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**“THE WAR IS AS USUAL”:
WORLD WAR I LETTERS TO A GALICIAN
VILLAGE***

Introduction

This article is based on a collection of soldiers' and POWs' letters written during World War I to a village in the eastern part of Habsburg Galicia. Historians have given far greater attention to soldiers' letters from the Western front than to those from the Eastern Front. It has been pointed out that while historians consigned the Eastern Front as a whole to the margins in both historiography and in the popular memory of World War I, the experiences of rank-and-file soldiers serving on the Eastern Front were especially neglected. There are several explanations for this tendency. Jay Winter suggests that the events of World War I in Eastern Europe have been eclipsed by the experiences of revolutions, and civil wars.¹ Alon Rachamimov points out that the nationalizing successor states of Austria-Hungary (I would also add national communities without states) underscored the histories and experiences of relatively small national

* The author acknowledges the anonymous referees of *AI* for their suggestions and recommendations.

¹ Jay Winter. *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven, 2006. P. 81.

formations inside the imperial armies and ignored the experiences of the vast majority of soldiers.²

There was also a project of intentionally forgetting World War I in the Soviet Union.³ Soviet narratives emphasized the senselessness of the imperialist manslaughter and the growth of an antimilitarist mood, revolutionary consciousness and internationalism leading up to 1917, and they silenced experiences that did not fit into this scheme.⁴ After the Soviet takeover of Central Europe, the revolutionary struggle and political radicalization became the only legitimate topics of historical research on the rank-and-file soldiers of the imperial armies.

The pioneering study on soldiers' letters from Austria-Hungary was done by Peter Hanak.⁵ Making valuable observations on letter-writing culture and commoners' letter writing in particular, Hanak focuses on how the political impact of the 1917 Revolution is reflected in these letters. Rachamimov revised Hanak's method and conclusions in his study of the letters written by Austrian and Hungarian prisoners of war (POWs). Rachamimov demonstrated that Hanak overstressed the extent of radicalization and the importance of class identities and underestimated national identification. Moreover, Rachamimov's study showed that until the end of the war, the majority of Austrian and Hungarian POWs in Russia saw themselves as citizens of Austria-Hungary, with all the expectations and obligations citizenship entailed.⁶

Studies of soldiers' letters from World War I in the East Central European context have also been linked to the tradition of studying peasant letters as indexes to social change in the village, a tradition that began with William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's pioneering study of letters written by Polish peasant immigrants in North America.⁷ However, even studies drawing on this sociological tradition have been influenced by the nationalist and Soviet

² Alon Rachamimov. *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front*. Oxford & New York, 2002. *Passim*.

³ Aaron J. Cohen. *Oh, That! Memory and World War I in the Russian Emigration and the Soviet Union* // *Slavic Review*. 2003. Vol. 62. Pp. 69-86.

⁴ Peter Gatrell. *Russia's First World War: A Social and Economic History*. Harlow, 2005. Pp. 255-260.

⁵ Péter Hanak. *Vox Populi: Intercepted Letters in the First World War* // *Idem*. *The Garden and the Workshop: Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest*. Princeton, 1998. Pp. 179-212.

⁶ Rachamimov. *POWs and the Great War*. Pp. 196-213.

⁷ William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America: A Monograph of an Immigrant Group*. 5 Vols. Boston, [1918].

codifications discussed above. The studies pay disproportionate attention to the issues of national identity⁸ and social discontent⁹ and neglect other aspects of soldiers' experience.

All the above-mentioned studies of World War I letters rely on the collections of letters produced by the governmental agencies of the two empires: either the letters intercepted by the censorship or samples taken to study public opinion and the army's morale. The nature and provenance of the available war letters also underscore the difference between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires on the one hand and Europe's other great powers on the other. While in Western Europe, museums and archives had accumulated voluminous collections of war letters and private stories had become part of public representation and historical scholarship on World War I, Eastern Europe demonstrates a glaring lack of similar material.

This study seeks, at least partly, to redress this unevenness of historical scholarship. The study is based on a collection of letters that were delivered to their addressees, as were the majority of soldiers and POWs' letters. Most of these letters date from 1915–16, while letters in similar studies date mostly from 1917–18. Moreover, these letters were addressed to a single village and therefore provide a unique opportunity to use a local context for answering larger questions about World War I and the participation of Galician peasant soldiers in it.

Communication is never transparent and is even less so in this particular case. People with no or very little previous experience of writing, for the first time, had to render their experience verbally in highly unusual and stressful circumstances and under the censor's restrictions. Paul Willis argues that "... like social scientists, social agents are, in their own way, concerned with larger structural questions, only in their case making sense of them as surviving and living out their consequences..."¹⁰ This article will analyze soldiers' impartment of their encounters with displacement, army, combat, suffering, destruction, and death to find out how Galician villagers represented their experience of World War I. Analyzing soldiers' perceptions of

⁸ Jan Molenda. *Uwagi w sprawie kształtowania się świadomości narodowej w pierwszym dwudziestolecu XX wieku* // *Kwartalnik Historyczny*. 1978. Vol. 85. No. 2. S. 315-328.

⁹ O. S. Porshneva. *Krest'iane, rabochie i soldaty Rossii nakanune i v gody Pervoi mirovoi voyny*. Moscow, 2004. Although this book claims to research also peasants' larger worldview and changes that the war brought upon it, doing this it relies heavily on hearsay and dubious folkloristic sources, while the quantifying analysis of soldiers' letters deals with social discontent and pertains to the letters written just before or after the revolutions of 1917.

¹⁰ Paul Willis. *The Ethnographic Imagination*. London, 2000. P. XVII.

the events, this article will mostly address the questions of whether Galician villagers' experiences were somehow markedly different from the experiences of other soldiers, reflecting the alleged specificity of peasant society, and of the Galician soldiers' identities and loyalties, in the light of more than half a century of their exposure to the activities and cultural production of the national movement and the Ruthenian/Ukrainian-Polish national conflict. Soldiers' narratives in this case were an integral part of their effort to sustain connections with their families and their home village. This effort provides another important context against which soldiers' statements will be analyzed and assessed. Therefore the article will also address the issue of the relationships between soldiers and civilian members of their families. It will analyze how these relationships changed during the war, what the spectrum of soldiers' attitudes to them and the home village was, and how it was connected with soldiers' experience of war.

The Collection

The letters were written to the village of Zibolky, in the Zhovkva district. The community of Zibolky in 1907 had 282 households that included 125 Roman Catholics, 1,485 Greek Catholics, 36 Jews, and 9 people of other confessions. A total of 190 villagers gave Polish and 1,464 gave Ruthenian as their preferred spoken languages. The village was located about 15 kilometers north of Lviv, the province's capital. These letters were preserved among the materials of Iaroslav Pasternak, a Ukrainian archaeologist, whose father, Ivan, was the Greek Catholic parish priest in Zibolky during the war. The collection consists of the letters and postcards soldiers and POWs sent to their relatives and to the priest.

