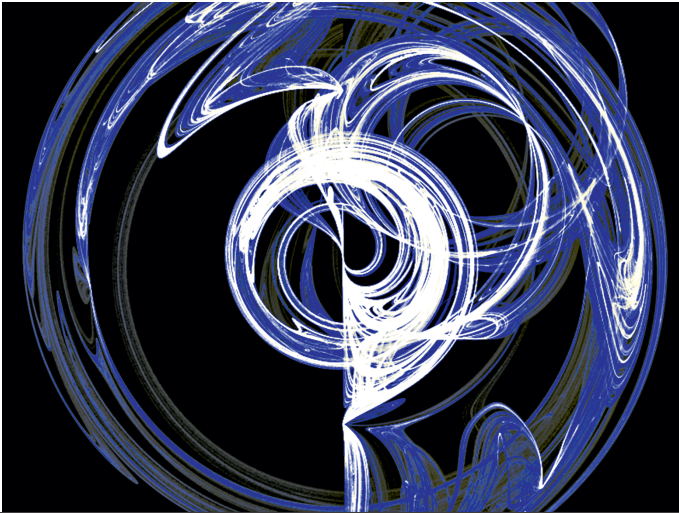


Ryszard Kaczmarek

Poles in Kaiser's Army On the Front of the First World War



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The book describes the fate of Poles in the German Imperial Army during the First World War. Poland did not exist for over a hundred years on the political map of Europe at that time, and the Poles had to fight for the opposite sides of the conflict: Germany, Austria, and Russia. In the German army, regiments recruited in Poznań, Upper Silesia, Masuria, and Eastern Pomerania were considered as "Polish." They were sent to the Western front and participated in the great battles of Arras, Verdun, and the Somme. Poles were also present on the Eastern front, in the Balkans, on the Italian front, and even in the colonies. An important part of the forgotten history of Poles in the Kaiser's army was the relationship between Polish soldiers and German officers. In regiments recruited on the Polish soil, it was common to use the Polish language, and from 1917 Poles deserted to the Polish Army formed in France.

The Author

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PETER LANG



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I. Poles in Prussian Regiments Before the First World War

The Prussian Army

Famous for its military drill, the tradition of the Prussian Army dates back to the eighteenth century, and it mainly derives from the Silesian Wars waged by Frederick II. These traditions served as an example for the next generations of Prussian officers while the mythicization of victories of that time aimed to integrate the Prussian state, notably the eastern territories inhabited by Poles. The nineteenth-century staff analyses also primarily referred to the campaigns of 1740–1763 and the biographies of the most famous commanders of the time. Many Prussian regiments were named after those commanders. The regimental traditions and the officer ethos referred to the absolutist Frederician monarchy.

However, the German Army and the Prussian troops that participated in the First World War had a different character, which mostly resulted from the changes in the Hohenzollern state after the lost war with Napoleon in 1806–1807, and later thanks to Helmuth von Moltke the Elder's mid-nineteenth century continuation of the reforms.

After losing the battles of Jena and Auerstedt to Napoleon, a group of young officers introduced organizational and operational-tactical transformations in the army. The group consisted of Gerhard Johann von Scharnhorst, August Neidhardt von Gneisenau, and Hermann von Boyen, supported by an outstanding war theoretician of growing prestige, Carl von Clausewitz. Thanks to their efforts, king Frederick William III introduced wartime universal conscription in 1813 along with the new military decoration – the Iron Cross (*Eisernes Kreuz*) – initially produced exclusively in a foundry located in Gliwice, Upper Silesia.

