes towards the formation of the first Yugoslav state through the case of South Slav prisoners of war who were imprisoned in Japan between 1914 and 1919. Since captivity of Yugoslav POWs during WWI in Japan and Europe remains a relatively unknown aspect of Japanese-Yugoslav relations, the examination of archival sources documenting South Slav captivity in Japanese prison camps during the War should provide a fresh perspective on Japan's thinking regarding the Yugoslav question.

概要

本論文は、1914年から1919年の間に日本に収容された南スラヴ捕虜の事例を紹介しながら、間接的にユーゴスラヴィア王国の形成に対する日本の態度を検討している。特に、兵庫県の青野ヶ原町に収容された80人の南スラヴ捕虜たちがどのように帰国したかに焦点を当てている。第一次世界大戦中の日本と南スラヴ人の交流に関する研究はまだ少なく、一次史料の調査を通し、バルカン半島に対する当時の日本外交についても述べる。

キーワード：日本、ユーゴスラヴィア、第一次世界大戦、捕虜

Key words: Japan, Yugoslavia, World War I, Prisoners of War

Japan wants to gain control over China. This is not a secret. Russia and England don't like it much, but since they are allies of Japan, they cannot do anything about it. America, on the other hand, seems to be much more upset about the Japanese behavior, mostly because they want to keep an open door for their trade with China. Since America is afraid to start a war with Japan, we can assume that in the near future it will be friendlier towards England, and even more hostile towards Germany. Japan just got a new Prime Minister who is known to be a fearless man.²

¹ This article has been revised and corrected on 26 March 2020.

² 'Japonska in Amerika [Japan and the US]', *Slovenski Gospodar*, 2 November 1916.

Introduction

In this passage *Slovenski Gospodar*, a popular Slovenian weekly, described Japan during the First World War as an uncompromising, bold nation that could stand up and claim its own. Japan was perceived as a strong and fearless country that was intimidating even to the United States. What is more noticeable, however, is that Japan is portrayed as a Great Power that had significant influence and ability to affect international power dynamics, especially in Asia.

Given Japan's Great Power standing during the First World War, I ask myself how were Japan's relations with Europe affected by the first global conflict. In the present article I am particularly concerned about Japan's reactions to the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and her views regarding the birth of the first Yugoslav state in the Balkans, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (KSCS).

Historiographers from former Yugoslav nations have not expressed great interest in Japanese foreign policy during the First World War.³ Despite Japan's improved international status after the conclusion of the Great War, we still poorly understand her thinking about the postwar political settlements in Europe. Even less is known about Japan's interactions with East-Central European nations during the Paris Peace Conference. These historiographers have remained oblivious to Japan's diplomatic posture towards allied secret arrangements, such as the Treaty of London (1915). Furthermore, given Japan's geopolitical, historical and cultural distance from these regions, it is often implied that Japan had almost no direct linkage to or influence on European affairs.

Such thinking, however, is not entirely justified and underestimates Japan's true weight during and after the First World War. For example, during the Paris Peace Conference Japan was a member of the Big Five and was assigned a special seat on all central peace committees. In relation to the Yugoslav question, telegrams from Japanese diplomats point to Japan's close working relationship with the Italian delegation.⁴ Her diplomatic proximity to Italian representatives suggests that Japan was not entirely oblivious to the political situation in the Adriatic basin. Furthermore, both countries were often compared and portrayed by the

³ The term Yugoslav (Jugoslav) means South Slav. The present article will use both terms interchangeably.

⁴ B. Bertalanic, 'The Adriatic Question and The Yugoslav Prisoners of War in Japan', PhD diss., University of Tokyo, 2012, pp. 91-94.

media as close partners with a common adversary, the United States.⁵ Due to the macro political developments after 1917 and gradual cementing of a complex network of secret treaties, Japanese thinking concerning the future political order in Europe seems to have been predetermined long before the Paris Peace Conference took place and even before the new East European states were recognized internationally.⁶

For the above reasons the present article will examine Japan's stance towards the formation of the first Yugoslav state after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Their relations will be analyzed through a case study of Yugoslav prisoners of war (POWs) who were imprisoned in Japan between 1914 and 1919. Since captivity of South Slav POWs during WWI in Japan and Europe remains a relatively unknown aspect of Japanese-Yugoslav relations, the examination of archival sources documenting South Slav captivity in Japanese prison camps during the War should provide a fresh perspective on Japan's thinking regarding the Yugoslav question.