How did letters to other villagers end up in the priest's archive? A significant part of the collection consists of letters addressed to the priest. Some letters written to relatives contain requests to obtain or compose certain documents. Since the parish priest in the Galician village not only provided pastoral care but also helped with various tasks that required knowledge of languages and bureaucratic procedure, villagers approached him with soldiers' business. It seems that during the war, as the younger, more literate, and more active peasants left for the army, the demand for the priest's knowledge and skills increased. Some letters explicitly instruct addressees to obtain help from the priest, and others bear the priest's handwritten notes.

However, requests are missing in most letters. Some of these were brought to the priest by their illiterate addressees to be read aloud, and apparently

were kept by him.¹¹ The size of this collection and the fact that it has been preserved indicates that the priest saw these letters as historical documents to be saved for posterity and might have procured them purposefully. The fact that they ended up in the archive of the library of the Taras Shevchenko Scholarly Society supports this interpretation. The war also inflicted a deep personal wound on the priest – his son was killed on the front.

The collection contains letters from 55 soldiers to their relatives and from another 26 to the priest. Two villagers who had been on friendly terms with the priest maintained an extensive correspondence with him, contributing 37 and 38 letters, respectively, to the collection, while from the rest we have at best several occasional letters.

This collection is composed of 223 items of correspondence, the majority dated 1915 and 1916, a handful dated 1917, several dated 1918, and only one dated 1914. The 1914 lacuna can be easily explained by the Russian occupation. This collection is just the tip of the iceberg of correspondence between those conscripted and their home village. Letters indicate that many soldiers were writing letters home every week or two. One month without receiving a letter was very disturbing and caused serious concerns about a correspondent's life.¹² Sometimes a single letter we have from a soldier refers to a dozen of his other letters.¹³ Even though fragmented and formed without clear rules, this collection is still the richest archive of soldiers' letters sent to a single village in Habsburg Galicia. Moreover, the letters do not indicate any significant interference from state censors, even when it comes to topics potentially undermining the state's war effort. It has been demonstrated that the historians of censorship "sometimes overestimate the efficiency of censors."¹⁴ In this case, "simple" and often difficult to comprehend irregular language of the letters could have helped them to bypass censorship.

¹¹ One letter to a soldier's wife is addressed to the priest, who is asked to read it to the wife. Manuscript Division of Vasyl Stefanyk Lviv Academic Library of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine (*Viddil Rukopysiv L'viv'skoi Naukovoï Biblioteky imeni Vasylia Stefanyka Natsional'noi Akademii Nauk Ukrainy*, hereafter – VR LNB). Fond 1 "Manuscript Collection of Taras Shevchenko Scientific Society" (hereafter – F.1). Sprava (hereafter – Spr.) 785/70. In references to this collection pages (*arkush* or a.) will be indicated only when more than one letter is in one file.

¹² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/9.

¹³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/1. A. 1.

¹⁴ Maureen Healey. *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*. Cambridge, 2004. Pp. 125-138.

The Form

Letters in this collection are usually written in pencil on standard blank postcards; only rarely a different kind of paper or ink, or illustrated postcards were used. These letters were sometimes accompanied by photographs – usually portraits made to assuage the pain of parting. These photographs apparently were kept in families.¹⁵ The only photographs found in the collection depict military life – a group of soldiers standing in front of a burned down house, a hospital room with fellow soldiers-patients, officers’ rooms in the trenches.

The majority of letters are in Ukrainian and in Cyrillic. Polish was used by nine correspondents; another thirteen used Ukrainian but in Polish characters. POWs in Russia were allowed to write their cards only in Russian, French, and German, but since Ukrainian was counted as Russian, cards in Ukrainian were coming through. One card from a POW is in Russian. One letter is in Slovak – it was written by a Slovak soldier for his illiterate comrade. Letters in Polish and in Polish characters deserve a commentary.

First of all, there was a significant Polish-speaking population in the village. Some letters in Polish could have been written by Polish soldiers on behalf of their illiterate Ukrainian comrades. Different handwritings appear in letters by the same soldier. Using Polish characters for writing in Ukrainian was a widespread practice in the Galician countryside in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In some instances in this collection Cyrillic and Polish characters are combined in the same letter. One letter starts with “Glory to Jesus Christ” in Cyrillic and the text that follows is in Polish characters.¹⁶ Another has the same greeting composed in a mixture of Cyrillic and Latin characters: “C. J. Chrycmy” (italicization of Cyrillic is mine. – A.Z.).¹⁷

These letters provide yet another proof that Ukrainian and Polish in East Galicia were mutually comprehensible, the boundary between the two was quite porous, and peasant linguistic practices were heterogeneous even during the war. The Galician soldiers’ environment remained “heteroglossic” in the army just as it was at home. At the same time, changes in the language of the letters by the same people indicate a tendency toward standardization in favor of Ukrainian and Cyrillic. In the course of a year or two, some soldiers

¹⁵ In one letter, a soldier promises to take and mail a photograph as soon as he gets to the town because in the village it was virtually impossible. VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/49.

¹⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/52.

¹⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/49.

switched from Polish to Ukrainian, and some – from Polish characters to Cyrillic. Most probably, the very practice of letter writing worked toward greater standardization of the written languages; influences from more educated comrades in arms, including noncommissioned officers (NCOs) from the intelligentsia, would be another possible influence.

Letters start with the standard greeting “Glory to Jesus Christ”¹⁸ that peasants used in their home village. Sometimes the phrase becomes more ornamental: “I greet you with no other but these God’s words Glory to Jesus Christ”¹⁹ or “The first words of this card (or letter) Glory to Jesus Christ.”²⁰ During major religious holidays, the greeting was holiday specific.²¹ Only correspondents with a high school education were likely to depart from this standard greeting.²²

In the exceptional circumstances of war, the traditional greeting ceased to be a mere formality. It evoked memories of normal civil life at home: “Glory to God Jesus Christ because I have no one to tell these godly words to neither here nor there. Because there are only Hungarians here and to them I cannot say these words because they do not understand.”²³ Even rhymed baroque greetings with folklore motifs suggest the soldiers’ yearning for the homes they left: “The first words of my letter are being written to my own land and to the beloved family[,] Go, letter, through the high mountains[,] through the dark forests and wide fields[,] and once you reach the doorstep, bow low to Lord God. Glory to Jesus Christ.”²⁴

The ending or farewell in the letters was also standard: “I have nothing special more to write, [therefore I] only greet you, most beloved Wife, and you Dear children and the rest of family.”²⁵ Wishes of good health and hopes for the eventual meeting were quite common: “I have nothing more to write[, I] greet you and the whole family a hundred thousand times. Stay well and till we see each other again.”²⁶ As with the greeting, such an ending under the circumstances was no longer formulaic. To see dear ones indeed

¹⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/1. A. 1; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/2.