The changes at the beginning of the nineteenth century concerned not only universal conscription but also the democratization of officer cadre, although the latter did not succeed until 1914. What played a significant role in the revival of the Prussian Army at the early stage of the reforms was not only the effort of the young Prussian officers but also the example of spontaneously created anti-Napoleonic voluntary troops. Adolf von Lützow commanded the most famous unit with nearly 3000 volunteers that mostly consisted of liberal students who fought against the French occupiers. Von Lützow's black-red-gold colors were later adopted by student associations (*Burschenschaften*) that fought for German

unification, which turned it into the symbol of the German nationalist and democratic movement; a tradition later evoked by Landwehr. The anti-French tradition in the Prussian Army grew stronger after The Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

The military reform was finished in 1814–1820, only after the Napoleonic Wars, but it no longer based on the liberal tradition of national liberation movements in German lands. The main goal was to further modernize Prussian army, once again a growing European power. To reach this position, Prussia implemented universal conscription. Since then:

- all men served three years of compulsory military duty; however, in 1833, the conscription in infantry had to be limited to two years due to financial reasons; gradual reestablishment of three-year compulsory military duty started in 1850 only to be formally decreed in 1856¹;
- until the age of thirty-two and after completion of the compulsory duty, all men had to go through two-year training in military reserve force as part of the first Landwehr contingent (*Landwehr ersten Aufgebots*) to be called upon in times of war (that was the case in 1849, 1850, and 1859); since 1859, each trained Landwehr regiment (*Landwehr-Regiment*) supported an infantry regiment with the same number, which in case of war functioned as a reserve line regiment that gathered members of the Landwehr's three youngest years²;
- members of the remaining Landwehr's older years formed the ranks of the second Landwehr contingent (*Landwehr zweiten Aufgebots*) until the age of thirty-nine;
- the trained soldiers until the age of fifty remained at the disposal of the Landsturm, called upon in case of a direct threat to the territorial defense of their place of residence in wartime.

Moreover, the reform planned for the democratization of the officer corps that began with the creation of the Landwehr in 1813. However, the corps of professional officers retained its elite character until 1914. Prussians and then German professional officers considered their profession as exceptional, which was to result from their constant willingness to sacrifice their lives. That was the reason why the officers expected different treatment in terms of criminal and civil law.

1 O. Kranz, *Erich Haffenstein und andere*, in: *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith 1. Oberschlesisches Nr. 22*, Kattowitz 1913, p. 170.

2 G. Ciupek, *Aus der Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments*, in: *Ratiborer Heimatbrief aus der Patenstadt Leverkusen*, Weihnachten 1952, pp. 7–8.

The specific character of this professional group stemmed from its observance of a separate code of honor, according to which all disputes were settled without the interference of the administration and civil courts. It was mostly connected with the noble provenance of this group. Although at the beginning of the twentieth century half of the officer corps was of bourgeoisie origin, the majority of professional positions of higher officers were still held by the aristocrats. In 1909, out of thirty Generals of the Infantry, only two belonged to the bourgeoisie. Among lieutenant generals (*Generalleutnant*), this ratio was forty-four to seven, and among the major generals (*Generalmajor*) – seventy-five to thirty-one in favor of the nobility. It means that the stereotypical caricatural image of an officer was quite true to life: he was to come from a Junker family in the eastern Prussian territories, east of the Elbe, with his inseparable monocle, and usually behave arrogantly, rigidly, and boastfully though possessing little knowledge of the world.³

Reserve officers (*Landwehroffizier*) were very numerous in the mass conscription army at the time of the war mobilization in 1914 and belonged to a much different group. Most of them represented the bourgeoisie, while later the majority even consisted of the representatives of the working class. Over time, it was the education and property that was crucial to obtaining the rank of junior reserve officer rather than noble background. The way to reach the officer ranks was different in the case of professional military. It resulted from the military reforms of the first half of the nineteenth century, which allowed recruits to choose between one-year voluntary military duty over the earlier two or three-year compulsory duty, which created a new category of “one-year volunteers” (*Einjährig-Freiwillige*). After the completion of this shorter training, volunteers could apply for the appointment to the rank of reserve lieutenant. However, there were additional conditions for the approval for the special one-year duty. Only graduates of at least the first grade of Gymnasium and *Realschule* (*Obersekunda*) could submit applications, that is, usually seventeen-year-olds. It also meant that the applicant will cover the expenses like housing, weaponry, and uniforms. The latter obligation was particularly difficult to fulfill. Such a one-time expense costed 2–3 thousand marks, far exceeding the income of small craftsmen and merchants. This is why only 30–40 percent of secondary school graduates – the potential “one-year volunteers” – enrolled in this type of military training. Between 1906 and 1910, 181 thousand people were eligible, but only 59 thousand exercised the possibility. But the professional officers hardly

