Andriy Zayarnyuk

Peasant Activists Reflect on World War I: War Poems by Ukrainian Peasant Soldiers from Habsburg Galicia[1]

ABSTRACT: This study examines poems sent by peasant soldiers of the Austrian army to the editorial board of *Svoboda* [Freedom], a Ukrainian Galician newspaper aimed at the common people, during World War I. It argues that soldiers' poems can be seen as a continuation of the relationship established between peasant activists and popular newspapers. The article situates the poems in the traditions of peasant correspondence and "peasant literature" as they emerged in the nineteenth century.

Soldiers used poetry to reflect on the unique and historically significant events in which they participated and to convey their personal experiences to the wider public and for posterity. Poems allow us to reconstruct the whole spectrum of soldiers' concerns and expectations. Interestingly enough, not a single poem from this collection was published by the newspaper.

The analysis of articulations of Ukrainian nationalism and imperial patriotism in soldiers' poems shows that changes in the nationalist discourse, military developments, and the international situation influenced soldiers' personal identity. At the same time this study argues that deeper existential motifs deriving from the war are also prominently present in these letters and subvert their patriotic and nationalist rhetoric.

RÉSUMÉ: Cette étude analyse des poèmes envoyés durant la Première Guerre mondiale, par des soldats de l'armée autrichienne au comité éditorial de *Svoboda*, un journal populaire ukrainien de Galicie. Les poèmes des soldats peuvent ici être vus comme une continuité de la relation établie entre les paysans activistes et les journaux populaires. Cet article situe les poèmes dans la tradition des correspondances paysannes et de la "littérature paysanne" au moment de leur apparition au XIX siècle.

Les soldats utilisaient la poésie pour réfléchir aux événements uniques et historiques auxquels ils participaient, et afin de transmettre leurs expériences personnelles à un large public et à la postérité. Les poèmes permettent la reconstruction d'un éventail de préoccupations et d'espérances de la part des soldats. Il est intéressant de noter qu'aucun poème de cette collection ne fut publié par le journal.

L'analyse de l'expression du nationalisme ukrainien et du patriotisme impérial des poèmes des soldats montre que les changements au niveau des discours nationalistes, des événements militaires et de la situation mondiale, ont affecté les identités personnelles des soldats. Cette étude propose que de profonds motifs existentiels provenant de la guerre, soient aussi présents dans ces lettres et renversent les rhétoriques patriotiques et nationalistes.

---

[1] I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers of *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue canadienne des slavistes* and Dan Stone for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue canadienne des slavistes
Vol. LV, Nos. 1–2, March-June 2013 / mars-juin 2013

The experiences of ordinary soldiers on the Eastern Front of World War I remain understudied. This is especially true of the soldiers who fought for the Habsburg and Romanov Empires. In the case of Ukrainian soldiers from Habsburg Galicia, the only formation whose wartime exploits have been described in great detail is the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen, a volunteer national military formation.[2] While the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen were a tiny regiment-sized unit of approximately 2,500 men, a hundred times more Galician Ukrainians served in regular Austrian units. The disproportionate attention paid to the Sich Riflemen can be easily explained. Histories written from the nation-centred perspective have been preoccupied with explicitly national organizations, institutions, and forms of activity.[3] Moreover, Ukrainian historians saw in this military formation the seed of the Ukrainian national armies formed in 1917–1918.

In their turn, Soviet historians, treating World War I as a background to "Great October," focused on class antagonism and the revolutionary movement, neglecting other experiences. Moreover, since they had to contribute to the struggle against "bourgeois nationalism" and uncover its "true face," just like their nationalist counterparts they also paid attention to the Sich Riflemen and other nationalist organizations in the service of the Central Powers.[4] Unfortunately, recent innovative studies discussing Galicia in World War I continue to ignore the "history from below" approach and focus on events and personalities directly connected with the spectacular political changes that occurred in the wake of the war.[5] Impressionistic evidence seems to point towards ambiguity in

---

[2] An authoritative and detailed synthesis of the formation's history was published as early as the 1930s: Osyp Dumin, *Istoriia legionu Ukrains'kykh Sichovykh Stril'tsiv, 1914–1919* (L'viv: Chervona Kalyna, 1936). Since 1991 many academic and popular accounts have appeared, one of the earliest being Mykola Lytvyn and Kost' Naumenko, *Istoriia halyts'koho striletstva* (L'viv: Kameniar, 1991).

[3] Oleksandr Reient and Oleksandr Serdiuk, *Persha svitova viina i Ukraina* (Kyiv: Heneza, 2004).

[4] V. K. Osechyns'kyi, *Halychyna pid hnitom Avstro-Uhorshchyny v epokhu imperializmu* (L'viv: Knyzhkovo-zhurnal'ne vydavnytstvo, 1954).

[5] Mark von Hagen, *War in a European Borderland: Occupations and Occupation Plans in Galicia and Ukraine, 1914–1918* (Seattle: Herbert J. Ellison Center for Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies, University of Washington, 2007); Timothy Snyder, *The Red Prince: The Secret Lives of a Habsburg Archduke* (New York: Basic Books, 2008). Such a state of historiography on Galicia is especially remarkable if we consider recent social histories of the Habsburg and Romanov populations in World War I: Peter Gatrall, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I,* Indiana-Michigan Series in Russian and East European Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Alon Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I,* Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

the impact that World War I had on individual peasant soldiers, with some peasants adopting a national self-identification and others becoming staunch imperial loyalists.[6]

These gaps in historiography also explain the nearly total lack of research on the testimonies of ordinary Galician soldiers. Regrettably, neither states nor various academic, cultural, and patriotic institutions and organizations were interested in soliciting and publishing texts produced by Ukrainian soldiers of the imperial Austrian army. Since Galicia had been one of the key battlefields of the Eastern Front and a territory of crucial importance for several conflicting visions of postwar Eastern Europe, as well as a "hotbed of Ukrainian nationalism," personal testimonies of Galician soldiers could be especially enlightening for our understanding of the Great War's impact in the region.

The formation of Ukrainian national identity in Galicia has been studied extensively. However, since nearly all the key studies on this topic focus on the period prior to the outbreak of World War I, the impact of World War I on national identities of ordinary Ukrainian soldiers from Galicia has not been analyzed. Even though many historians believed that by 1914 Ukrainian national identity was well-entrenched in the Galician countryside,[7] we also know that World War I and the policies of states had greatly impacted national identities and nation-building in Eastern Europe.[8] Was the Ukrainian identity of the Galician peasants influenced by the war and, if so, how? This research question acquires additional significance in light of recent findings by scholars who study individual identities in the Habsburg Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and who caution against overestimating the permanence and lastingness of attitudes codified as "national identity."[9] At least one study indicates that nationalism and national identity were issues that concerned Galician peasants in World War I very little.[10]

---

[6] Jan Molenda, "Uwagi w sprawie kształtowania się świadomości narodowej w pierwszym dzwudziestoleciu XX wieku," *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 85.2 (1978): 325.

[7] For the best summary of this approach, see Paul Robert Magocsi, "The Ukrainian National Revival: A New Analytical Framework," *Canadian Review of Studies of Nationalism* 16.1–2 (1989): 45–62.

[8] This is discussed in von Hagen. For discussion of a different region of the Russian Empire, see Vejas G. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[9] Pieter Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[10] Andriy Zayarnyuk, "'The War Is as Usual': World War I Letters to a Galician Village," *Ab Imperio* 4 (2010): 197–224.

This article contributes to the discussion of war's impact on Galician Ukrainians offering a close reading of a single collection of texts produced by Galician soldiers during World War I. The collection consists of letters with poems composed about World War I, which were sent to the editorial board of *Svoboda* [Freedom], a Ukrainian popular newspaper. Analyzing the collection's provenance, the article attempts to explain why these soldiers chose poetry to describe their military experiences and what these poems tell us about their authors. The article's main focus is on the representations of the soldiers' experiences and on the ideologies and identities articulated in the poems. How is war, and the soldiers' participation in it, depicted and evaluated in these texts? What are the soldiers' loyalties and communities of belonging, and how is Ukrainian nationalism expressed? All these questions relate not so much to the events of the war as to the soldiers' own interpretations of them.