The study is based on the analysis of primary sources that were discovered in the National Archives of Japan. All primary documents are from the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Institute for Security Studies at the Japanese Ministry of Defense. Most of the documents are digitalized and can be accessed online through the website of the Japan Centre for Asian Historical Records (JACAR), which works under cover of National Archives of Japan (NAJ).⁷

1 Narratives of War Captivity in Japan During WW

I

Experiences of POWs in Japan appear in strong contrast to narratives of captivity in other war theaters, for example Russia or the Western front, where prisoners suffered from hunger, illness and physical abuse.⁸ Japanese narratives tend to emphasize harmonious Japanese-German relations and various aspects of intercultural dialogue among prisoners and local communities.⁹ These relations are often romanticized. Prisoners are often depicted as cultural

⁵ 'Japan's case like Italy's', *New York Times*, 21 April 1919.

⁶ 'Wilson Unaware of Japan's Deals', *New York Times*, 12 August 1919.

⁷ Japan Centre for Asian Historical Records (JACAR), <http://www.jacar.go.jp/>, accessed on 26 March 2020.

⁸ A. Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front*, Oxford 2002.

⁹ For example see T. Seto, 'Chintao kara kita heishi-tachi [Soldiers who came from Qingdao]', Tokyo, 2006; H. Muneta, 'Bandō-furyo monogatari: Nihon-jin to Doitsu-jin no kokkyo wo koeta yūjō [The Story of Prisoners From Bando: Japanese-German Friendship That Crossed Borders]', Tokyo, 2006.

promoters or friends. Descriptions such as the one in the following passage are not uncommon:

'Lasting friendships were forged between the German prisoners and the Japanese villagers, and the bond has survived largely intact... German soldiers reciprocated by teaching local residents how to practice dairy farming, bake bread and build Western-style houses and stone bridges'.¹⁰

Most of these narratives, however, appear unbalanced and one-sided. During the Great War German and Austrians, although predominant, were not the only POWs in Japan. Among researchers who offer a more balanced narrative about POWs in Japan we should mention one of the leading Japanese historians on relations between Japan and the Habsburg Monarchy, Atsushi Ōtsuru from Kobe University. In his extensive work on the Aonogahara prison camp in Hyōgo Prefecture, he describes the multiethnic dimension of Austro-Hungarian POWs in Japan. Based on his research we can conclude that although the majority of POWs in Japan came from Germany or Austria, not all of them were ethnic Germans. Among POWs there were as well Czechs and Slovaks, Poles, French from Alsace and Jews. Among the 300 Austro-Hungarian prisoners more than 40% were of non-German origins. They included Italians, Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, Bosnians, Czechs and Slovaks.¹¹

One of the aims of this paper is to point out that we would make an irreparable mistake if we reduced the whole issue to an intercultural episode in the history of bilateral relations between Germany and Japan or Austria and Japan. In this sense Ōtsuru demonstrates how POWs from 'minor' nations were not just passing through Japan on their way back home from Russia, as it is often assumed, but were actually an important part of the general narrative on captivity in Japan. His contribution is significant also because it shows that despite the predominant German representation of POWs, the multinational dimension of captivity in Japan is important and deserves proper scrutiny. Furthermore, since among POWs in Japan the German historical experience tends to dominate and is heavily idealized, minority experiences of POWs from other nations consequently tend to be overlooked. This is a marked difference from, for example, the situation in narratives of captivity in Russia where research tends to build on the multi-national character of the POW population, rather

¹⁰ 'Japanese POW camp was a little slice of home', *Taipei Times*, 23 March 2004.

¹¹ A. Ōtsuru, 'Aonogahara-furyo-shūyōjo-no-sekai [The World of the Prison Camp in Aonogahara]', Tokyo, 2007.

than neglect it. This is worth remembering, as unbalanced and one-sided narratives carry several negative consequences. For example, experiences of prisoners from minority groups tend to be brushed aside and, although sometimes acknowledged, their stories remain untold.