¹⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/3.

²⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/4 and VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5. A. 5.

²¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/54.

²² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/27.

²³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/34. Since the language of soldiers’ letters in most cases is far from standard Ukrainian or Polish, translated excerpts reflect important inconsistencies of the originals in grammar and syntax.

²⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32.

²⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5. A. 5.

²⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/6.

was the foremost desire of the majority of soldiers: “And I am begging our God to unite [us] again.”²⁷

After the greeting, the address followed. Since most those mobilized were married men, most of the letters (30) address wives: “Beloved (or dear, dearest) wife.”²⁸ Children are often included with the wives.²⁹ Parents constitute the next largest group of addressees (16). Presumably, these were mostly letters by younger, unmarried soldiers. Addressing parents together with a wife was less common. Only one letter addresses all three generations of a family.³⁰ The next in order of frequency as addressees are siblings (5 instances) and grandparents (4). Finally, there are also single letters to in-laws, a friend,³¹ an aunt,³² and even a friend’s parents. One letter is addressed to the community, and another to a mayor.³³ Even the line of address could be used to underline soldier’s displacement and the discomfort it had been causing: “Sweetheart and sincerely beloved Wife, I am writing back to you from a distant foreign land.”³⁴

The Most Important Things

A letter’s subject matter was sandwiched between the greeting and farewell, just as letter-writing manuals advised. It consisted of inquiries, wishes, instructions, news, and acknowledgments. But the most important concern of correspondents was the life and well-being of the addressees. Only a letter from August 1914, written before the actual war, could be innocently neglectful of these matters.³⁵

The high probability of one’s death looms large in all the letters: “I’ve already sent one card to you, but you have not responded to it, and because of this I feel tense and bewildered because I imagine that you are no longer alive...”³⁶ Any letter, even very formal, written upon request by a stranger, first of all was a proof that its author was still alive.³⁷

²⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/11.

²⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/1. A. 1; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/2; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/11. Addressing a wife by name was rare: VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/8.

²⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5. A. 5; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/41.

³⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/44.

³¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/19.

³² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/27.

³³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5. A. 5; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/56.

³⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32.

³⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/7.

³⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/57.

³⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5. A. 5.

Mailing mistakes and communication breakdowns exacerbated soldiers' anxiety. Such mistakes and breakdowns were bound to happen when both parties were illiterate:

Thank you very much for the letter... because of that letter I became like a fool... I have a document from the community saying that my wife died three months ago, and now someone writes to me in the name of wife as if it were she herself, about all the children.... Do not lie to me because I know present times. If she lives, God give her good health, and if she died, give her Soul light. I am writing this letter and do not know to whom I should address it. Whoever wrote it, please take this one and reply immediately....³⁸

Soldiers worried when their letters could not reach the addressees.³⁹ They insisted on immediate replies and did everything they could to secure communication, including mailing more expensive registered letters.⁴⁰ Sometimes soldiers mention the shortage of postcards⁴¹ but they never say that mail is beyond their means.

The situation of Galician soldiers and their families differed from those in other provinces of the empire. Most of Galicia was under Russian occupation from September 1914 to May–June 1915. Soldiers from Zibolky were cut off from their village from August 1914 to July–August 1915, when mail service was restored. Uncertainty and worries about relatives were aggravated by rumors and Austrian war propaganda. Malfunctioning of the postal service in newly recovered territories in the summer of 1915 added even more feverishness to the first letters exchanged: “I have written to you a dozen of postcards and you are not answering me, and my heart is very heavy because it’s been already a year and I do not know what you are doing and children and whether you are well...”⁴² or “I’ve been waiting for your letter as for God’s mercy, because till now I did not have a single letter and did not know whether you were alive...”⁴³

All the uncertainty of the preceding months was poured out in these letters: “I had no way to know whether you went away or stayed there, whether the children are in good health or whether you are still alive... when you

³⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/1. A. 7-8. The priest later confirmed soldier wife’s death. VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/95.

³⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/48; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/49.

⁴⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5. A. 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/1. A. 1.

⁴³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/51.

write to me, please write the truth....”⁴⁴ Having no response to their first letters, soldiers wrote to more distant relatives and to the village priest, trying to find out their families’ whereabouts.⁴⁵

Many soldiers did lose their wives, children, and parents in the war. They grieved for them and were even more anxious about those who survived:

Now I am asking you, sweet Nastunia,⁴⁶ to write who helps you with errands, whether there is a kind soul to save you my poor orphan in this world, and what is my sweet child Oliunia doing, whether she remembers me and her sister Vasiunia, whom God had taken and my Dear Father whom she used to call Black Grandpa and that little Angel Stefan whom we enjoyed only a short time because he also left for the service with The Lord our God. I am writing and sprinkling with tears this paper and our unfortunate fate [traces of tears]...⁴⁷

Once it was established that the addressees were alive, regular inquiries about “well-being” and “faring” followed. Soldiers seemed to believe that civilians staying in the village were more vulnerable to the hardships of war: “It’s difficult for us here but it’s even more difficult for those who stayed at home with little children.”⁴⁸ Laconic about their own health and well-being, they demanded more information from their families: “I would like to know about your health and how you manage, about the children and how you live, and whether you have food to eat.”⁴⁹ Another tide of disturbing rumors about the home village came in the summer of 1916 in connection with Brusilov’s offensive and fears that the village would be occupied again.⁵⁰ Soldiers heard that villagers were being forced to leave and advised their families to “let them beat you up, but do not leave home, because what would you do [and] and the winter is not far away.”⁵¹

Soldiers were aware that with men having left for war, women were overburdened with physically demanding chores. One soldier asked the priest “to warn my Wife so that she does not work too much, although I know that there is much work and no men, but she is of little strength but very ardent when it comes to work. If I come back, then we’ll work together,

⁴⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5.

⁴⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

⁴⁶ *-unia* is a diminutive ending.

⁴⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32.

⁴⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/81.

⁴⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/1. A. 3-4.

⁵⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/26.

⁵¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/21.

but at present let her not work but be able to survive with the children...”⁵² These worries did not subside in the course of war. In 1917 another soldier inquired about his wife’s health:

...if your back is painful, you may have got chilled somewhere. Write how long you were in pain and whether it has eased up by now. Please be careful about your health and do not overload yourself with work because if you break yourself with all this work, who will help me if God helps me to survive this misfortune and to come back to the native land? whom will I, such a worn-out and wasted poor wretch, snuggle up to[?]⁵³

Soldiers were also concerned about their families’ psychological problems: “Spiritual Father, please take care of the family. Advise them if you can so that they do not cry so much and do not grieve...”⁵⁴ Via correspondence, soldiers tried to maintain ties with their families and communicated intimacy, concern, and even care. There is no trace of the new militant masculinity that had emerged during the war in Europe and was based on men’s direct involvement in violence.⁵⁵ At least partly, in this case it can be explained by the fact that during the first months of war soldiers’ families ended under occupation and until the end of the war remained in the front zone. Therefore the soldiers were less likely to see themselves as “protectors” of those left at home, they were less likely to see civilians at home as enjoying the “luxuries” of civilian life. Indeed, the letters prove that the Galician soldiers were well aware of their families’ hardships and sufferings.