THE POEMS

Svoboda never published the poems discussed here, even though the newspaper appeared regularly during the war, with only a minor interruption at the end of 1914, when it moved from occupied L'viv to Vienna.[11] The overwhelming majority of poems date to 1915, with a couple of poems coming from 1914 and 1916. There are several possible explanations for this. In 1914 conscripted soldiers from Galicia experienced a nearly complete breakdown of communication with civilian society. They lost contact with their families and friends in occupied Galicia as well as access to the Ukrainian press. Only in 1915 did the press begin reaching them again and correspondence with their home villages resumed. 1915 was also the year of the Austro-German offensive on the eastern front, when hopes for a Russian defeat and an end to the war were high. By 1916 the war was no longer novel, while victory was becoming more and more elusive. In addition to war fatigue, the February Revolution of 1917 and the founding of the Ukrainian Central Council in Kyiv changed the geopolitical situation and made Habsburg loyalty problematic for many Ukrainian patriots.

Unlike the well-known literary poems and songs of the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen, the poems and songs that were sent to *Svoboda* were written by peasants with elementary school education and not by university or gymnasium graduates who were often professional writers.[12] The unrefined style of these

---

[11] The newspaper was more likely to publish poems avoiding references to the soldiers' plight and operating on a higher level of abstraction. For one example, see Pavlo Mezhysadets', "Vyselentsi" [Deportees], "Vzhe zaroslo badyliem pole" [Weeds Have Covered the Field], "Moia nyva" [My Tillage], *Svoboda* 46 (1917): 2.

[12] For the most detailed analysis of Ukrainian Sich Riflemen songs and their connection with folklore, see Oksana Kuz'menko, *Strilets'ka pisennist': fol'kloryzm, fol'kloryzatsiia, fol'klornist'* (L'viv: Instytut narodoznavstva NAN Ukrainy, 2009). Polish scholars also

poems has probably influenced the editors' decision not to publish them (very likely, they perceived the poems as lacking in aesthetic value).[13] The same attitude existed in the ranks of the Polish Peasant Party, which made use of peasant writers as correspondents and activists, yet treated their literary activity as mere hack work.[14]

These poems represent only a small fragment of *Svoboda*'s lost archive. This may be deduced from the fact that all extant "letters to the editor" come from correspondents whose surnames start with the letter "K." Therefore, the authors of the letters analyzed here are not a random sample of peasant soldiers. Moreover, these soldiers knew what a poem was, could write one, and send it in for publication. These authors were *Svoboda* readers and therefore had been exposed to the cultural production of Ukrainian national institutions. Some letters prove that the authors' connections to the paper predated the war. One author describes how he had lost touch with his favourite newspaper in 1914, but later, "wounded, I got to the hospital in Feldkirchen and found that a Ukrainian newspaper had arrived there, [and] indescribable joy swept over me. I started reading *Dilo* [The Deed, a Ukrainian daily for educated readers] because there was no *Svoboda.* But now, to my great consolation, I am receiving my favourite newspaper *Svoboda*."[15] In 1911 *Svoboda*'s print run was 5000.[16] Although its actual peasant readership was higher, it was still minuscule compared with more than 3,000,000 Ukrainian peasants living in the province. Not only peasant contributors to the popular press but even subscribers can be safely counted as "peasant activists," the group that provided a vital link

---

view soldiers' songs from World War I as being essentially Polish legion songs. See Adam Roliński, *A gdy na wojenkę szli ojczyźnie służyć… Pieśni i piosenki żołnierskie z lat 1914–1918* (Cracow: Księgarnia Akademicka, 1996) 5. Another extreme is to treat all World War I songs from the region as essentially the same product of folk culture cross-fertilized by other genres and languages: Donald Rayfield, "The Soldier's Lament: World War One Folk Poetry in the Russian Empire," *Slavonic and East European Review* 66.1 (1988): 66–90.

[13] Even though the content of many poems could be interpreted as undermining wartime morale and deemed inappropriate, too, the fact that the editors chose not to publish perfectly loyalist poems either seems to indicate that the quality of peasant poetry was the decisive factor.

[14] Stanisław Czernik, *Chłopskie pisarstwo samorodne* (Warsaw: PIW, 1954) 175.

[15] Central State Historical Archive in L'viv (*Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi istorychnyi arkhiv u L'vovi*; hereinafter TsDIAUL), fond (hereinafter f.) 408, opys (hereinafter op.) 1, sprava (hereinafter spr.) 2, arkush (hereinafter a.) 90.

[16] Oleh Zhernoklieiev, *Natsional'ni sektsii avstriis'koi sotsial-demokratii v Halychyni i na Bukovyni (1890–1918 rr.)* (Ivano-Frankivs'k: Vydavnycho-dyzainers'kyi viddil Tsentru informatsiinykh tekhnolohii, 2006) 357.

between the leadership of the national movement's institutions and organizations, and the peasant masses.[17]

Just like the peasant correspondents of the popular press before World War I, these authors were better educated than the average Galician soldier (even though they were autodidacts whose official education ended with elementary school, just as in the case of all the other peasant soldiers). They were also better integrated into nationalist organizations with their emphasis on communication skills and discipline.[18] Such a background also explains why sergeant ranks are overrepresented among these authors (even privates often occupy a special position; for example, as a regiment's trumpeter).[19]

The distinction between newspapers for educated readers and popular newspapers, aimed primarily at peasants, remained intact during the war. One letter containing a war poem, which was addressed to *Dilo*, the main Ukrainian daily in Galicia, ended up in the *Svoboda* archive.[20] The editors of *Dilo* probably forwarded it to the newspaper, which, they believed, would serve as a more appropriate medium for peasant writing.

Soldiers' letters to *Svoboda* differ markedly from letters to soldiers' families.[21] Newspaper letters were sent to an official institution, and, therefore, they lack intimacy and immediacy. The poems were meant for a wider public, and there was every chance that the accompanying letters would be published. The difference in tone is evident even in the formal sections of such letters. In this collection, the traditional greeting "Glory to Jesus Christ," which was used with slight variations in nearly all family letters, occurs only once.[22] The letter part in most of them is just a short note preceding a poem submitted for publication.

In Galicia, poetry was an integral part of so-called "peasant literature", from the emergence of that genre in the early nineteenth century as distinct from both anonymous folk literature and "real" belles-lettres by and for the educated

---

[17] These peasant correspondents are central for John-Paul Himka's seminal study of the Ukrainian national movement in Galician villages: John-Paul Himka, *Galician Villagers and the Ukrainian National Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan in association with Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1988). The importance of "peasant activists" as a specific interests group among the peasants is stressed in Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[18] One author mentions his pre-war membership in *Sich* (a Ukrainian volunteer fire-fighting and gymnastic association), where he was a leader of a village branch. TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 155.

[19] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 83.

[20] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 96.

[21] Zayarnyuk 197–224.

[22] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 112.

public.[23] Nineteenth-century peasant poetry was mostly rhymed prose, and thematically it was dominated by the articulation of patriotic ideologies.[24] Thus, the collection under discussion here may be seen as a continuation of this tradition. At the same time there are significant deviations. Here the soldiers clearly separate the poems from the notes accompanying them. In the 1880s and 1890s poems were usually integrated into the body of a letter.[25] This seems to imply that, unlike some late nineteenth-century peasant correspondents, soldier-poets treated poetry as a distinct literary genre and saw poems as having a unique aesthetic value.[26]

We know that World War I produced a number of folk songs that were eventually recorded by ethnographers.[27] Apparently, peasants saw this war as an epic experience worthy of being represented in poetic form. Oleksa Kalyniak, one of the peasant authors in this collection, defines his poem as a *duma*, a genre of Ukrainian epic poetry often related to important historical events.[28] Kalyniak's usage of the term *duma*, however, points not to continuity but to a rupture between soldiers' poems and local folklore. Geographically, the original *dumas* were connected to the history of former Cossack Ukraine and were absent from Galician folklore. Before World War I they were popularized in Galicia by the Ukrainian national movement and assigned a central position in the national folk culture.[29] Kalyniak sees his duma as a text that should conform to certain philological rules, even though he is aware that he has not mastered

[23] Czernik 62–72.