2 Yugoslav POWs in Japan

All South Slav POWs in Japan were Austro-Hungarian sailors from the Kaiser Franc Joseph I class cruiser *Kaiserin Elisabeth*. At the outbreak of World War I in 1914 the cruiser was stationed in China, and it took part in the defense of the German-controlled port of Tsingtao (Qingdao), which was captured by Japanese armed forces on November 7, 1914.¹² Approximately 4,000 German soldiers and 300 Austro-Hungarian sailors were immediately transported to Japan. They reached Hiroshima on November 17 and two days later continued their journey to Himeji in Hyōgo Prefecture, where they were accommodated in Buddhist temples. In September 1915 the Japanese military transferred the prisoners deeper inside the prefecture and accommodated them into a newly-built prison camp in the town of Aonogahara.¹³

From the very beginning of captivity their diverse ethno-national backgrounds became a constant source of tension and conflicts. During the summer of 1915 the newspaper *Kobe Shimbun* reported that German prisoners in Himeji attempted to kill several fellow prisoners of Italian background. Apparently some prisoners openly expressed their sentiments of allegiance to Italy, sang the Italian anthem, and eventually provoked a violent German response. The incident was not an isolated event and was probably an expression of the diversified structure of the prison camp community and the less advantageous position of the marginalized ethnic groups like Italians, Croats, Bosnians, Serbs and Slovenes.¹⁴

Japanese authorities were quick to restore peace. They immediately segregated and transferred all POWs of presumed Italian nationality to a separate army facility in Marugame in Kagawa Prefecture. The Italian embassy in Tokyo thereafter learned about the incident and began a lengthy negotiation process with the Japanese Foreign Ministry for the release of prisoners claiming allegiance to Italy. During the negotiations they attempted to gain

¹² See R. Greger, 'Austro-Hungarian Warships of World War I', London, 1976.

¹³ Ōtsuru, pp. 6-8.

¹⁴ Ōtsuru, pp. 73-76, 116-17.

jurisdiction as well over prisoners who were originally from the areas claimed by Italy under the Treaty of London, including Yugoslav regions like Gorizia, Istria, and Dalmatia. The Japanese, however, not being a party to the treaty, allowed the release of only those prisoners who opted to join the Italian army and indirectly accept Italian citizenship.¹⁵

Events surrounding the release of Italian prisoners are indicative of another issue that has been poorly researched, namely the question of prisoner repatriation. The majority of secondary sources surveyed implicitly indicate that at the conclusion of the War prisoners were repatriated via the same channels. This, however, is inaccurate. The primary sources analyzed in the present research tell a different story. With the political order of Europe shifting, repatriation actually represented a considerable challenge for the Japanese authorities.

As will be presented through the rest of these pages, the repatriation of Yugoslav POWs was indeed a complex issue that was addressed in several stages. In the beginning phases Yugoslav authorities attempted to establish channels of communication with the Japanese diplomatic representatives in Paris, but failed. At the same time the Czech military representative in Tokyo tried to solve the problem with his own proposal. He suggested the transfer of all Yugoslav prisoners to Siberia and their integration into the military contingents of the Czech legions. He failed as well. Finally, through French mediation Japan acknowledged Yugoslav claims and began preparations to send them home. This proved to be the final solution.

3 Search and Release of Yugoslav POWs in Japan

Reports about Yugoslav prisoners in Japan had already been circulating during the war. For example, in February 1915 a Slovenian clerical newspaper published a letter from a Croat sailor imprisoned in Himeiji. The letter was dated December 26, 1914 and was addressed to the sailor's mother. He described his life in captivity in the following way:

About our life in captivity, I must say, we are not hungry and they keep us warm. The only problem is that we have no money. We cannot walk out freely; they told us, we

¹⁵ Bertalanic, pp. 107-33.

couldn't go outside until the Japanese ministry of war allows it. In the morning we wake up at 7.45; we wash up and around 8 o'clock we receive tea with white bread and sugar. At 12 o'clock we have another meal, usually made of one dish: goulash, meatballs, fish or something else. Besides that we also receive two pieces of bread. Dinner is served at 5 in the afternoon and is also made of goulash and rice. Compared to lunch, we only get a quarter of bread. We can have some tea, but with no sugar this time.