Money

War meant the end of normal civilian life but not of the basic mechanisms of the capitalist economy. To survive, one needed money, and it seems that during the war the principal direction for the flow of cash was from the army to the village and not the other way around. Only in one letter does a soldier reject his wife’s request for money: “I cannot help you because I have just about enough for myself and have not saved anything.”⁵⁶

Sometimes, letters include requests from soldiers to send them several crowns – from a POW in Italy (but we should remember that POWs were

⁵² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/78.

⁵³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32.

⁵⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/80.

⁵⁵ Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur. Introduction // Wingfield and Bucur (Eds.). *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe*. Bloomington, 2006. Pp. 6-7.

⁵⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/36.

in a different situation),⁵⁷ or from a grandson to his grandmother.⁵⁸ Sometimes soldiers requested money from the aid their families were receiving from the state because men served in the army.⁵⁹ The sums in question are small, and the largest request is for 10 crowns.⁶⁰ In one letter a soldier asks for home-made food.⁶¹

It has become common knowledge that World War I changed the gender division of labor and undermined prewar gender roles. Soldiers were well aware of these changes. Because of state payments to soldiers' families, soldiers could still style themselves breadwinners and advise their wives on major budget decisions. As late as 1917, the wife of a soldier would ask advice on the purchase of a cart and horses.⁶² One soldier, suspecting that his parents-in-law were trying to take advantage of his absence and get hold of his family's money, asked the priest to help in this delicate matter.⁶³ Soldiers believed they were better informed about larger economic trends. They were also given talks by government and insurance companies' agents and passed the information received to their families.⁶⁴

At the same time, soldiers readily delegated access to the money to their wives and were not excessively worried about how wives spent it: “You are writing to me that, God, everything is expensive, but you must buy everything that is needed. There is nothing we can do about it; it's everywhere that expensive. . . .”⁶⁵ Wives had to deal with banks and credit unions from which funds were borrowed before the war.⁶⁶ Since in Galician villages individuals were as important as institutions as the source of credit, wives also had to collect money from debtors.⁶⁷ Women even formed female partnerships for joint investments to purchase more expensive household goods.⁶⁸

Because death was such an eventuality, the financial side of it had to be taken care of. Testaments were sent to the village by mail even though as one soldier explained: “I would have loved to do this surrounded by

⁵⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/6.

⁵⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/25.

⁵⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/29.

⁶⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/10.

⁶¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/21.

⁶² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/51.

⁶³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

⁶⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/2.

⁶⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/49.

⁶⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

⁶⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/97; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/8.

⁶⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/51.

my family....”⁶⁹ This particular testament dealt with the soldier’s second wife and two sets of children from different marriages, all of whom were provided with land plots and cash. The soldier was worried about the treatment of his daughters from the first marriage, and he asked the priest to talk to them confidentially and, in the case of complaints, to allot them part of the funds the family was receiving from the state.⁷⁰

Leaves

Not all business could be solved by correspondence. Nonetheless, in the letters soldiers say frankly that they are applying for leave not because of business but out of the sheer desire to see their loved ones. Some needed leave to find out their families’ fate: “I dream about them every night, and I cannot bear it anymore. My heart is so heavy. Please go to the priest and ask him to make a request for my leave... .”⁷¹ Others felt they needed to make amends: “I would like to get leave to be able to kiss those hands and feet that raised me. I would like to get a parental blessing for me because I fear the righteous God’s judgment. Because I may have to part with this life, I fear that the tears and execrations I brought upon my poor head could draw to me God’s just finger.”⁷²

Getting leave was difficult. Some soldiers had not been home for three years.⁷³ Soldiers’ own requests as a rule were ignored, and only requests coming from soldiers’ homes could make a difference: as one soldier put it “from this side *urlaub* [leave] cannot be obtained.”⁷⁴ The death of a close relative – a parent or a spouse – definitely provided sufficient grounds for leave, but even in this case, it was not automatic.⁷⁵ Obtaining leave was a bureaucratic procedure for which proper documentation was extremely important, and the language to be used was German. The only person in the community qualified for the job was the local priest. Even his requests often had to be rewritten several times and approved by both the community (municipal) government and the local district captaincy.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

⁷⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

⁷¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/34.

⁷² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/40.

⁷³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/33.

⁷⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/37. Officers also advised soldiers to get requests form home: VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/43.

⁷⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/21.

⁷⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/10, 2; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/12.

Soldiers had been figuring out the best time to apply for leave – a respite on fronts, for example,⁷⁷ and they also knew about periods when obtaining leave was impossible.⁷⁸ Requests were sent to the different levels of military hierarchy – company, regiment, and sometimes even the ministry.⁷⁹ Getting leave was easier when soldiers were not far away from their home – in this respect those fighting on the Italian and Balkan fronts were disadvantaged.⁸⁰

Leave for “family reasons” was the most popular – close relatives’ illness, old age, or disabilities served as grounds for it.⁸¹ Family was an institution the state honored even during the war. But another motif can be found in many requests as well: the need to help with the harvest,⁸² sometimes regardless of other family members’ age and health.⁸³ The state needed food supplies and could not afford to waste land or yields. In these cases peasant soldiers’ class background worked to their advantage. The larger the land plot, the better the soldiers’ chances.⁸⁴

In this respect, the Galician villagers’ experience resembled that of the Bavarian farmers, for whom obtaining leave for agricultural work was easier than it was for soldiers coming from cities, which contributed to the tension between the soldiers of rural and urban background in the German army.⁸⁵ At the same time, in this case, the soldiers’ peasant background was treated similarly to the professional background of other categories of citizens, such as railway men. It was their professional qualities that qualified them for leave. Characteristically, a former community secretary who seemed to be the priest’s friend and regular correspondent also appealed to his unique secretarial qualifications and skills while trying to obtain a leave.⁸⁶

Village

Soldiers missed not only their families but also their village. One inquired “...whether the village is heavily burnt, whether there is harvest already

⁷⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/10, 2; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/37.

⁷⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/77.

⁷⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/36.

⁸⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

⁸¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/22; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32.

⁸² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/4.

⁸³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/26; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/61.

⁸⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/33; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/42.

⁸⁵ Benjamin Ziemann. *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1921*. Oxford, 2007. P. 50.

