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‘Alien Enemies’ in the Waikato:  
Early European Immigrants, 1899–1919  

Sabion Pivac  

In 1918, *The Colonist* estimated that there were ‘some 200 Slavs from the Austrian area’ working in the Waikato, Piako, Te Aroha, Ohinemuri and Thames districts. Most were young men already employed in gum digging, farm labouring or in the drainage of swamps. Retired police commissioner John Cullen, who had been reinstated and appointed Commissioner for National Alien Employment, was quoted as having been ‘in personal touch with these Slav inhabitants’ to ascertain where each man could best be assigned for State work. It could be assumed that while the Commissioner had visited the Waikato region he had assessed patriotic loyalty during wartime unease, while cataloguing these men in his alien enemy portfolio.

Seven months prior to the account of these men published in *The Colonist*, members of parliament had discussed a report regarding drainage operations on the Hauraki Plains. The labour pool was depleted due to the war effort and it was questioned whether prison labour — or any other labour, for that matter — might be industriously employed for the benefit of the State. There were but two dredges at work on the Hauraki Plains and two thirds of the 100,000 acres of appropriated land were still considered ‘the haunt of the wild duck.’ In order to convert the Hauraki swamp into revenue, urgent drainage was required for settlement to occur. It would not be long before a scheme was put into place. A plan was initiated in December 1917 to investigate, classify and supervise the ‘Yugoslav’ people of New Zealand. Henceforth, on the heels of Cullen’s social call to the Waikato region, a large number of ‘Yugoslavs’ reported to the Public Works for labouring positions. This included swamp drainage and stopbank construction with the Ohinemuri and Waihou river works, and other construction work such as the Paeroa-Pokeno railway.

All enemy alien surveillance, conscription and detainment, was being enforced under the coercive praxis of John Cullen. He had undertaken the task of compiling a register of ‘Yugoslav’ migrants by means of Defence Department advertisements which had begun to surface in the local newspapers. In a manner that commanded all ‘Yugoslavs’ to report personally for registration, an advertisement in *The New Zealand Herald* stipulated that those failing to report, whether naturalised or not, would be ‘drastically dealt with’. Under Cullen’s charge, large numbers of Croats were directed into labouring camps under...
government supervision, so that assigned work was undertaken either for the State or for a sanctioned employer.

In both public and official debates during this time, the identity of Croatians in New Zealand encompassed Slavs, Austrians, Dalmatians and Yugoslavs. This in itself reflects the turbulent and complex homeland condition that these men had departed from as subjects under the regime of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Before World War 1 the Kingdom of Hungary had granted Croatia and Slavonia internal administrative independence under its reign, whereas Dalmatia had been subject to Austria. As a result, those in New Zealand who identified as Austrians before the Armistice were predominantly Dalmatians.

We might ask why these European men were in New Zealand, and what experiences they may have encountered. After decades of dual monarchy and control over their homelands, the manner in which their peasant agrarian culture had subsisted had been compromised. This, coupled with failing crops, extreme poverty and an aversion to military service, had prompted many to immigrate to New Zealand shores. It was soon realised that in New Zealand, money could be made primarily by digging for kauri resin, with profits sent back to villages to relieve hardship. Before long a chain migration system developed, which was cultivated through existing social relationships and which provided both support and networks for future migrants, who had begun to arrive in considerable numbers in 1892.

Employment in public works brought Croats to the Waikato region, particularly during World War 1. However, work and opportunities prior to this time also took them to other parts of the North Island, as this essay shows.

Before World War 1, attitudes in New Zealand toward Croatian immigrants were largely preoccupied with the undertakings of enterprising Croats who had potentially created a glut in the kauri gum industry marketplace. It was an economic resource that the British settler believed was compromised due both to the inflow of ‘Austrians’ onto the gumfields and to their output of productive labour. A letter to the editor of *The New Zealand Herald* in 1899 identified with a number of small settlers in the north who had but a few hundred acres and therefore needed to supplement their income. In the article, the Croats are referred to as ‘a curse and a blight … just taking the bread from these people’s mouths.’ The letter reflects a general discord targeting ‘undesirable’ immigrants, and this attitude may be found in numerous accounts at this time.