All day long there is nothing to do. We can wash our clothes and every eight days we can take a hot bath. Those who have some reading materials read; others write or dictate their letters to those who can write.

After all, we are treated well. I have even gained some weight and I feel healthier than ever before. We regularly receive German newspapers from China. They tell us that in this war Austria is doing well. A few days ago they wrote that the 'Kaiserin Elizabeth' was sunk in Tsingtao with the entire crew on it. But this is a lie! Yes, there were a few deaths and wounded, but the majority of us are safe on shore here in Japan.¹⁶

The letter was probably one of the first reports about Yugoslav prisoners in Japan published in the Balkans. Officially, however, the prisoners question surfaced only towards the end of the war. In the beginning of April 1919 the Yugoslav delegation participating at the Paris Peace Conference made the first attempt to contact the Japanese legation. Based on Serbian intelligence they were searching for two navy Lieutenants, Viktor Klobučar and Vladimir Marijašević. Both were supposed to be held captive somewhere in Japan.¹⁷ There was, however, a problem. The Japanese side refused to deal with the Yugoslavs. Their new kingdom was yet to be recognized internationally. Therefore, it soon became clear that attempts to communicate with the Japanese delegation in Paris were a dead end and because of that Serbia requested France and UK to mediate with Japan.

At about the same time, however, in Tokyo they were handling the Yugoslav prisoners question from a different angle. There the Czech military representative Dr. Vaclav Nemec

¹⁶ 'Naši vojni ujetniki na Japonskem [Our prisoners of war in Japan]', *Slovenec*, February 25, 1915.

¹⁷ 'Diplomatic note of Yugoslav authorities to the Japanese embassy in Paris', DAJ, JACAR, *Ouke Dainikki*, 2 April 1919, ref. C030253180000, p. 273.

was already aware of the Yugoslav prisoners and actually met with them several times. Nemec had been in charge of the representation of the Czech legions in Tokyo since November 1918. Although he held the status of a military attaché, he was not the official diplomatic representative for the Czechoslovak authorities in Japan. The Japanese government thus did not support his efforts, because he was not a diplomat from the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but rather a representative of the Office of the Czech legions in the Far East.¹⁸

Nemec was also a Pan-Slavist and he cared about the Yugoslavs. On April 7, 1919 he wrote a confidential letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (MOFAJ) where he proposed the integration of the Yugoslavs with the Czech military units in Siberia. According to his information they were held in two prison camps in Japan, in Narashino and in Aonogahara. Before engaging the Japanese side he contacted his superiors in Vladivostok and requested permission to negotiate their release and transfer to Siberia. His request was approved and he was authorized to approach MOFAJ.

From the beginning Nemec did his best to secure the most favorable release conditions. He was convinced that Yugoslavs should be treated under the same terms as his fellow Czechoslovak soldiers. He also suggested that every man sign an oath of enlistment proving that his choice to join the Czech fighting units in Siberia was a deliberate one.¹⁹ The Japanese authorities agreed, but had a demand of their own: As provided by established protocol, they demanded the signing of pledges whereby the prisoners promised to refrain from fighting Japanese forces. When the Czech initiative was announced, in total only twenty-two Yugoslav prisoners decided to sign: six in Narashino and sixteen in Aonogahara.²⁰

As the preparations to release the Yugoslavs began unfolding, France stepped in and suddenly stopped the transfer. Nemec was contacted by the French ambassador in Tokyo and

¹⁸ T. Vostry, Councilor at Czech embassy in Japan, e-mail correspondence to author, June 10, 2009.

¹⁹ 'Proposition of Dr. Vaclav Nemec to integrate Yugoslav POWs with the Czech legions in Siberia,' DAJ, JACAR, *Ouke Dainikki*, 7 April 1919, ref. C03025318000, pp. 11-12.