[24] Czernik 111–112.

[25] This, for example, was the case with Hryhorii Rymar's "Khlop na vesni" [The Peasant in Spring], which the editors retitled as "Khlops'ka dolia" [The Peasant's Fate], *Khliborob* 19 (1893): 134.

[26] This is not to say that peasants did not value poetry and did not understand the difference between poetry and prose prior to their acquaintance with the writings of the national movement. Poems had circulated in the countryside even during the first half of the nineteenth century and were used by political agitators. See Volodymyr Borys, "Antyfeodal'na ahitatsiia v Skhidnii Halychyni v polovyni 30-kh na pochatku 40-kh rr. XIX st.," *Arkhivy Ukrainy* 3 (1968): 76–84. Literate village notables would write down poems in their notebooks, for example, Teofil Kostraba in the 1850s–1860s: Manuscript Division of the Stefanyk Library of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in L'viv, collection of *Biblioteka Naukovoho Tovarystva imeni Shevchenka*, file 726, folder 10.

[27] A. Ioanidi and O. Pravdiuk, *Ukrains'ka narodna tvorchist'. Rekruts'ki ta soldats'ki pisni* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1974).

[28] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 42.

[29] Even a popular Ukrainian series for peasants in the early twentieth century included discussions of folkloric genres and explained how they differed from real literature. See Ivan Franko's introduction in Volodymyr Hnatiuk, *Starokhrystyians'ki liegendy: Iz knyhy "Narodovishchaniie,"* Vydannia "Prosvity," vol. 259 (L'viv: Prosvita, 1901).

them yet: "[…] look at these *dumas* of mine, and if they are appropriate for Publishing [*sic*], please publish them and correct if there are mistakes."[30] A donation to a fund for wounded Sich Riflemen accompanying the letter indicates that Kalyniak was an active participant in the networks of the Ukrainian national movement, which had survived despite the war and continued to mobilize both human and material resources.

Our authors were not part of some traditional peasant society where culture, as classical anthropology once claimed, was transmitted in an oral fashion almost exclusively, produced by the grassroots, and remained essentially anonymous.[31] The Ukrainian popular press, including *Svoboda*, had long made use of poetry in its attempts to reach peasants.[32] Songs and poems articulated the new values and main tenets of the new ideology of the national movement. To connect with villagers and to acquire peasant correspondents, popular newspapers also encouraged peasants to write poems about their own experiences.[33] By the beginning of the twentieth century peasants were also taught to view poetry as an art and to value the poetic form as uniquely suitable for certain kinds of expression.

On the one hand, poetry was being made more accessible to the peasants. Well-known Ukrainian poets wrote simple, patriotic poems that mimicked the rhyme and rhythm of folk songs.[34] Popular anthologies of poetry were published to inoculate peasants with a modern aesthetic taste.[35] At the turn of the twentieth century solemn recitals of historical poetry had become a routine part of celebrations and festivities in village reading clubs.[36] On the other hand,

---

[30] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 42.

[31] This model is articulated most powerfully in Robert Redfield, *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

[32] For an early example of poems allegedly composed by peasants and inserted in the text of a correspondence, see P. P., brat tverezosty, "Vsechestnyi P. Redaktor," *Nauka* (1877): 66.

[33] One of the earliest peasant poems published in Ruthenian popular newspapers was by Vasylii Klymchak: "Protsesiia do Karlova," in *Nyva* (Lviv: Obshchestvo imeni Kachkovskoho, 1878) 78–85, which describes the founding of a temperance society in the village of Karliv.

[34] Franko's "Ne pora, ne pora, ne pora…" [No Longer, Lo Longer, No Longer] and "Hei, Sich ide…" [Hey, the Sich Is Marching] are the two best known examples.

[35] In 1902 Franko edited an anthology of Ukrainian and world poetry for peasants: *Vybir dekliamatsii dlia rus'kykh selian i mishchan: Zladyv i peredmovu dodav Ivan Franko,* Vydannia "Prosvity," vols. 262 and 263) (L'viv: Prosvita, 1902). In it he claimed that "our peasants and less educated people in general, even though they understand the value of literature, usually do not understand the value of the part of literature known as poetry." Franko, *Vybir dekliamatsii* 1. The collection was meant to remedy this situation.

[36] Such recitals are regularly mentioned in press reports about reading clubs in the Sambir area: *Svoboda* 18 (1901); *Svoboda* 3 (1903).

educated intellectuals assigned special value to people's poetry ranging from folk songs to poems written by peasant activists.[37] Peasant activists had been exposed to the popular press and publications for decades and must have learned to discern epic dimensions in their personal experiences and to correlate them with global historical changes. Newspaper editors presented peasant poems to the public as evidence of the peasants' growing self-consciousness and enlightenment.

Although soldiers who sent poems to *Svoboda* drew on this tradition of the presence of poetry in Ukrainian popular publications, the subject of their verse was novel. First, there was a global war, a unique experience worthy of memorializing. As one soldier explained,

> From the beginning of the war I have been […] thinking and guessing and taking notes // entering them into the notebook I am preparing for my family // so that they will have a testimonial for years to come // and when I die, there will be a memory even after my children die // that in 1914 // there was a terrible war on the European side // a war such as there had not been since the beginning of the world // and a thousand million people perished […].[38]

Soldier-poets echoing Kalyniak often express doubts about the aesthetic qualities of their work: "Even though it's simple and modest, I dare to ask [you] to be generous and publish […] this […]."[39] They also call their poems "songs" to stress their folk origin or connection with people's culture. But they also explain the shortcomings of their poems by the hardships of the war: "Since it is difficult in the trenches because of the lack of paper and free space, I am writing as I can [...]."[40] Sometimes, the circumstances are emphasized in order to invoke compassion: "Sorry that I am not writing nicely and clearly because my right hand is injured […]."[41] With these caveats the soldiers indirectly acknowledged that the primary value of their texts lay not in artful writing, but in the fact that they were based on authentic soldierly experience of war. As one soldier

[37] Folk songs were presented and analyzed as a high form of poetry not only in scholarly journals but also in popular publications: Filaret Kolessa, *Ohliad ukrains'ko-rus'koi narodnoi poezyi*, Vydannia "Prosvity," vols. 302–303 (L'viv: Prosvita, 1905). Explaining the types of poetry, this publication singled out lyric and epic themes as most suitable for the poetic form. There were also special studies dedicated to the works of peasant poets, who, as a rule, were also political activists: Ivan Franko, "Iz poezii Pavla Dumky," *Zibrannia tvoriv u 50 tomakh*, vol. 28 (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1980) 89–92.

[38] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 157. All translations are the author's except where otherwise noted.

[39] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 86.

[40] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 57.

[41] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 38.

remarked, his "several verses" came "from the soldiers' military life and from my own experience […]."[42] Nearly all these poems are written in the first person.

The authors believed that their personal stories were representative of the experiences of other Ukrainian soldiers in the Austrian army. Sometimes they speak on behalf of other specific groups: wounded soldiers or "older conscripts."[43] In most cases, however, the poems are about the "soldier's plight," "soldier's life," and "soldier's duty." Some authors made their patriotic motivations explicit: "I write to you so that [our] brothers will know about Ukraine, their mother. Where a Ruthenian son is, there should be a Ruthenian poem."[44] Clearly, these poems were also strong statements about the authors' identity.