3 W. Wette, *Militarismus in Deutschland. Geschichte einer kriegerischen Kultur*, Frankfurt am Main 2011, pp. 50–51.

tolerated even those enrolled before 1914. Most often, the latter would become an object of mockery in regiments due to their insufficient military training and lack of experience. Nevertheless, they usually tried to meet the requirements, which enabled them to enter the circle of professional officers. Moreover, the reserve officers adopted the professional officers' features and values important in first-line regiments: discipline, order, punctuality, sacrifice for the duty, and even the behavior and worldview mocked by the civilians. They later implemented these views in their everyday life, which led to the popular belief that the soldiers the German Empire.⁴

Right before the First World War, patriotically oriented representatives of the Polish intelligentsia exploited this system and enlisted as "one-year volunteers," so that they could later use the experience in their work toward the rebirth of the Polish state. For example, the national-democratic Association of the Polish Youth "Zet" recommended such way of action, as Bogdan Hulewicz testifies in memoirs on his voluntary enlistment to the German Army: "I was healthy, physically skilled, athletic, and inured, my ZET "brothers" in Munich picked me out for the future instructor in Rifle Squads. Therefore, avoiding the German military one-year duty was out of the question, so after a couple of study semesters, I reported to the draft board in October 1912. To receive a comprehensive military training and reach the rank of reserve lieutenant was part of ZET's program, which I followed enthusiastically. I chose a naval battalion quartering in Kiel, where I received military training in the infantry and the navy, as well as in the essential aspects of field and naval artillery."⁵

Apart from "one-year volunteers" and already during the First World War, there emerged an intermediate category between commissioned and non-commissioned officers was proved a gradual democratization of the German officer corps, even if forced by the growing recruitment needs. That is, there appeared the function of a deputy officer (*Offizierstellvertreter*). At first, those waiting for the commission were treated like non-commissioned officers and received no admission to the caste of the professional military men. Only when front losses increased did they become significant front commanders at section and platoon level.⁶

There was a strong tradition both in the Prussian officer corps and among officials that dated back to the Frederician period, which was to keep class

4 Ibid., pp. 60–61.

5 B. Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, Warszawa 1973, pp. 13–14.

6 W. Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi 1914–1967*, Warszawa 1975, p. 59.

diversity among those nominated by the king. The goal was to integrate the state around an absolute monarch. For instance, in 1815–1830, the king appointed in the Upper Silesian 22nd Infantry Regiment seven officers from Saxony, five from Mecklenburg, four from Westphalia, four from the Kingdom of Poland, three from Pomerania, two each from Rhineland, Hanover, and Hesse, one each from Holstein, Anhalt, Franconia, Austria, Russia, and England. What integrated all of them was loyalty to the Hohenzollern dynasty that they conscientiously cultivated as part of the regimental tradition. All the officers of the 22nd Infantry Regiment had to have “solely monarchist views” and keep distance toward “any party-oriented attitude.”⁷

The military reform partially changed also this tradition, even among commissioned officers. The new generation of officers of the 22nd Infantry Regiment stemmed from the Upper Silesian destitute nobility already from the 1820s. However, we mean here the families that settled in Silesia only in the eighteenth century. Hopes for quick enrichment often turned out illusive, so the newcomers’ sons and grandsons, after having obtained appropriate education, decided to pursue a military career in the nearest regiments. They spent the initial part of duty in regiments as officer aspirants (*Offiziers-Aspiranten*), due to the lower cost of such accommodation. This was facilitated by the fact that, after the Napoleonic Wars, regiments received permanent locations of residence with barracks.