⁸⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

in the home province [*w kraju*] whether the sons are at home ... everyone knows about one's place and village, and I cannot wait till I receive [some information]."⁸⁷ For the sake of convenience we may distinguish between two sets of inquiries about home villages. One set was about people – the whereabouts of relatives, epidemics and mortality, drafts.⁸⁸ Soldiers urged their correspondents to “write to me all the news in the village...,”⁸⁹ and they sometimes tried to maintain correspondence with co-villagers from other regiments and POW camps.⁹⁰ Personal ties with co-villagers were of crucial importance for the civilian population of the village. During the war, survival often depended on help from neighbors to whom soldiers expressed their gratitude in letters: “Pylyp Bliatnyk did your field. ...[tell him] that I greet him heartily that he is so kind to you and saves my children. God give him health so that he lives happily, and if God helps me to return luckily, I'll repay him this a hundred times.”⁹¹

The second set of inquiries was about agriculture and everything connected to it – weather, seasons, vegetation, livestock, and yields.⁹² Soldiers missed the farming routine and the rhythm of a farmer's year.⁹³ Even a peasant son with a gymnasium education was keenly interested in cattle and harvests.⁹⁴

The parish priest was also part of the home village and an important link in a soldier's connection to it. The priest would send greetings and religious images to the soldiers, and some appreciated it.⁹⁵ Yet others were interested in the priest as in yet another correspondent.⁹⁶

Communication with the home village was not motivated solely by sentiments. A letter to a mayor accuses him of abusing his office. The mayor had tried to assign a custodian to a soldier's children, while the soldier believed that the mayor was after the soldier's money and claimed that his mother could take care of children. The soldier played out the contrast between his own military and the mayor's civilian status:

⁸⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/35.

⁸⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/21; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/78; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/59; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/18.

⁸⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5, A. 5.

⁹⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/59. VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/21.

⁹¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/51.

⁹² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32 or VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/45.

⁹³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/18; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/72; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/72.

⁹⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/75.

⁹⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/72.

⁹⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/79.

...I feel miserable when I recall you because you are an official in the community house while I am out in the world making war... if someone needs money he can come to the *Abteilung* [military detachment] and have a taste of “easy money” and please do not poke your nose into my children and do not confuse them because, thank God, I am still alive and I, not you, can still give them orders.⁹⁷

The community as a municipality was also approached in less controversial matters – to help establish the fate of families, especially if there were no other relatives.⁹⁸ Apparently soldiers believed that their own life would return to normal only when they returned to the village. But the link with the village was not merely emotional. Multiple ties stemmed from the fact that it was their place of residence and a municipality, with all the attendant civic rights and obligations.

Men on War

In most letters soldiers dispense with their own experiences in a brief line: “Thank God, I am well, and doing what one usually does in war,”⁹⁹ “faring as usual in the army,”¹⁰⁰ or “faring as in the field”¹⁰¹ (if writing from the front). Partly this laconism can be explained by the awareness of censorship. On the other hand, many unvarnished descriptions of soldiers’ lives reached their addressees. Possibly, soldiers did not want to traumatize their relatives. “Life as usual” sounded assuring at a time when any change normally meant a change for the worse.¹⁰²

A letter from August 1914 describes the first impression of the mobilized: the train journey and soldiers’ food, expectations of a short war and a quick homecoming.¹⁰³ Soon they were to face death and injury, utter physical and mental exhaustion, undernourishment and disease. Still, soldiers described their physical condition with the standard “I am well.” Even from the hospital soldiers wrote about “being, thank God, well”¹⁰⁴ or “I am well but not

⁹⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/56.

⁹⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/1. A. 3-4.

⁹⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/1. A. 1 or VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5. A. 5. VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/8.

¹⁰⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/18.

¹⁰¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/58.

¹⁰² In one letter a soldier explicitly equates any news with bad news: VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/35.

¹⁰³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/7.

¹⁰⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/10. A. 3.

completely; I am in the hospital.”¹⁰⁵ Even ready-printed hospital postcards in the empire’s nine official languages were more eloquent. They included five options to be circled by patients – “lightly wounded, wounded, heavily wounded, sick, very sick.”¹⁰⁶ Although to stay alive, to be able to move and reason in these circumstances was to do well: “I am already well and can walk... Senko Bilei is still lying in his bed while I, thank God, can walk...”¹⁰⁷ To “fare well,” just as to “do well,” was a matter of degree. Having some food was its essential part: “Thank God, I am healthy and faring well because we have something to eat.”¹⁰⁸

There are also complaints: “I am not doing well, because I am in the hospital with my right arm wounded.”¹⁰⁹ Food was never plentiful: “Thank God I am in good health and faring not too badly. But you would not recognize me now, because I do not look like a man, but like a corpse. That is why I do not want to be photographed.”¹¹⁰ Soldiers were making it clear that their service was not as worry-free as some civilians apparently imagined. Several times the “luxury” of a soldier’s life is mentioned ironically.¹¹¹ Soldiers with sons of draft age were appalled by the prospect of their sons being drafted into the army.¹¹²

For the majority of soldiers, physical hardship that did not involve critical injury was bearable. It was the psychological problems that they admitted and complained about most. Sadness figures prominently when soldiers describe their emotional state: “By the grace of God, I am healthy, but conditions here are sad.”¹¹³ Like medical doctors at the time, soldiers were reaching the conclusion that this depression often could not be traced to some physical damage or concrete event: “I do not know what it is about.”¹¹⁴

Some soldiers indicate that partly this psychological discomfort was caused by the fundamental unpredictability of events and of one’s chances of surviving: “By the grace of God, I am healthy... I am in Russia, and we are doing quite well in Russia but do not know for how long it’ll be like

¹⁰⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/26.

¹⁰⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/47.

¹⁰⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/39.

¹⁰⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/54.

¹⁰⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/13.

¹¹⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/21.

¹¹¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/3. For luxury, see also VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/66.

¹¹² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5. A. 5.

¹¹³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/4. See also VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/22.

¹¹⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/16.

this,”¹¹⁵ or “I am well, but I worry about myself because with every passing day it gets worse and more vexing [*co raz hirszy i prykrisy*]”¹¹⁶

Separation from families exacerbated the distress: “I miss my family because I have not seen them for so long...,”¹¹⁷ as did foreign environs and the absence of prewar acquaintances. Having three soldiers from the village in the same regiment was unique.¹¹⁸ Sometimes they would meet another co-villager in uniform only after half a year of service.¹¹⁹ Normally this would happen in the rear where detachments were rested and replenished.¹²⁰ Even these brief encounters, sometimes lasting only an hour, were mentioned in the letters.¹²¹

Foreign land and foreign language reinforced the soldiers’ estrangement: “... In this hospital I am the only one from Galicia among Slovaks, Hungarians, and Romanians. This is in Transylvania near the Romanian border. Here in Sasvaros I am very sad because there is no one from Galicia, nor do I hear anything from you.”¹²² Communication with the Hungarians was almost impossible: “There is no one to ask for leave because these are all Hungarians.”¹²³ But foreign people speaking strange languages were not perceived as wicked: “We are on positions where there is no one from our land (*kraianyn*) but many Germans and Czechs... so far so good. I do not know how it’ll be hereafter, but I hope in God that everything will be well because we have good people...”¹²⁴

Peasants in uniform saw their army service as a meaningless waste of time and life. Military drudgery and combat were no substitute for what they saw as real work. The soldiers describe their existence without real productive work as abnormal, and this resonates with descriptions of their lives by POWs, who, perhaps, felt this abnormality even more acutely. A POW in Italy wrote back to his village:

I am not badly ill. It’s just that my heart is heavy, especially when I recall you, my dear mother, brothers and sisters, relatives, and our roof, under which you raised me. And now in old age you have to

¹¹⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/2.