Besides poems composed by soldiers, the collection includes letters that demonstrate continuity with the pre-war popular press. In Galicia Ukrainian popular newspapers played an important role in producing a body of knowledge about traditional peasant society: the press used the discipline of anthropology (ethnography) to reach out to villagers, while ethnographers contributed to newspapers and capitalized on their network and information. One of the letters in the *Svoboda* war collection contains a transcript of a song "sung by our soldiers in the hospitals" to "Our Lady Empress," a popular melody among the Galician peasants.[45] It was recorded in December 1914 from a corporal in one of the military hospitals.

Two poems from this collection come from the civilian village population. One was by a young woman named Katrusia Zavaliivna from the village of Iasnyska, who sent her "small and simple song, not necessarily well composed," in December 1915, with a request to publish it in "your glorious newspaper." The letter revealed that she was an aspiring poet, contacting her first publisher: "If it is suitable for publication, I can gladly send others as well."[46] Another letter was from an older peasant from Oriv, who shared his experiences of the Russian occupation, emphasizing the Russians' disrespect for the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church[47] and his contacts with Ukrainians in the Russian army.[48] His letter includes a song about World War I, which was sung by

[42] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 96.
[43] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 128.
[44] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 112. Occasionally, patriotism was emphasized even in the authorial signature: "A patriot of Ukraine, Novitski Stefan." TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 96.
[45] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 123.
[46] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 34.
[47] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 34.
[48] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 34.

Ukrainian soldiers in the Russian imperial army.[49] (The poems by these civilian authors will not be analyzed here.)

MOBILIZATION

The majority of the poems in this collection start with the mobilization. The hospital song begins with news of the war reaching the village and decries the fate of the soldiers, who "have to go now without having finished their work [in the field)."[50] The interruption of the work routine figures in a number of other poems: "I scythed barley and reaped wheat, and on Friday night I heard the sad news […]."[51] The suspension of work in the fields was all the more striking and memorable because the mobilization took place in the middle of the harvest season, the most labour-intensive season of the agricultural year.[52] Poems interpret this moment as the end of normal, regular, constructive work and the beginning of military life centred on destruction.

Parting with one's family is another aspect of mobilization that figures in most poems. In the hospital song the wife, children, and parents cry, while the draftee explains to his children that he must leave and prays to God and the Virgin Mary to take care of his kids. The soldier takes one last look "at my wife, children, and the place where I was born" and declares his "hope in God that he will defend me […]."[53] Soldiers' family members from another song also place their hopes in God: "Perhaps, God will grant that you'll come back alive."[54]

Two sub-themes are common in the poems' descriptions of soldiers bidding farewell to their families. They are painfully aware of the misery awaiting their family (in the hospital song a soldier even prays for a quick death that would spare him from seeing his family's sufferings). Death also appears in these poems during the mobilization phase, foretelling myriad untimely deaths: a soldier warns his children to step away from him because "death is near me."[55] This tragic tone contrasts sharply with the descriptions of mobilization in officially sanctioned patriotic songs, which emphasize eagerness to join the army, ardour, and joy.[56]

---

[49] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 34.
[50] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 124.
[51] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 46.
[52] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 149.
[53] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 124.
[54] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 143.
[55] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 149.
[56] Janusz Wasylkowski, *Lwowska piosenka wojenna na wojennym szlaku* (Warszawa: OTO Kalambur, 1999) 14.

Mobilization is presented as a universal experience: village men are drafted just “like every man” is.[57] During the mobilization, the state appears in the village in all its authority. “The card came from the Emperor”; then the lord commissar arrived, declaring that every man aged between 20 and 42 had to leave.[58] In another song, a soldier recalls how he had to appear for the draft on 24-hours’ notice because “a telegram had come”; there was also the unusual sight of older people flocking to draft points.[59] The state then spirited the village men away.

The moment of departure seems to occupy a central place in soldiers’ memories during the war. It also constitutes the beginning of life as a soldier, a life that is radically different from normal civilians’ and characterized by profound anxiety. Longing for and worries about one’s family are a recurring topic in soldiers’ poems. These worries start with the departure and never cease: “I do not know anything about you, and my heart hurts and faints // What does she do there; is she still alive?”[60] One poem about “an old soldier” depicts him crying from the pity he feels for his wife and children; during his military training he is so distracted by worrisome thoughts that he makes mistakes.[61]

The Russian occupation of Galicia in 1914–1915 contributes to the anxiety; there are concerns about the Russians’ behaviour in the occupied territory and rejoicing at the news of their retreat.[62] Soldiers’ poems also complain about communication problems. In one poem, children and women cry because they have not heard from a drafted man in 18 months.[63] Soldiers, in turn, envy comrades who are receiving letters from home; some are even managing to see their families.[64] According to one poem, away from wives and children, “life passes in vain.”[65]

One author describes his reaction to the news about the Austrian counteroffensive in Galicia and attempts to reconnect with his family:

> I was reading about the Russians running away // so I started writing to the family how are they doing // I wrote to the family during the Easter holidays // and I have not heard [back] from my father // if they are still alive—father, mother, and the whole family // farmstead and livestock and wife Maryna // I’ve already written up to 10 letters asking for the reason // do my letters not reach the place where my

---

[57] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 143.
[58] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 46.
[59] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 149.
[60] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 44.
[61] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 128.
[62] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 38.
[63] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 47.
[64] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 44.
[65] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 141.

> family lives // and why are theirs not arriving […] perhaps, the Russians have not been chased away from there yet.[66]

Second in importance to their families, soldiers pine for their native villages: "Oh my native village // I was raised in you […] In the middle of the village is the church where I prayed // And now I am in Vienna, so far away from it."[67] In another poem, a soldier prays to God for the war to end so that he can go back home:

> to cheer up the children // and to dry up the wife's tears // Oh God, grant my request to end the war // I beg you with tears in my eyes // Bring me back home and reunite us // Allow me, God, to live to see that moment // Allow me, God, to reach that moment as soon as possible…."[68]

Death on the battlefield becomes especially dreadful in the absence of family members to bid farewell to and mourn their dead.[69] Soldiers' thoughts about death in these poems are usually paired with reflections on the fate of their families. In one song, the field uniform that the soldier receives—a sign of impending combat—triggers the following reflection:

> Do not fear, my wife I am writing a testament // Once done, I will put it into my ID tag case // If I die in the war and lie in a foreign land // People will find this testament and send it by telegraph all the way to Stanyslaviv // And they will approve it for you there, my dear wife.[70]

Idyllic relationships based on mutual loyalty and care predominate in the poems' descriptions, but they are not the only ones that appear there. Rumours about Galicia figure in a song reproaching unfaithful soldiers' wives: "many a wounded soldier // is dying from pain // while his wife with the Russians // sings and carouses // she drinks and hangs around with the Russians // and does not care about him."[71] Interestingly enough, the song reassures soldiers that women who retreated with the Russians will come back "because the Russians are not fools enough // to feed them // they will kick them out of the house // flogging [them] with whips […]."[72]

---

[66] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 157–158.
[67] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 46.
[68] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 129.
[69] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 47.
[70] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 156.
[71] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 38.
[72] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 38.

SOLDIERING

Many poems also describe the trek from the village to the army, a journey that transforms village men into soldiers. The mobilized are moved “to wherever the closest railway is”; families cry and say their last farewells while fathers and husbands turn into war comrades (“*kameraden*”).[73] In the army, one’s fellow soldiers become a substitute family. Close ties and strong feelings between war buddies are mentioned in these poems: “Comrades, beloved Brothers, we loved each other so much // Possessing only a tiny piece of bread, we still shared it.”[74] In the poems authors often refer to other soldiers as “brothers.” They form a community of equals and understand each other better because of the shared experience of war. Significantly, ethnic divisions in the Habsburg army are not mentioned at all.