At the time of regiments permanent location in the Upper Silesia before 1866, the frequency of officers’ contacts with the surrounding Silesian nobility grew, as we read from reports of this gradual process:

There was a lively, valorous spirit in the regiment during the stay in its garrison. The most important was to keep in close touch with exquisite local circles. At the beginning of the carnival season, young men visited nearby homes in rigid service dress uniforms and feathered hats sprucely worn on neatly arranged hair. Families of high officers and officials along with the noble families – all cordially greeted the officers from the 22nd Infantry Regiment due to their courteous and quiet behavior. For this reason, the families willingly and voluntarily allowed the officers to make acquaintances with their daughters. . . . In the fusilier bataillions that quartered in small garrisons (Brzeg, Kłodzko, Opole), officers were particularly eager to fulfill their social duties. In this way, former captains and lieutenants [who had already completed active duty and lived in their rural estates] could longer entertain themselves in the circle of young officers who then belonged to the new generation. The unmarried grey-haired men felt like fathers

7 Kranz, *Erich Haffenstein und andere*, p. 135.

to these young modest officers, always eager to help them with money in case of need, which the “young blood” often lacked during parties.⁸

The long garrison stay and the increasingly closer relations between different strata of inhabitants in the eastern Prussian territories – even more true in the case of local non-commissioned officers and soldiers – over time caused the Prussian regiments, which sometimes received particular location by chance, to transform into local troops, which also complied with the objectives of the military reform. The aforementioned 22nd Infantry Regiment quartered in Upper Silesia in order to “train the young people of Upper Silesia to become good soldiers and citizens thanks to the new [reform] bill and the involvement of officers. This established and tightened contacts with all social classes in the province. Thereby, the reformers intended the burghers to adopt military virtues and motivate the brave to volunteer.”⁹

However, these reassurances did not ameliorate the very bad opinion about Polish recruits from the eastern territories until the mid-nineteenth century, in particular from Upper Silesia:

Conscription of recruits for the regiments offered the officers a chance to display their talents. At that time, the annual arrival of recruits allowed them to make many observations of the physical and moral decay of the Upper Silesian population that was to characterize this region. Shoeless, with torn thick linen trousers and similar jackets with tassels, sometimes dressed in cheap clothes from thrift shops; they stood together in front of the barracks and only spoke Polish, which made them seem dull. Their long hair under old hats never encountered a comb. Their eyes were hazy from the coal dust of the local mines. Weak as children, the conscripts who “brought great hope” pushed their way into the barracks. Later, their hair was cut and they were cleaned. When Lieutenant von Goszicki saw the transport for the first time, he said: “We should have been sent here maids who would teach these men how to keep their place clean and orderly and how to properly nourish themselves. Only this way could we accustom them to the new conditions.” Their susceptibility to alcohol must have drawn special attention to the gravity of the problem. However, there definitely appeared no [negative] attitude towards them. After the introduction of harsh discipline, Poles quickly manifested their military penchant: commitment to duty, extraordinary endurance in long marches, and loyalty to superiors. Hence, we praise them highly.¹⁰

At the time, the duty was still quite different from the one in the second half of the nineteenth century, after von Moltke’s reforms. An ordinary member of the

8 Ibid., p. 141.

9 Ibid., p. 135.

10 Ibid., pp. 144–145.

22nd Infantry Regiment received a monthly salary of 2 Prussian thalers, 16 silver groschen, and 6 pfennigs with 12 silver groschen and 6 pfennigs as food benefit (*Viktualienzuschuß*), because he was supposed to buy everything on his own in the garrison. Non-commissioned officers received an additional benefit of 3 silver groschen. As a comparison, the wages of professional officers were much higher: the commandant of the same regiment received 2500 thalers per year, staff officers 1800 thalers, captains 800–600 thalers, lieutenants 200–300 thalers. They also received food benefits and benefits for their military decorations, especially for the Iron Cross (one thaler per month).¹¹ Meanwhile, in the 1860s, a typical textile industry worker earned about 120 thalers per year and a qualified worker in the highest paid metallurgical industry could receive even over 300 thalers.¹²