¹¹⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

¹¹⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/77. This man was fighting in Russia, not held in captivity.

¹¹⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/59.

¹¹⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/14.

¹²⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/45.

¹²¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/58.

¹²² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5.

¹²³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/34.

¹²⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/30.

work alone while poor I am wasting my youth for nothing, rotting in this miserable captivity because within these walls a man lives and at the same time does not live without the world and without work.¹²⁵

As months passed, men were simply worn out: “I am so bored. It’s already the sixteenth month [that I’ve been here] and . . . and how many places I still have to go to, and no one knows what will happen and how.”¹²⁶ The monotony of army service was also blamed: “With me it’s always the same, and I want home. . . .”¹²⁷ These feelings strengthened as the war continued:

It gets harder and harder, and at the end a man does not know how he’ll live in this suffering world, and worrying will not help, and neither will tears or requests, and what is the use of such a life if fate is so harsh. . . .¹²⁸

One soldier confessed his despair and suicidal thoughts:

I cannot even convey how tormented my life is. Other Nations sing and play, but I cannot. For some reason my insides cannot cheer up. You know I am asking God to make me go once into a hailstorm of bullets to end all this sooner and that would be it, and it seems that the moment is closer. I am telling you, Father, my blood is drying up and neither sleep nor work nor learning stick in my head, and I have no idea what do with myself. . . .¹²⁹

The regular change soldiers experienced was rotation between front and rear.¹³⁰ The frontline or “field” was a special experience very different from the regular army routine. Being on the frontline turned a recruit into a seasoned soldier.¹³¹

Descriptions of combat in these letters are rare, but they deal with things familiar from other accounts of World War I. Soldiers were impressed by the destructive power of artillery fire: “As usual before the battle, even the mountains shake around me, and [there is] noise from bullets, grenades, and shrapnel above our heads. God help us to survive this and do it soon because I am fed up with this misery after two years. . . .”¹³² The changed landscape of the battlefields is also mentioned: “As we went through the Carpathians, we

¹²⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/9.

¹²⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

¹²⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/10. A. 2.

¹²⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32.

¹²⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/78.

¹³⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/30.

¹³¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/10.

¹³² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

saw Russian trenches and such that you do not see normally, and it seemed that we had gone to the other world.”¹³³

Frontline service was seen as different from regular service: “It seems that soon I’ll enter a different service, a service in which life is counted by minutes and seconds.”¹³⁴ The death that accompanied them was difficult to cope with: “I do not know how I could bear it. People fell down like straw.”¹³⁵ At the same time, death was a taboo subject, not to be mentioned explicitly. Soldiers preferred to represent frontline service in terms of swelling misery and hardships: “I am now in the field and... here I am in dire need. There is not even a place to sleep.”¹³⁶ Frontline living arrangements were a novelty, and soldiers sent home photographs of living quarters in the trenches.¹³⁷ There was a regular rotation, and three months “in the field” was considered a long time.¹³⁸ Respite was definitely better than major combat. After Brusilov’s offensive, a soldier would report that now it was “not even remotely as bad as it was earlier in May and July....”¹³⁹

Those with at least a gymnasium education are more eloquent in describing their experience of others’ deaths:

People die! Nearly every day I hear that someone among my acquaintances died or was killed by the enemy’s bullet. At first it impressed me greatly but no more. I am staring into death’s face every day. Sometimes when I recollect where my friends are, my flesh creeps and involuntarily I let out words of thanks to the Lord, who till now saved me from everything evil. Of my friends, some fell in combat, others got lost without a trace, and still others became cripples in hospitals.¹⁴⁰

Not everyone served in combat formations. Older men were often taken into engineering, work, and railway regiments. Soldiers well knew the difference between frontline service and work detachments.¹⁴¹ Those serving in noncombat regiments considered themselves lucky: “Don’t worry about me because it’s not too bad for me in the army because as you know I went

¹³³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/54.

¹³⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/40.

¹³⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/21.

¹³⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

¹³⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

¹³⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/27.

¹⁴¹ “We have several [soldiers] who are 70... when war started they were taken to horses and to digging trenches and they think that everyone is like this but I left for the front and not for *arbeit abteilung*.” VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/34.

to *Eisenbahn*, and this regiment does not fight but only works on railway tracks and bridges. . . .”¹⁴² Chores in these noncombat formations were often akin to the work peasants did back at home: “Now I am with horses. I have two horses. I was assigned to pioneers . . . don’t be afraid of what people say because from here no one will send me to the infantry. . . .”¹⁴³ Peasants were especially delighted if they could work with horses, Galician peasants’ most precious animals.¹⁴⁴

For many peasant soldiers, war proved to be their first tourist experience.¹⁴⁵ Since the soldiers often were not allowed to disclose their location, they would give only vague hints, which nonetheless betray their awe of these exotic places: “I am far away in the southern land so deep in the mountains that it will be about 100 miles. I cannot write more because the letter will not reach you”.¹⁴⁶ One of the priest’s regular correspondents was sending postcards with views of places where he was stationed together with reports on local natural wonders and weather.¹⁴⁷ Soldiers fighting in the Alps reported about “such high mountains that there is snow even during *Petrivka* lent. . . in summer.”¹⁴⁸ Some passed through the empire’s capital.¹⁴⁹ Even POWs reported their observations on the geography of foreign lands.¹⁵⁰ The soldiers from Zibolky would also assess the surrounding weather and nature from a farmer’s point of view. They pitied yields that were wasted in the fields around them¹⁵¹ and commented on potatoes, winter crops, and agricultural prices.¹⁵²

There is very little in these letters on the relations between people in military detachments. Pairs of war buddies (*kriegskameraden*) were formed: “There are only two of us from our area, and the rest are Dalmatians whose language one cannot understand. Vasyk sleeps with me, and we go together for exercises.”¹⁵³ Although literature focused on social conflict and struggle,

¹⁴² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32.

¹⁴³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32.

¹⁴⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/72.

¹⁴⁵ For the main character of Józef Witlin’s war novel, the train trip of the Galician recruits to the training camp was “not only the longest but also the most beautiful trip of his life.” Józef Witlin. *Sól ziemi. Powieść o cierpliwym piechurze*. Warszawa, 1988. S. 138.