²⁰ 'Statements of Yugoslav POWs on their agreement to be integrated into the Czech legions in Siberia signed in Narashino prison camp', DAJ, JACAR, *Ouke Dainikki*, 27 April 1919, ref. C03025318000, pp. 19-30; 'Statements of Yugoslav POWs on their agreement to be integrated into the Czech legions in Siberia signed in Aonogahara', DAJ, JACAR, *Ouke Dainikki*, 5 May 1919, ref. C03025318000, pp. 57-56, 62-75.

informed about the new developments.²¹ Based on the Serbian request in Paris, France was officially taking charge of the Yugoslav POWs in Japan. Nemec had to withdraw his proposal. He was disappointed and on the same day wrote a confidential letter to his contact in MOFAJ where he explained his shock and concern. He described how he attempted to persuade the French ambassador, but his proposal had no chance. The French ambassador explained his obligations under international law and stated that, since his government already agreed with the Serbian side, he was required to assume the official representation of Yugoslavs. In the end Nemec remained skeptical that France would really take to heart the interests of the prisoners. In his telegrams he described his personal experience in the Russian prison camps and warned the Japanese authorities against the escalation of political tensions among the POWs.²²

France was, nevertheless, well aware of the Yugoslav presence in Japan. Already in mid-April 1919 they asked the Japanese authorities to provide details about 150 South Slav sailors from the Kaiserin Elisabeth that had been interned in Japan since the beginning of the war.²³ The Japanese authorities replied in a positive tone in mid-May and promised to start a full enquiry in order to establish the exact number and whereabouts of the Yugoslav prisoners.²⁴

In the meantime Serbia also requested the assistance of Britain.²⁵ The British ambassador in Tokyo contacted Vice Minister Kijūrō Shidehara at MOFAJ, who immediately confirmed that Japan was harboring some eighty sailors of Yugoslav origins. Since the French side was already taking charge, Shidehara informed the British that Japan had decided to manage the affair through the French authorities and that the specifics concerning prisoner's release were to be elaborated by the Japanese government in the following months.²⁶

²¹ 'Diplomatic note of Dr. Nemec to MOFAJ Uchida', DAJ, JACAR, *Ouke Dainikki*, 30 April 1919, ref. C03025318000, p. 54.

²² 'Confidential letter of Dr. Nemec to MOFAJ Okabe', DAJ, JACAR, *Ouke Dainikki*, 30 April 1919, ref. C03025318000, pp. 52-53.

²³ 'Diplomatic note of French embassy in Tokyo to MOFAJ, DAJ, JACAR', *Ouke Dainikki*, 19 April 1919, ref. C03025318000, p. 51.

²⁴ 'Diplomatic note of MOFAJ to the French embassy in Tokyo', DAJ, JACAR, Miscellaneous documents on establishment of POW Information Bureau and German prisoner of war during Japan Germany War, Vol. 15, 19 May 1919, ref. B07090924300, p. 21.

²⁵ 'Diplomatic note of the British embassy in Tokyo to MOFAJ', DAJ, JACAR, Miscellaneous documents on establishment of POW Information Bureau and German prisoner of war during Japan Germany War Vol. 15, 27 May 1919, ref. B07090924300, p. 25.

²⁶ "Diplomatic note of MOFAJ to the British embassy in Tokyo," DAJ, JACAR, Miscellaneous documents on establishment of POW Information Bureau and German prisoner of war during Japan Germany War Vol. 15, 9 June 1919, ref. B07090924300, p. 26.

By the beginning of September 1919 the French embassy in Tokyo had compiled a detailed list of all Yugoslav prisoners. The list was delivered to MOFAJ and included sixty-three Croats, ten Slovenes, seven Serbs and three Bosnians. Slovenes were from all corners of the country: from Ljubljana came Lepold Voje, Anton Lipovž, Alojz Barič and Josip Jurčič; from Celje came Anton Rioza and Alojz Bršnik; from Maribor came Ivan Lesnik; from Kranj came Josip Kralj; from Vipava came Gašper Mesenel and from Sežana came Franc Malalan.²⁷

The French diplomats were especially keen to establish contact with Lieutenant Viktor Klobučar. He was the only South Slav officer among the prisoners and was thereafter designated as the chief coordination and liaison officer for the release and hand over of the Yugoslavs to the French embassy.²⁸ Japanese military authorities granted him free access to the prisoners' quarters, which smoothed communications.²⁹