Meanwhile, Croatians had also emerged in various public works and continued to be perceived as threatening to the livelihood of the white settler. The Croatian occupation of an abandoned space near Kaipara Flats — while they awaited work placement — had been
described in another publication as ‘their latest encroachment’; this was sounded in a letter to
the editor as ‘a note of warning to my fellow-workers’ with regard to the Croat presence on
railway works. The writer objected to the ‘Austrians’ camped up on a deserted gumfield as
they waited to replace men that vacated, so they could take up work that the ‘Britishers’ were
being denied.8

Besides, the so-called ‘Austrians’ were imagined as sojourners. Not dissimilar to
Chinese immigrants, they were often transient, hard-working, predominantly male and
inhabiting makeshift, remote places. Indifferent to becoming settlers, they were therefore
considered unsettling. At a meeting of the House of Representatives in 1899, it was noted that
‘Austrians’ were ‘industrious and sober’, yet they were classified as ‘other’, not meeting the
idealised image of the desirable settler. As it was pointed out, ‘hundreds of these people lived
together, living in a nomadic state’ and sent money out of the country.9 It appeared that the
‘Austrians’ were somewhat less interested in contributing to the fiscal pool of the burgeoning
colony, but rather elected to send earnings back to their homeland.

With the advent of World War 1, the position of Dalmatians, as representative of the
majority of ‘Austrians’ in New Zealand at this time, shifted. Sending earnings to their
families in Austria-Hungary became an arrangement considered sympathetic to enemies of
the British Empire.

Instigated at the hands of government, the classification of the ‘enemy alien’ was
assigned both to immigrants of Austria-Hungary and to select ‘others’ such as German
migrants. They were regarded with intense suspicion due to being subjects of territories with
which Britain was in combat. The assigned category of ‘enemy alien’ originated in a sense of
paranoia, but it was perpetuated in the feelings of fear and mistrust that characterised war-
time attitudes toward ‘other’ nations. For example, containment and surveillance were
discussed in a parliamentary debate in 1916, with reference to the ‘men in question’ included
in discussions concerning Germans and espionage. Members of Parliament considered a
strategy of appointing soldiers with ‘rifle and bayonet’ to patrol the boundaries of places
where ‘Austrians’ were employed, as a means of preventing intrusion into the wider
community. It was proposed that ‘a line could thus be drawn and the guards would see that
the Austrians did not pass it’, in an attempt to alleviate the collective anxiety.10

With many in New Zealand having been dispatched to war duties, select identified
groups came to recognise that they were excluded from fighting for the British Empire. Those
who had enlisted for service, though rejected for not being British subjects, found the
Government had deferred the matter of naturalisation till the war was over.11 Furthermore,
one of many wartime regulations initiated to influence control over enemy aliens was the Revocation of Naturalisation Act in 1917. This gave the Government the power to revoke or suspend the citizenship rights of Croats and others who had previously been naturalised.

Following the Armistice in November 1918, those men who had been deprived of the freedoms of citizenship came to realise that wartime-regulated restrictions — including being quartered under canvas at the works and receiving a capped wage — were still in effect. Resentment incited the Croats to instigate ‘go-slows’ and ‘no-shows’. One such event that was indicative of the ill feeling was a protest at Paeroa, initiated by workers on the government drainage works. The strike was ignited from what was considered the unjust treatment of workers who had been arrested and interned for boarding in Paeroa. Court proceedings noted that they refused to ‘obey the orders’ and live at the works camp, and many of those who participated in the protest were apprehended and fined.12

Almost a year after the Armistice, Commissioner Cullen visited several of the works camps on which Croats were engaged. He announced in a publication of The New Zealand Herald that he had released these men from their ‘obligations under the war regulations as far as employment on public works were concerned’.13 At the end of September 1919, the Defence Department issued a statement to the media, announcing that their ‘Yugoslav’ branch activities had effectively terminated.

Notes

1 The Colonist, 23 Feb 1918, p. 4.
3 Ohinemuri Gazette, 22 May 1918, p. 2.
4 The New Zealand Herald, 17 April 1918, p. 12.
7 The New Zealand Herald, 6 March 1899, p. 7.
8 Ibid., 14 July 1906, p. 3.
9 Thames Star, 4 October 1899, p. 2.
12 Ohinemuri Gazette, 28 February 1919, p. 3.
13 The New Zealand Herald, 26 September 1919, p. 9.