¹⁴⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

¹⁴⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

¹⁴⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/72.

¹⁵² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/73.

¹⁵³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/10.

emphasized soldiers’ discontent and the tensions between them and the officer corps, officers are never reproached in these letters. On the contrary, sometimes gratitude is expressed.¹⁵⁴ One young soldier even claims that his “ober lieutenant... is so nice toward me just like father.”¹⁵⁵ One villager himself became a noncommissioned officer. He was taken into the army from the last year of gymnasium, was allowed to enter officers’ school, and graduated from it.¹⁵⁶

Since getting leave was difficult, some soldiers did not see their village for more than two years.¹⁵⁷ Even an NCO with a gymnasium education had not been home for twenty months.¹⁵⁸ Those lucky enough to get leave and visit home sometimes returned even more depressed because of the contrast between life with the family and life in the service,¹⁵⁹ or because they had not found their families.¹⁶⁰ Some soldiers lost almost their entire families as well as all their friends.¹⁶¹ The more fortunate ones drew strength from the knowledge that they were remembered and loved. Letters from home that did not bring bad news were uplifting.¹⁶² Soldiers could be cheered up by news that their friends were alive.¹⁶³ Cards from the priest on holidays or on the day of a soldier’s namesake patron saint were a source of joy as well.¹⁶⁴ Returning home was seen as the ultimate reward to be hoped for: “God help us to survive this miserable war and to see each other in our own land under our native roof.”¹⁶⁵

Ideologies

When it comes to soldiers’ explanations of the events they were going through, religion was most important. God’s ungraspable will was the ultimate cause of all events, and God was also the only force that could grant survival: “... although bullets and shrapnel fly over my head there is God’s

¹⁵⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/95.

¹⁵⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/40.

¹⁵⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/75.

¹⁵⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/33.

¹⁵⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/27.

¹⁵⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/10. A. 3.

¹⁶⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/52.

¹⁶¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/72.

¹⁶² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/11.

¹⁶³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/30.

¹⁶⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/66; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/77.

¹⁶⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/81.

will for everything and I hope in God that God will guide us in this our misery that is now in the world....”¹⁶⁶

Prayer was an appeal to the only authority in control of the situation: “I am, thank God, Jesus Christ, the Most Holy Virgin Mary, and my Guardian Angel for their mercy. They have been protecting me till now from every misfortune....”¹⁶⁷ Soldiers prayed themselves and asked the village priest¹⁶⁸ and relatives to do so.¹⁶⁹ Prayer and trust in God for many were the only solace: “Dear mother do not worry. God is with us,”¹⁷⁰ “do not worry about anything... God has not forgotten about us; he will not leave us.”¹⁷¹

The letters suggest that the absolute majority of soldiers from the village were sincere believers. They attended liturgy whenever possible, confessed and took sacraments, and also kept track of religious holidays.¹⁷² Just as in the case of the German Catholic soldiers, “faith was of significance primarily in grappling with a specific, particularly precarious aspect of everyday life at the front.”¹⁷³ Proper liturgy in the real church was among the things they missed: “It has been already for eighteen months that I have not heard God’s Word in church... .”¹⁷⁴ Field services and army chaplains were a poor substitute; soldiers were of the Byzantine rite and, unlike other Catholics, were used to the services in their language and eastern rite: “...There is a chaplain here and he reads God’s service, but it is not as clear as in our place/rite (*po nashomu*)....”¹⁷⁵ Their peculiar religion was also part of the link between the soldiers and their homes – soldiers claimed to miss specific religious community rituals,¹⁷⁶ sermons in their native language and their parish priest.¹⁷⁷ These also appeared in their dreams.¹⁷⁸ While dreaming, soldiers frequently traversed space and saw people and places they missed. Dreams were also taken as signs and analyzed.¹⁷⁹

¹⁶⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

¹⁶⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/65.

¹⁶⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

¹⁶⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/3.

¹⁷⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/9.

¹⁷¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/26.

¹⁷² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

¹⁷³ Ziemann. War Experiences in Rural Germany. P. 128.

¹⁷⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/65.

¹⁷⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/73.

¹⁷⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

¹⁷⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/69.

¹⁷⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/72.

¹⁷⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/34.

Of all the tangible political topics, peace was the only one soldiers were concerned with and mentioned in their letters: “With every day it’s more difficult in this unfortunate war because it is of no use to even mention that holy peace.”¹⁸⁰ This was said in 1915; in 1917 soldiers were still asking: “God send us peace.”¹⁸¹ Peace rumors were reported home as when the Montenegrin king was passing through the empire to exile: “I am sending joyous news that King Nikita is already in Vienna and praying to Holy God.”¹⁸²

Although state propaganda portrayed Russians as cruel barbarians, and the village was under Russian occupation for eight months, the letters contain surprisingly little anti-Russian sentiment. One soldier made derogatory remarks about Russians while inquiring about occupation in his letter to the parish priest: “How did the Father and our People live for such a long time under these damned and indecent unworthy Russians.”¹⁸³ Another derogatory reference to Russians in this collection comes from the community scribe: “We follow Russians ever farther, and maybe soon will shake our land from Russian rottenness.”¹⁸⁴ All other letters mention Russia and Russians neutrally, just as they mention the ethnic groups of the Habsburg Empire.

Soldiers never specify the ethnic group to which they themselves belong. The community they were sustaining with their correspondence is strikingly a-national and delimited only vaguely.¹⁸⁵ “Their own” (*nashi*) are people from the village, and from the province – from our land (*krai*), from Galicia. The soldiers never articulate the difference between Poles and Ukrainians (or Ruthenians) as an ethnic one. The linguistic boundary between the two groups did not matter to the soldiers, and only confessional differences were mentioned: “I have not heard God’s voice since I left home and have not attended church because we do not have it here. I confessed twice, once to the Polish priest in Vienna when I was there and the second time here, where the Polish priest came and heard our confessions, and I do not know whether it may be a sin, but let God’s will be done.”¹⁸⁶ Choral singing and the Slavic language reminded them of their own rite,¹⁸⁷ while the Hungarian language was most alienating.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/81.

¹⁸¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/70.

¹⁸² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

¹⁸³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/78.

¹⁸⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

¹⁸⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/41.

¹⁸⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/34.

¹⁸⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

¹⁸⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/24; VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/34.