The conscripts board train cars and turn into observers of the mobilization drama: “We went by railway and watched everything // How wives and small children fainted from sorrow.”[75] Their observations left an indelible impression on the draftees: “When we reached the station // And disembarked from the car // Many soldiers // Trembled on their legs // Since they knew what was about to happen // And how bitter was their fate […].”[76]

In another poem a gunner describes his initial military experiences in minute detail. When he was drafted, like most Europeans he expected the war to last for about a month. After saying goodbye, he boards the train with one suitcase and takes a last look at the village “where I was born, grew up, learned about people, and studied in school,” thinking about his wife and children. The engine roars, the train “flies” while the soldier gazes through the window. He spies his loyal friend at a railway station and meets his child’s godfather during a stopover in Stanyslaviv. After changing trains in L'viv, he arrives at his artillery regiment in Cracow.[77]

The military routine begins. Draftees go through basic training. (The author of another poem complains that older soldiers find this training utterly useless.)[78] In the regiment the gunner is assigned two horses and a reinforced artillery cart. Women and children in the towns through which he passes treat soldiers to cigarettes, tea, and sweets.[79] Closer to the battlefield, the scenery changes: “It became sad // The forests were cut down // Villages were afire // People hid away.” The soldiers see their first enemy prisoners and mutilated

[73] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 46.
[74] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 47.
[75] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 46.
[76] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 131.
[77] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 155.
[78] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 128.
[79] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 156.

bodies of wounded soldiers, whose appearance is hard to behold.[80] Other poems corroborate the starkness of the first encounter with devastation, disruption, and displacement brought on by the war: "We've been marching // For two days // And we do not see anything // Except people who are fleeing from their native homes. // They left everything they had and ran away // With just their lives, asking us // How far they would have to travel."[81] Another soldier also draws readers' attention to children and women forced to leave their houses, "hiding in fields […] dying of starvation, having abandoned their work."[82] It appears that Galician soldiers found the sight of homeless people on the move especially unsettling because their own families lived in the same combat zone.

Endless marches and bivouacs provided plentiful time for pensive reflection:

> We came to a village // Where we were billeted // We got some coffee // And went to bed // Early in the morning // We woke up // And prayed to God // For God to help us // And give us strength // When we got on the road // There were countless numbers of soldiers // And many among us began to reflect // So that even our souls froze.[83]

Profound uncertainty about their lives seems to be the main reason for soldiers' anxiety.[84] Unlike private letters sent home, the poems sent to *Svoboda* contain vivid depictions of soldiers' combat experience.[85] Here combat is associated first and foremost with death and maiming. Death is indiscriminate; it does not show the slightest respect for familial ties: "When it comes to charge // there is no distinction // between lads and married [men] // a Russian thrusts his bayonet // he does not choose either // Poor or rich // The one at whom the Russian aims his bullet // must get it."[86] Just like the topic of death, the prospect of being wounded involves reflections on the fate of soldiers' families: "God will allow many soldiers to live out their age // but what is the use if I come home injured."[87] Wounded, disfigured bodies are the key element of battle descriptions: "Many a soldier lies without legs, both are missing // And over there another one lies without arms and legs, begging for salvation."[88]

Some of the authors were wounded on the battlefield. One of them was injured on the Russian front: "When I was wounded // I started crying there // I

---

[80] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 156.
[81] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 172.
[82] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 131.
[83] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 131.
[84] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 131.
[85] Compare Zayarnyuk.
[86] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 149.
[87] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 144.
[88] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 144.

had to bandage // my wound myself // I fell to the ground // And reflected // And slowly crawling // Hid behind a haycock." When a few more wounded men crawled into the hideout, the Russians started pounding the area with shrapnel, trying to finish them off.[89] After enduring much pain and anxiety, they were carried to a sheltered area, where all the wounded were treated by orderlies; many died before they could reach that spot.

The author of this poem draws readers' attention to the miseries experienced by wounded soldiers. Their injuries were horrible, in many cases shrapnel having severed veins and arteries. Finally, horse-driven carts arrived, and the wounded were loaded onto them, four men per cart. A journey by cart was another ordeal; every move of the horse caused pain. En route, the wounded would be surrounded by civilians, mostly women and children, fleeing the enemy. Finally, the caravan reached the station; the wounded were loaded onto a train heading for Hungary. Budapest was the final destination, but there were stopovers at makeshift hospitals housed in schools and libraries. In Budapest the soldiers received surgical treatment, and the air was filled with the screams of the wounded. After their operations, the wounded began to recover. Convalescents were moved to a barn and laid on fresh straw. The author of the poem spent a sleepless night there, and in the morning, for the first time in four days, they were given some water to wash themselves.[90]

Then they were loaded onto another train and had to endure a four-day journey on the bare floors of freight cars. At a small Hungarian station seriously injured soldiers were unloaded, while friendly civilians treated the wounded to cigarettes, food, and drinks. The narrator contrasts the happy, normal life of civilians to the misery of wounded soldiers: "Life is good for // the healthy, but for the wounded, not so much // everyone is fainting from pain // and cannot get up." Finally, the train reached Vienna, but no room was found for the passengers there either:

> We were taken farther // and it was getting worse for us // We went through the tunnels // Through those mountains we saw // Such a [body of] water // Like a sea // We went all the way to Linz // Where we stopped // Automobiles were waiting for us there // and […] took us to the barracks //where camps used to be and there // it was better for us // because we slept on beds // In Krems it was even better for us // Because of the good doctors // They bandaged our wounds lightly // Since they knew that we were ill // And civilians came // Bringing gifts for us // We had enough of everything // Even clothes were given // As a gift // They gave us wine to drink // God grant them a long life.[91]

---

[89] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 131.
[90] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 132.
[91] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 133.

Another detailed autobiographical account of a wounded soldier also begins with a battle on the Eastern Front in the Carpathian Mountains:

> From my high mountain // Cannons roared // […] When they start roaring // and then buzzing // You cannot sit // Underground, in trenches, // or inside a house, you cannot bear [this] // You have to shoot // But you can't even show your head // from the trench // I got out of the trench at once // And tried to shoot // A Russian was already aiming at me […] // Finally, he aimed well // And shot three bullets // The first one in my right hand // The second in my left // And the third in my left knee // […] What happened to me? // I could not remember // Was I killed or wounded […] // I opened my eyes // And I was soaked with blood // And my comrades // Crawled over to me // "We thought Comrade // that you were killed" // [My] comrades gave me // some warm water // Bandaged my wounds // And brought [me] in a tarpaulin // To a house // In the house they put me // Near a bench // There were two women in the house // And they cried // They gave me milk to drink // But I was not able // To open my mouth // When medical orderlies came // And took me on a cart // All my body started aching // Stars flashed in my eyes // I was carried to the medical field // and there were many injured // Military doctors gave me some wadding // and gauze for it // We were packed into train cars // And we departed // For six days // We had nothing to drink […] // Every time the steam engine shook // The cars a bit // I [felt] very close // To coffin wood.[92]

The train reached the Hungarian town of Miskolc. Lightly wounded soldiers were kept on the train and went on, while the author was taken off and brought to the doctor. The gravity of his wounds and the pain they caused impressed the doctor who decided to amputate. The soldier persuaded his doctor only to extract the bullets. During the operation he fainted several times, and nurses revived him with buckets of cold water.[93]

Descriptions of actual military operations are rare, and they pale in comparison with those of death, injury, and suffering. Just as with images of death and injury where wounds are always inflicted by bullets and shrapnel,[94] the fighting is also presented as the action of projectiles. Shrapnel and bullets are described as "our food."[95] The battlefield is described as a world dominated by the terrifying mechanical sounds of weaponry, fear, and pain; it is a world apart from normal experience, one that is impossible to convey:

> When the bullets started striking // and later, cannons // the land underneath us // started to bend // When heavy mortars ("*mozdiri*") started // to roar and bellow //

---

[92] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 37.
[93] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 37.
[94] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 144.
[95] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 144.