There were no communal kitchens in the regiment, so meal preparation became a form of training. Everyone still received soup in the morning (for 10 pfennigs) but they had to prepare the rest of the meals on their own. The selected soldier would go shopping to the city market with lieutenant supervision:

Most of the recruits were not able to do this, they did not know the value of money or the prices of vegetables or meat, let alone the knowledge of spices. Many of the newcomers had to learn how to properly eat meat. However, later they cooked very well and clever soldiers began after a short time to comment on the effects of the gastronomic art. Colonel von Goszicki soon discovered that he did not need women to improve the living standards of the local population! The opposite sex could do it. After two or three years of duty, a soldier was able to prepare a tasty meal for a relatively small amount of money, keep his place clean and orderly, and regularly clean his uniform and shoes; but he also used comb, brush, soap, and hand towel on a daily basis, which became his second nature. Later, he would teach his wife how to do these things.¹³

Nevertheless, the main focus was military training, especially drills, marches with full load, and shooting. The most outstanding soldiers in this duty moved to special three-grade military schools that operated within the regimental framework, after which they could obtain ranks of non-commissioned officers. The lectures at the school were led by former professional non-commissioned officers along with full-time and over time (“one-year volunteers”) officers. Classes began on October 1 and ended in spring. For Polish recruits, these schools also served as places of complementary education in elementary subjects, such as reading

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 146–147.

12 G. W. F. Hallgarten, J. Radkau, *Deutsche Industrie und Politik von Bismarck bis in die Gegenwart*, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 28.

13 Kranz, *Erich Haffenstein und andere*, pp. 146–147.

and writing in German: “out of uneducated Polish recruits, the lessons produced gifted non-commissioned officers and minor officials.”¹⁴ Uneducated recruits testified to the negligence of public education which, since the Frederician times, was theoretically universal. There was still a very low turnout in folk schools, particularly in the countryside, which resulted in very high levels of illiteracy until the mid-nineteenth century.

Even after 1848, many non-commissioned officers recruited from the inhabitants of the Opole district, were not able to read or write what made it very difficult to fulfill the official duties. They coped with the situation in an astonishing way: “Many of them were illiterate. An individual that after many years of duty sometimes obtained the rank of company lieutenant, wrote orders with his own signs that resembled letters, that is, he actually shorthanded it according to his own system of signs, but later read it convincingly and confidently.”¹⁵

After the Unification of Germany

The military reform in Prussia was completed by Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, appointed the Head of the Prussian General Staff in 1857, later the author of Prussian victories over Austria in 1866 – essential for the unification of Germany – and France in 1871, after the unification. Due to the fact that the former kingdoms in the south of the German Reich partially retained separate institutions, the German Emperor formally took leadership of four military contingents after 1871: Prussian, Bavarian, Saxon, and Württembergian.¹⁶ However, von Moltke improved the functioning of the German Army everywhere, uniformly commanding from the General Staff. Apart from the radical changes related to the increase in firepower, including both firearms and field artillery, von Moltke especially concentrated on the development of a precise mobilization system that was constantly improved until the outbreak of the First World War. The system based on territorial division and enabled a rapid concentration of military units in particular areas of warfare by the use of railway, the fastest and most modern means of transportation that rapidly developed in the German Empire. The number of railway passengers in Germany increased

14 Ibid., pp. 147–148.

15 Ibid.

16 W. Rezmer, *Polacy w korpusie oficerskim armii niemieckiej w I wojnie światowej (1914–1918)*, in: *Spółczesność polskie na ziemiach pod panowaniem pruskim w okresie I wojny światowej (1914–1918)*, ed. M. Wojciechowski, Toruń 1996, p. 138.