Priest's nonpeasant, educated correspondents would send postcards printed to raise funds for the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (the Ukrainian national voluntary formation in the Austro-Hungarian army).¹⁸⁹ Apparently, such cards were also sent to the soldiers, and a former community scribe responding to such a card referred to these Riflemen as "our dear defenders."¹⁹⁰

The only villager who referred to the Ukrainian national community was a former village school teacher: "... setting hopes in the mercy of the Almighty, I plead to see the end of this turmoil and to return to the motherland to work further for the souls of children and our Ruthenian nation."¹⁹¹ There is also a reference in his other letter to some political work he was involved in.¹⁹² Another instance of national patriotism can be found in a letter by an NCO with a gymnasium education, who engaged in some national proselytizing in Volhynia, the Ukrainian province of the Russian Empire.¹⁹³

"Our land" in soldiers' letters is sometimes specified as Galicia.¹⁹⁴ Soldiers distinguish between "their own land" (*nash kraï*) and the "state," which was also "theirs."¹⁹⁵ By "Russia" they meant the Russian Empire, even when it was inhabited by Ukrainians and Poles. Soldiers do not voice opinions about the government, which is understandable. But there are no patriotic motifs in these letters either. "Our Frantz Joseph" is mentioned just once in a letter to the priest on the eve of his birthday with the wishes of "many and happy years of life."¹⁹⁶

For these peasants the state was no longer about the person of the monarch; it was about institutions and an incipient welfare system. They had developed a reliance on and trust of state institutions. A community secretary trying to obtain leave referred to the indispensable services they were performing for the state: "While I was in the community, I managed records, and most important, I managed agriculture to the great benefit of the community and of the State."¹⁹⁷

¹⁸⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/27.

¹⁹⁰ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

¹⁹¹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/97.

¹⁹² VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/97. We also know that his wife left the village with a Russian officer during the Russian retreat. VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/27.

¹⁹³ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/75.

¹⁹⁴ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/5. Sometimes, the connotation seem be to be even more local, e.g. VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/81.

¹⁹⁵ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

¹⁹⁶ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/93.

¹⁹⁷ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/67.

There is no resentment against any particular figure, state, or nation in these letters. The soldiers do not blame anyone in particular for the war or think that some other ethnic or social groups are benefiting from it. The calamity and the suffering were global: “good times passed and those ill-fated for humankind came. . . it’s not only us who suffer but almost the whole world. Wherever I arrive, I hear the same things – disease, starvation, and absolute and extreme misery....¹⁹⁸ The very word “people” (*narod*) was used to denote both a nation and humankind: “Perhaps, God will have mercy on us sinners and will reconcile these unhappy people in this world of tears.”¹⁹⁹

Conclusions

There is nothing peculiarly “peasant” in these letters of the Galician soldiers, if “peasant” refers to a particular type of society that has been conceptualized in anthropology as a stage in the development of humankind somewhere between the primitive and the modern; a part-society based on oral tradition, largely self-sufficient and self-enclosed, untouched by the culture of urban centers and unchanging.²⁰⁰ Neither were these soldiers “peasant” in the sense of some radical constitutive difference between them and soldiers from urban centers and “more developed” regions.

The conscripts from Zibolky were peasants in the sense that they lived from agriculture, in small compact settlements owning small parcels of land with family being the main unit of production. The number of illiterates among them was higher than among conscripts from more urbanized western provinces of the empire. Their perception of the world was influenced by their life in the village and their occupation. Their ties with the village might have been stronger than the ties of urban dwellers to their neighborhoods, but this still remains to be proved. They related their war experiences to their life in the countryside and assimilated military life, even the experience of combat itself, to the agricultural work they were used to. But historians have shown that the strategies of urban industrial workers in similar circumstances were identical.²⁰¹ Family structures, personal attachments, emotional life, even attitudes toward and relationships with the state

¹⁹⁸ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/32.

¹⁹⁹ VR LNB. F. 1. Spr. 785/80.

²⁰⁰ For a critique of this view of peasant society, see Michael Kearney. *Reconceptualizing the Peasantry: Anthropology in Global Perspective*. Boulder, 1996.

²⁰¹ Alf Lütke. *The Appeal of Exterminating “Others”*: German Workers and the Limits of Resistance // *Journal of Modern History*. 1992. V. 64. Pp. 46-67.

in these letters do not appear much different from those of the empire's urban population. Galician peasant soldiers might have been more religious than soldiers from the cities. On the other hand, there was nothing particularly surprising about their religiosity. Religious imagery and dreams were just as important to West European soldiers.²⁰²

Soldiers' communicative strategies were also remarkably similar to the strategies used by families and soldiers elsewhere in that war. Through the correspondence they built and tried to sustain families, friendships, and their smaller village community. Soldiers tried to protect those who were dear to them from unnecessary stress and worries, while sharing experiences and giving emotional support. Both soldiers and their families appear as deeply integrated into the complex political, legal, and economic mechanisms of the state, and part of the suffering that they endure eventuates from the breakdown and erosion of these mechanisms.

The majority of Zibolky soldiers seem to have remained immune to patriotic and nationalist propaganda, even though the parish priest in the village was a Ukrainian patriot, and there were Ukrainian activists among the more educated villagers. To borrow a concept from Tara Zahra, the absolute majority of these soldiers demonstrate in their letters remarkable "national indifference."²⁰³ The letters hint that this immunity was developed due to the impact of imperial citizenship, life in an ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous community and province without strict boundaries between ethnic groups, at least functional bilingualism, contact with multiple ethnic and social groups during army service as well as the leveling, universally shared experience of the total war. There is also no enthusiasm about fighting and war in general. This could be explained by the fact that the majority of letters come from married mature soldiers. Even though war duty and the war itself were detested by soldiers there are no signs of disloyalty to the state. However onerous and dangerous, military service is seen as a civic duty, from which they do not intend to shrink. At the same time, these soldiers are looking for all possible ways to alleviate the burden of war service and are hoping for eventual and imminent peace.

Finally, even though for the majority of Zibolky soldiers these letters must have been their first experience of writing, they succeeded in telling very human and specific stories, whose universal emotional appeal was not

²⁰² Jay Winter. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge, 1995. Pp. 54-77.

²⁰³ Tara Zahra. *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948*. Ithaca, 2008. *Passim*.

diminished by the constraints of the form or the soldiers' poor writing skills. These stories provide the best rebuttal of the condescending approach observable in some studies of early twentieth-century East European peasants.

SUMMARY

В статье подробно проанализированы письма галицийских солдат на фронтах Первой мировой войны, отправленные в их родную деревню родственникам и односельчанам. Автора интересует то, как солдаты описывали и воспринимали свою обыденную фронтовую (или лагерную) жизнь, как понимали войну и мир вокруг себя, как трактовали свою идентичность. Андрий Заярнюк проливает свет на значение Первой мировой войны для галицийского крестьянства, пересматривая стереотипные представления о крестьянских идентичностях, лояльностях и субъектности. Статья раскрывает гибридный характер идентичностей этих крестьян, которые не были носителями представлений о национальной принадлежности, четко ограниченной языком, культурой и территорией. Военный опыт не способствовал их национализации в этом направлении. В статье также приводится много новых данных о малоизвестных аспектах экономической, социальной, культурной и политической жизни галицийской деревни кануна Первой мировой войны.