After the Japanese authorities received the list they requested additional information. More specifically, they asked for a detailed itinerary of the repatriation plan. The French ambassador at that moment did not possess those details; however, he later confirmed that Serbia was requesting the assistance of the UK regarding transportation.³⁰ In the event, Britain was not able to provide adequate transport, and France had to assume responsibility. They managed to find a corvette named Sphinx cruising in Asia, which took the prisoners back to Europe. There were other complications, mostly related to logistics. French diplomats complained that the Japanese authorities were slow and disorganized. Prisoners were scattered all over the country and the authorities had no idea how to gather them in one place.³¹ By mid-September 1919 the release was finally formalized and the French consular

²⁷ 'Letter of the French ambassador to MOFAJ Uchida', DAJ, JACAR, Miscellaneous documents on establishment of POW Information Bureau and German prisoner of war during Japan Germany War Vol. 15, 9 June 1919, ref. B07090924300, p. 41.

²⁸ 'Diplomatic note of the French embassy to MOFAJ on the Klobučar case', DAJ, JACAR, Ouke Dainikki, 18 June 1919, ref. C03025318000, p. 275.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ 'Letter from the French embassy in Tokyo to MOFAJ Uchida', DAJ, JACAR, Miscellaneous documents on establishment of POW Information Bureau and German prisoner of war during Japan Germany War Vol. 15, 17 June 1919, ref. B07090924300, pp. 29-30.

³¹ 'Letter from the French embassy in Tokyo to MOFAJ Uchida', DAJ, JACAR, Miscellaneous documents on establishment of POW Information Bureau and German prisoner of war during Japan Germany War Vol. 15, 13 June 1919, ref. B07090924300, p. 47.

department provided all the necessary travel documents.³² Towards the end of the month one prisoner, Anton Jelovčič from Istria, died from tuberculosis. He was buried in the military cemetery in Himeji.³³

The release papers were handed over to the POWs in the beginning of October 1919.³⁴ The French consular office later screened the documents and found out that all prisoners except a certain Otto Toffola, who was designated as an Italian national, were fulfilling the necessary conditions to be repatriated through the French channels. Toffola was later, against his will, handed over to the Italian authorities in Tokyo.³⁵ After formalities were cleared they fixed the dates for the release. It was agreed that the prisoners would be gathered in two separated locations, Narashino and Aonogahara, and then transferred to Kobe.³⁶ The release was finalized in the beginning of December 1919 when all prisoners boarded the Spynx and sailed back home.³⁷

Conclusion

The present article indirectly examines Japan's attitude towards the formation of the first Yugoslav state after the conclusion of World War I through a case study of Yugoslav prisoners of war in Japan between 1914 and 1919. Since this topic remains a relatively unknown aspect in the early development of Japanese-Yugoslav relations, the research was concentrated on retrieving and examining primary sources from Japan's National Archives documenting South Slav captivity in Japanese prison camps during the War.

The results of the case study show that at the end of the First World War both nations had practically no relations and they communicated through intermediates, mostly France and the UK. Japan did not respond to the attempts of the Yugoslav delegates in Paris to establish

³² 'Diplomatic note of the French Embassy in Tokyo to MOFAJ with release forms for the Yugoslav POWs', DAJ, JACAR, Ouke Dainikki, 20 September 1919, ref. C03025318000, pp. 110-121.

³³ 'Report on the death of Anton Jelovčič', DAJ, JACAR, Miscellaneous documents on establishment of POW Information Bureau and German prisoner of war during Japan Germany War Vol. 15, 18 September 1919, ref. B07090924300, pp. 64-65.

³⁴ 'Copies of release forms for the Yugoslav POWs', DAJ, JACAR, Ouke Dainikki, 5-9 October 1919, ref. C03025318000, pp. 150-232.

³⁵ 'Diplomatic note of the French embassy to MOFAJ', DAJ, JACAR, Ouke Dainikki, 5 November 1919, ref. C03025318000, p. 148.