> Russians started dying of fear // You, good people, think // how it is in a war //it is not the same as writing [about it] // on paper with a pencil.[96]

Artillery men also experienced battles through the sounds of firearms, followed by the sight of transports of wounded soldiers passing by.[97]

Only one poem describes in detail a regiment's military operations with some sense of purposefulness. Not by accident, this is also an account that celebrates military camaraderie and honour. The poem "Z pravdyvykh podii" [From Real Events] describes the bayonet charge of a company from the 95th Infantry Regiment. It begins with the preparations and anticipation of the battle. There is fear and anxiety about death while the priest is trying to provide solace to the soldiers:

> The wind blows sadly // Raindrops trickle down // And my heart is full of sorrow // A priest in the forest valley // Gives absolution today[.] // Tomorrow we go against the enemy // ["]My children, beware // Remember my words // Not everyone will die // Here in the war. Pray // And gather your strength[."] // Thus he appeals to the heart // And says a prayer // Our priest Vorobets' // So that people are not afraid // And do not lose their hope […].

The commander instructs the troops on tactics, trying to lift their spirits by appealing to their soldier's pride:

> ["]When the fight starts // Throw hand grenades[."] // [He] assigns those who will cut the wire // The major is saying ["]Lads, that is a shame // That the German general // Treats us with suspicion // To dispel his doubts […] Our regiment [must] take the mountain // Let's show that our 95th Regiment is strong and persistent // Is marching bravely forward[,] // That we are capable of anything // Loyal to our Emperor // Go for life and death // You have nothing to fear // Artillery will fire // When we attack // There are 40 cannon behind our backs // They will fire with grenades // We must take this mountain // When we approach too close // For the artillery to help us // Then everyone gets // Hand grenades and throws them // Straight between the Russians' eyes // The moment is already close //And the task we have to fulfill is difficult // Dress quickly // And prepare to decamp // You have to start the job[."]

Thus prepared, the soldiers approach the enemy lines:

> The hill looks ordinary // But it is filled with the enemy […] There are trenches at the very top // Barbed wire in front // That will get into our hands // We approached quietly // It was so close to the Russians // [Only] around 600 steps were left // And they did not know about us // When I recall this, I am still afraid // There was thunder and a roar // In the air and only howling // Above our heads // Meanwhile we stormed farther // Like March waves of the whirlwind // Against *batiushka*[98]

[96] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 38.
[97] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 157.
[98] The Russian word for "father," a term of endearment for the Russian tsar.

> Nicholas // Machine guns went into action […] It's hard to get there // Hurrah[!] We are already at the wires // Hand grenades fall // Into the enemy's trenches // And shrapnel plays above // We cut through the wires // Storm the Russians // The Russians know that // While far away they shoot // But once they see a bayonet // They throw away their weapons // And raise both hands // Everyone runs towards us, every man for himself […].

The aftermath of the glorious attack was not very exciting. As was often the case with such operations, without receiving a further mission, the troops would advance too far into swampy, mountainous terrain and eventually had to retreat to the old Russian position, fearing encirclement. The ending of the poem positions this skirmish in a larger nationalist narrative: "Let's keep on in the same way // In every difficult, important cause // And victory will be ours // Ukraine will yet rise // And people will start living well."[99]

While this bravura poem depicts fighting as glorious and meaningful, other poems tell of rather different feelings: "We march along the road and sing joyously even though every one of us has a terrible grief in his heart."[100] Military death is far from glorious. The war robs people of the last opportunity to see each other: "A family is waiting for the father and husband, but neither children nor mother will see him; he fell, struck down by a bullet, and only a shallow pit is left. A shallow pit was dug just to cover him so that the Brothers would not see him […]."[101]

One poem explicitly ridicules the notion of honourable military death:

> Death in war is good // One will be buried nicely // A funeral will be served by orderlies // Everyone is stacked in a pit // One pulls you by your feet // Another one by the hair // And a third says ["]make some space // push him to the middle["] // Fathers and sons were stacked // Like herring in a barrel // Nicely washed and dried // And dressed in shirts // One was washed with boiling lime // Which would eat his white body after death // And what a shirt he had— // Rolled into a tarpaulin // In a bloodied uniform // his boots were not removed // Only his heavy rifle and the bandolier // Were taken away // As long as the war lasts // There will be others who take it over // How will you, mother, know where your son rests in a grave […] Old mother, you will know // And you, wife with little children // Every soldier has a card // They must look it up // Orderlies will find the card // It will be given to the commander // Who will write it down in a notebook // And send information home // This card is in the pocket // On the right side // Old Mother, you will know in a year and half // The poor soldier would have preferred dying at war // To coming back

[99] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 58–64.
[100] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 172.
[101] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 166.

> home // Maimed // Having suffered pain in the hospital // To returning home as a beggar // stretching his hand out for some food.[102]

UKRAINIAN NATIONALISM AND HABSBURG PATRIOTISM

Besides describing actual military experiences, these poems also feature ideological themes and motifs. Since the poems were written in wartime and submitted to an official newspaper, this is not at all surprising. The peasant-poets were obliged to express imperial patriotism, which many genuinely felt, but the war also offered opportunities to express Ukrainian patriotism within the imperial framework. Examination of the poems reveals how these two sentiments—imperial and national patriotism—were reconciled and articulated.

First, there was a common enemy, Russia. The absolute majority of poems describes fighting on the Eastern, or Russian, front, even though large numbers of Ukrainians also fought on the empire's two other fronts—in Italy and the Balkans. Our poems often blame Russia for starting the war, for the misery it brought, and for its prolongation. Even the song that was reportedly dictated by soldiers recuperating in hospitals and not intended for publication condemns Russia: "If only this damned Russia would collapse // It left more than one pair of orphans without a father."[103] In so doing, the poems echo the position taken by all the Ukrainian political parties in Galicia after the outbreak of the war. On 3 August 1914 the members of the Main Ukrainian Council declared that even though they valued peace and did not belong to the war enthusiasts, they also believed that Russia was seeking war, continuing a centuries-old imperialist policy. Russia was "the greatest enemy of Ukraine […] the greater the defeat of Russia, the sooner the hour of Ukraine's liberation will strike." In the interests of the Ukrainian nation was to "ally unanimously against the tsarist empire with the state in which the Ukrainian national life found freedom to develop."[104]

Brutalities committed by the Russian occupation army in Galicia are often mentioned in the poems' anti-Russian diatribes. These include the confiscation of peasants' livestock and fowl, beatings, closures of schools, and the introduction of (Russian) Orthodoxy instead of Byzantine-rite Catholicism: "People did not want that heaven, the Russian heaven // [They] only suffered torments from the evil Russians // […] The Russians ran amok in Galicia, like mad dogs."[105] Some poems encourage Ukrainian soldiers to fight to avenge their plundered motherland, their raped wives and sisters.[106] Poems couple familiar anti-Russian images (savage Cossacks, tsarist autocracy), which were

---

[102] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 149–150.

[103] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 144.

[104] Kost' Levyts'kyi, *Istoriia politychnoi dumky halyts'kykh ukraintsiv 1848–1914. Na pidstavi spomyniv* (L'viv: Kost' Levyts'kyi [*Nakladom vlasnym*], 1926) 721–722.

[105] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 45.