³⁶ 'MOFAJ memo to the administrations of prison camps in Narashino and Aonogahara', DAJ, JACAR, Ouke Dainikki, 21 November 1919, ref. C03025318000, pp. 243-245.

³⁷ 'Letter of MOFAJ Uchida to the US embassy in Tokyo', DAJ, JACAR, Miscellaneous documents on establishment of POW Information Bureau and German prisoner of war during Japan Germany War Vol. 15, 10 December 1919, ref. B07090924300, p. 99.

direct contacts and even tried to solve the repatriation problem of Yugoslav prisoners through their integration into the Czech legions in Siberia. Although Japanese policy makers had no vested interests in the political situation in the Balkans, their military and foreign office administrators were nevertheless entangled in the political tensions that sprang among prisoners, especially in the latter phase of their captivity while attempts were made to repatriate them.

Sources also suggest that in their attempt to placate tensions among prisoners the Japanese authorities assumed the role of an arbiter. As we can see from the gathered documentation, in their decisions the authorities often granted to the prisoners the liberty to choose their nationality. This appears to have been in line with the Japanese official practice of viewing citizenship separately from territory and granting inhabitants the liberty to choose their residence outside of the ceded territories, a practice that can be tracked back to article 5 of the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895).

In the midst of nationalistic tensions among various groups of prisoners, states like France, England, Italy (and even Spain, to a certain degree) became involved in the repatriation process. Japan's key interest was to get prisoners out of the country as soon as possible. This was clearly stated in many diplomatic notes and even in the bilateral agreements for the release of prisoners during the war, for example with Italy. In the case of the Yugoslav prisoners it appears that several states were simultaneously claiming the right to represent them. For example, as early as 1917 Italian territorial claims as stated in the London agreement of 1915 were used as a justification for claiming Italy's jurisdiction over the Yugoslav prisoners. Unfortunately for Italy, as the war ended France got the upper hand.

The present study also shows that Yugoslav POWs in Japan to a great extent remained loyal to the monarchy, even when they had the chance not to be. For example when the Czech representative in Tokyo Vaclav Nemec proposed to integrate them with the Czech legions in Siberia, less than a third (22 out of 82) were prepared to do so. Also when in 1917 Italy promised a way out for those who showed sympathy for its cause, only thirteen chose to do so.³⁸ The majority decided to stay in Japan. This is worth mentioning, because disloyalty and

³⁸ Bertalanic, *The Adriatic Question...*, pp. 128-133.

desertion have been one of the central problems among Austro-Hungarian POWs and it seriously affected the Habsburg military maneuvers during the war. The notion that many soldiers of the Habsburg monarchy were disloyal has been widely accepted in the historiography of the Austro-Hungarian war effort, but cannot be claimed in the case of Yugoslav prisoners in Japan.

The repatriation process also offers us some insight into how Japan approached the question of prisoners nationality. For example, as already mentioned above not all of the prisoners who were designated as Italians actually decided to go back home by acquiring Italian nationality. For many of them, going back home probably meant returning to the front and most of the men wanted to avoid that. The question of prisoners nationality became even more complicated after the war ended. Prisoners stopped being Austro-Hungarians and became Croats, Slovenes, Poles, Magyars, Serbs, etc. The political situation in the Balkans was uncertain. The borders between the new states that were born out of the Peace Conference in Paris were undefined. Disputes and tensions were peaking. Due to this it was impossible to decide who was a national of which state. Japan took a pragmatic approach. As is mentioned above, Japanese authorities often asked the prisoners to choose their nationality and their way back home. This was, however, fertile ground for opportunism and many tried to avoid being handed over to a specific state. Indeed, they often decided to stay.

In conclusion, the present article presents a testimony describing the experience of Yugoslav POWs in Japan and I am convinced that it significantly complements and expands current research on Austro-Hungarian POWs in Japan. It also helps diversify the current narratives on POWs in Japan. Based on the results of this case study we could presume that the nationality question surrounding the repatriation of POWs contributed to Japan's early encounters with various European nationality questions. In this sense, the present contribution offers also a starting point for further research into the possible roles that Japan played in the establishment of the new political map of Europe in the interwar period.

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