[106] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 87.

widespread in Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the Russian occupation of Galicia and Ukrainian nationalist themes:

> We were separated, dispersed // by the Russian Cossacks // A savage Cossack without mercy // flogs with a whip // In winter he throws out of the house // Poor wives with [their] children // Hey, Tsar, bethink yourself // take a look at us and have some mercy // Order your soldiers // Not to throw us out of our house // Because our bloody tears will drop not on cloth // But on you, fearsome Tsar, // and on your soldiers // […] Return all the way back to Moscow // You will not rule here // Destroying Ukraine // You are not fit for war against us // No match for us.[107]

In these poems Tsar Nicholas appears either as an evil or comic figure, both cursed and mocked.[108] Russian troops' behaviour in Galicia also provides a pretext for an ironic comment about the tsar's subjects: "Oh, *batiushka* Russian Tsar // We did not know // That you have such cadres // So keen on looting."[109] Nicholas II is accused of his troops' atrocities, plundering, and forced population transfers. This behaviour is also presented as uncivilized, un-European: "Our churches have been burnt // Villages robbed // Poor wives with children // Taken into captivity // You, *batiushka* Russian Tsar // Showed yourself well // Only Tatars long ago // Took wives and children."[110] Characteristically, almost identical sentiments with the same accents on "Russian" slavery and an inept tsar, together with expectations of coming independence, may be found in patriotic World War I Polish songs from Galicia.[111]

The feelings invoked against the "Russians" are those of revenge and retribution: "Oh, Almighty God // Send them a fright // Let them fall down // Like flies do // In winter from frost // For those wives // For those children // For their coffins // For their fear and torments // For their livestock."[112] The authors of the poems, as well as their readers, are identified as Ukrainian. Significantly, soldiers' poems omit the issue of Ukrainians serving in the Russian army. There is only a generic Russian (*moskal'*) on the other side of the front line in these poems. The poems represent the war as a Ukrainian conflict, and Ukrainians—as allies of the Central Powers: "Fight with us for Ukraine against the enemy […] To take Ukraine from Russia // Under Austrian patronage and in alliance with the Prussians // We shall defeat the enemy."[113] Thus, for Galician Ukrainians the

---

[107] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 142.
[108] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 169–170.
[109] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 5.
[110] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 4.
[111] Wasylkowski 20–24.
[112] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 4.
[113] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 83.

war was justified because its goal was Ukraine's liberation: "Oh, how much misery we've suffered in this war // to obtain that freedom // and stop the misery of serving other peoples […]."[114] The war, especially the participation of the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen on the Austrian side, also "showed // the whole world // that we Ukrainians // have not been in Union // with the Russians // that our land they // took by roguery // and long centuries // kept it enchained […]."[115]

Not only the Ukrainians but also the Central Powers are said to be fighting a just war, while scorn is heaped on Russia's allies fighting against Austria:

> Some die on the battlefield trying to achieve peace. And yet others die because they cannot forget [their] luxurious life. Better these Serbs should break their necks because they have taken the life of our Lord and successor [Franz Ferdinand]. The Serbs did not do it by themselves; the sly Russians bribed them to do that. Because they hoped that our Ukraine would collapse, that they would destroy it and only sad ruins would be left. Even though the enemy destroyed our land and our settlements, our hope has not yet disappeared. Every Ruthenian Ukrainian willingly fights and leaves for the distant field to shed his blood. Even though not all of us will be able to see the peace, we'll leave a good memory to our grandchildren.[116]

Service in the Austrian army was represented as service to the Ukrainian cause: "Young lads formed military columns, everyone was so nervous, God protect us // an *Oberst* [colonel] came to us to administer the oath //we'll be defending Ukraine faithfully."[117] In combat "Everyone sweats and fights for Ukraine with his whole heart."[118] In another poem, Ukraine figures as a country that has been struck by the enemy and devastated.[119] The Russians are seen as invaders not merely of Galicia but also of a larger Ukraine: "The Russians came to Ukraine uninvited, and everywhere we Ukrainians were left with ruins. […] They've burnt our towns and villages and everything that was there, and frequently fathers and mothers died, leaving children alone […]."[120] In one case, patriotic verses were written in Polish script; the author of a poem dated 1915 calls upon his fellow soldiers to "chase away the occupiers from our home […] From the beloved Kyiv region // And in Kyiv we shall all meet."[121] There is also a poem in Cyrillic, whose author signed as "a Pole from L'viv"; the signature on the letter is also in Polish.[122] There is no sign of Polish-Ukrainian antagonism in

---

[114] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 157.
[115] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 70.
[116] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 166–167.
[117] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 169.
[118] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 172.
[119] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 90.
[120] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 166–167.
[121] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 141.
[122] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 169.

these poems; in the first stage of the war both Polish and Ukrainian loyal subjects of Habsburgs had the same common enemy and similar war goals—taking back Galicia and defeating the Russian Empire.

In these poems the Ukrainian Galician soldiers treat the Ukrainian territories of the Russian Empire as part of their motherland, one that they have to liberate from the Russians. "You, bloodthirsty enemy […] leave our Ukraine […] we shall chase [you] all the way past the Dnipro."[123] There are also references to the local Galician identity struggles: Galician Russophiles (Ruthenians who saw themselves as part of some larger Russian/Rus' nation and were ruthlessly persecuted during the war) are blamed for the Russian occupation: "*Katsa byki*,[124] *katsa byku* // What have you done // Letting the Russians // Into our Native land."[125] Another poem identifies Russophiles, along with Russians, as enemies and implicitly approves the demise of the former: "Not one Austrian family has perished, but not a single Russophile benefitted from it. We place our hope in God that we will persevere and get rid of the Russians in our land […] help us, God, to survive happily and better enlighten our glorious Ukraine."[126] In yet another poem, even the infamous executions of alleged Russophiles are approved: "We were leaving the village // The bells rang for us // Because the damned Russophiles // Took rubles for us // Rubles they took for us // But they had no use for them // Because they were caught everywhere // And all hanged."[127]

One poem departs from the general pattern of narrating personal war experiences and, instead, uses the symbolic figures of a soldier, representing the nation's men, and a girl, representing the nation's women; those who have been left at home but also the voice of the nation: "A soldier walks through Galicia // With his head bowed // A black-browed girl // Meets him // Meets him // And talks to him with tears […]." The soldier is seeking Ukraine's freedom, and the girl encourages him to continue this quest: "Look for it // My dear brother // Because now is the right moment // Look for it and ask, because this is our future // Because this is mother Ukraine // Because this is our freedom."[128] Invoking landmarks of the larger Ukraine, which includes the territories in the

[123] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 91.

[124] From *katsap*, the pejorative Ukrainian term for a Russian. Probably a word play was intended here between *katsapyky* (diminutive plural form of *katsap*), *katsapyku* (vocative singular form from the same diminutive) and *byky*, *byku* (plural and vocative of *byk* [a bull]).

[125] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 5.

[126] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 170.

[127] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 131.

[128] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 112.

Russian Empire—Taras Shevchenko's grave and "Father" Dnipro—the poem ends with the hope of a better future for Ukraine.[129]

Several poems mention Volhynia, the only Ukrainian region of the pre-war Russian Empire under Austrian occupation between 1915 and 1918, when the Treaty of Brest–Litovsk was concluded. In one of them an old man from Volhynia speaks of Russian atrocities in a tone similar to that of other poems from this collection: "I am unhappy // There is no one to sit with // I had a farm, oxen and cows // but they were taken away, together with [my] children and grandchildren […] Many villages have been burnt // And who burnt them?—the mad Russians."[130] The takeover of Volhynia was presented as the liberation of fellow Ukrainians, and patriotic education of the local population became an important part of the narrative about the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen's war exploits.[131] Another poem states that "When the army came, our people [in Volhynia] // Realized that the Austrians were not as // frightening as the Russians had said // They lied."[132] It also complains about the appalling illiteracy of the local population—the legacy of Russian rule. Reflections on Volhynia also conclude with expectations of Ukraine's liberation: "Fate smiles on our Ukraine // Fate will smile and the chains will fall away // And the Russians will be the overlords of Ukraine no more."[133] Ukrainians' joy and hopes were connected with the successes of the Central Powers, and the fact that "our lads have taken Volhynia // and are marching on Kyiv" also meant the end of the tsar's expansionist plans, which were aimed at the Dardanelles.[134]

Even though Ukrainian patriotism is so ubiquitous in these poems, Austrian patriotism also occupies a prominent place; in many cases, both are articulated together. Military service is seen as a patriotic duty to both the nation and the state: "To obtain honour for yourself and glory for the state // You will have to forget [your] Wife and the whole family // You have to defend beloved Ukraine […] you will shed your blood for the emperor and the state."[135] Since all the poems, with one exception, describe combat on the Eastern front, they also recount major milestones in the fighting there: the occupation of Eastern Galicia, where the Russians "hoped to stay," especially those entering L'viv; the siege

[129] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 113.
[130] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 49.
[131] V. S. Levyts'kyi, "U.S.S. na Volyni," in *Ukrains'ki sichovi stril'tsi, 1914–1920*, edited by Ivan Ivanets', Vasyl' Sofroniv-Levyts'kyi, and Bohdan Hnatevych (Montreal: Vydavnytstvo Ihora Fediva, 1955) 113–116; T. H. Kuz'menko, "Pedahohichna ta osvitnia diial'nist' Ukrains'kykh Sichovykh Stril'tsiv na Volyni," in *Visnyk KNUKiM* 3 (Kyiv: Kyivs'kyi natsional'nyi universytet kul'tury i mystetstv, 2005) 11–14.
[132] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 45.
[133] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 45.
[134] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 69.
[135] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 143.

and fall of Przemyśl (Peremyshl')—"Oh, brothers, how sad we were"—the liberation of Przemyśl during the German-Austrian offensive of 1915, and the capture of Warsaw by the Germans.[136] In this poem, the fall of Warsaw, the first major city of the Russian Empire to be captured by the Central Powers, gives hope that Ukraine's turn will come next: "in Warsaw we'll rest // And then continue chasing them // Until we expel the Russians // from our Rus' land."[137] A poem describing fighting on the Italian front also mentions the capture of Warsaw as the turning-point of the war.[138] Whereas the defeat of Przemyśl was a heavy blow to the morale of the Galician Austrian soldiers,[139] the retaking of Przemyśl was seen as a sign of changing fortunes and duly celebrated.[140]

Besides soldiers, an older peasant (civilian), who submitted his own Christmas carol to *Svoboda*, viewed the Austro-German offensive of 1915 as the first step towards the liberation of Ukraine: "Damned Moscow // Left our land // Let us rejoice // […] for our fighters // collect donations […] So that they can easier reach the Black Sea // Our native Ukraine is waiting for them // Because she is perishing // In Moscow's chains."[141]

In some poems, the word "motherland" seems to refer to the Habsburg Empire. Some poems explicitly mention Austria as the object of their loyalty: "Hurrah, brothers! All together, hurrah // Let's drive away the enemy! // Long live the Most Illustrious One! // to Austria! […] *Hoch* hurrah!!!"[142] The emperor is also often paired with the state or the "motherland": "This is the holy duty // of every soldier // To pay back the enemy // For the Emperor and the Motherland."[143]

Imperial patriotism is most evident in poems that explain the causes of the war and international politics. The peoples of Austria are encircled and outnumbered by enemies, and at the same time united in a just war: "Even France and England rose up against us // While Serbia and Montenegro have not been completely defeated // We are the chosen people of the Slavs, Germans, Hungarians // And we shall succeed in fighting jointly for our native land."[144]

---

[136] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 5.

[137] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 5. This poem echoes the celebratory tone of *Svoboda* during the German-Austrian counteroffensive of 1915: "Pobida," *Svoboda* 15 (1915): 1.

[138] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 96–97.

[139] Stepan Shukhevych, *Vydysh, brate mii (8 misiatsiv sered USS-iv)* (L'viv: Chervona kalyna, 1930) 228–230.

[140] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 45.

[141] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 69.

[142] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 87.

[143] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 86.

[144] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 83.

Austria is seen as an innocent victim of predatory neighbours. A poem from the Italian front is filled with wrath against the treacherous and imperialistic Italians:

> Shameless Italian face [*bezlychne lytse italiis'ke*] // Declared war against us // After ten months of war // With the Russians [The Italians] wanted land from us // But our Most Illustrious Monarch // Said to the people // [“]Beat the Italian nation // So that there will not even be progeny // Because earlier I presented them with a nice // Chunk of land // Now I am not giving even a scrap[”] // When the soldiers heard this, they shouted loudly // We are not giving up our land, not even a hair’s breadth.[145]

The poem then turns to descriptions of fighting against the Italians, who “scurried like dogs in the Alps.” The poem celebrates the deeds of the Austrian army: “We swore our souls to God and the Emperor […] And bravely under fire // We stand as if made of steel // […] they will get a hell of a beating from the glorious Austrians // […] they sent eight regiments against a single one of ours // But what of it if they had to run back, breaking their necks.”[146] Some poems describing the fighting on the Eastern front also celebrate the offensive of 1915 not so much in connection with the liberation of Ukraine but as a feat of Austrian arms.[147] Others contain standard wishes for the Austrian military. They include victory, heaven in the event of death on the battlefield, and a long life for the commanders. In these wishes imperial loyalty goes hand in hand with Ukrainian patriotism.[148]

Nevertheless, patriotic blustering and bragging do not erase the misery of war portrayed in these poems. Even the poem entitled “Za Tsisaria i Vitchyznu” [For the Emperor and Motherland] begins with the sadness of a soldier’s existence: “Even though it’s a green May // the soldier woke up from his dream // Very sad.”[149] Sometimes an explicit anti-war message creeps into poems otherwise loyal to the monarchy: “The only thing that happens in war // Is torment and subjugation.”[150]

Even patriotic sentiments fail to overshadow descriptions of the war’s most appalling aspects. Soldiers’ personal experiences seem to be much stronger than the influence of national and patriotic discourses. The prominence of soldiers’ concerns about death, pain, fear, the fate of their families and civilians undermine national and patriotic motifs justifying the war. These concerns prove that just as in the nineteenth century, peasant activists’ connection with the Ukrainian national movement cannot be reduced to nationalist indoctrination. Peasant activists saw the popular press and the movement’s nation-wide

---

[145] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 96–97.
[146] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 96–97.
[147] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 170.
[148] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 4.
[149] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 86.
[150] TsDIAUL, f. 408, op. 1, spr. 2, a. 131.

institutions as means to reach worlds beyond their immediate local community and to win a broader audience. Accepting the national framework, peasants used it to communicate things that were not on the nationalist agenda, or sometimes explicitly challenged it.

At the same time, nationalist and patriotic themes that appear in soldiers' poems are not merely an external convention accepted out of necessity. Soldier-poets seem to be sincere, if not very original, in their invocations of nationalist tropes. What distinguishes these tropes from the parts based on soldiers' personal experiences is a higher level of abstraction. The "national" appears in these poems as a matter of historical development or international politics; it helps to explain historical causality but remains detached from soldiers' actual war lives. Neither soldiers' own families, nor the villages they left behind, nor their war comrades are marked in ethnic terms.

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the poems discussed here were written by former village activists, who were part of the Ukrainian national movement before the war. Thematically, they focus on mobilization, soldiers parting with their families, and the ensuing grief; the carnage of war, especially injury and death; patriotic feelings and the politics behind the war, Russia's heinousness, and the righteousness of the Ukrainian cause. All three thematic elements are almost equally important in terms of the space devoted to them and the emphasis placed on them. The first two are discussed in highly personal terms, whereby soldiers attempt to convey the singularity of their situation, their feelings and suffering, and to share their experiences with readers. These themes show the war from the inside, from soldiers' perspective.

The authors seem to use nationalism and patriotism in rational explanations of the war as an event caused by objective external factors, to make the war and their participation in it meaningful. In so doing, they employ images and stereotypes from wartime Austrian and Ukrainian nationalist propaganda. The strong Ukrainian identity of the authors, which was compatible with Austrian imperial patriotism, facilitated this task. As a rule, the more patriotic the poem, the less attention it pays to the suffering and misery inflicted by the war. These poems also demonstrate that the Ukrainian cause was internalized by their authors and seen in the international context. Nonetheless, most of these works retain a tension between patriotic and more existential motifs. Only two poems endorse valiant military virtues without reservation. Poems describing combat usually do not celebrate it. The prominence of injury and death and doubts about the meaningfulness of war as expressed in these poems prove that the institutions and communicative fields created in the framework of the national movement were often used for articulations and actions neither inspired by nor entirely compatible with nationalist political programs.