tenfold in 1870–1914.¹⁷ The corps was the basic military unit responsible for mobilization – coordinated by the General Staff – for which it prepared detailed plans and recruited new people. Thanks to these actions, in the case of military conflict, the corps could deliver equipment and firearms to soldiers in line regiments in an organized and quick manner – according to the sequence of actions that was planned with the accuracy of an hour – not to mention the reservists who gradually strengthened the rapidly developing regiments. The delivery of regiments to designated sties based on the “schedule” determined by the staffs. The reform of the General Staff – which began to play the key role since the mid-nineteenth century in the Prussian and later in the German Army – was possible thanks to constant rearrangements of this complicated schedule. It was important not only to determine such a schedule but also to constantly improve and rearrange it due to the changing strength and armament of the army, the relocation of troops, and the development of railway.¹⁸

Logistic problems multiplied with the growing strength of the Prussian Army. The increasing expenses for the army, approved by the German Parliament (*Reichstag*), resulted also in the growing number of soldiers and officers in active duty: from less than 100 thousand to more than 400 thousand in 1880. The duration of time spent in the military training area increased to eighteen weeks per assignment.¹⁹ The army constantly grew to number almost 700 thousand people the brink of the First World War, after the decisions of the German Parliament.²⁰

However, universal military duty before 1914 never applied to all men. In 1909, only a little more than half of men in military age formed the ranks of regiments, that is, 230 thousand recruits out of 422 thousand available men. The reasons for this state of affairs were not financial but political and ideological. Part of the officer corps was not eager to call up whole year groups as they feared the agitation of German social democrats, whose influence steadily grew among the increasing number of the working class. Even right before the First World War, in the 1913 conscription, the military called up only 60 percent of the available pool. As a result, when 1914 required the mobilization of a multi-million-strong army, 5.4 million of conscripts out of the total of 10.4 million had no

17 J. Dülffer, *Deutschland als Kaiserreich (1871–1918)*, in: *Deutsche Geschichte. Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. M. Vogt, Frankfurt am Main 2002, p. 548.

18 M. Howard, *Wojna w dziejach Europy*, Wrocław 2007, pp. 111–112.

19 B. Gebhardt, *Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte*, Vol. 2, Stuttgart 1931, p. 547.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 686–687.

previous military training. Thus, they required preparation before going to the frontlines.

After the introduction of the new military bill of 1912, the number of reserve officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers on the eve of the Great War amounted to 768 thousand (761 thousand in Germany and 7 thousand in colonies).²¹ At the outbreak of the Great War, the German Army was smaller than the French. The former had 120 thousand officers and 3.7 million non-commissioned officers and soldiers in active duty out of 67.8 million inhabitants, so 6 percent, while the latter's indicator reached 9.1 percent²²; of course not in absolute values, but proportionally, that is, taking into account the number of inhabitants. 2147 thousand conscripts were sent to the European fronts, 10 thousand to the colonies – 7–8 thousand were recruited directly in the colonies – while the rest were on duty in the German Reich.²³

In the nineteenth century, the German Army became the model of modern organization and logistics thanks to the creation of conditions for the rapid movement of mass military and the most efficient mobilization capability in Europe. The two wars with eminent European powers – Austria and France – tested the efficiency of this war machine. The Battles of Königgrätz and Sedan proved the superiority of Prussian training. It resulted from the perfect preparation of recruits in the regiments, to which they practically belonged nearly through their whole adulthood. The impersonal military gave way to a civic army that based on loyalty to regiment of registry passed from one-year group to the next. The acceptance of military norms and values along with the pride of belonging to a specific Prussian regiment became the experience of several generations of not only officers, as before, but also regular soldiers.²⁴

Poles from the eastern Prussian territories belonged to the Prussian contingent and the following corps: II in Szczecin, V in Poznań, VI in Wrocław, XVII in Gdańsk, and XX in Olsztyn. Many Poles became members of the elite 2nd Guards Infantry Division and the 1st Guards Infantry Division that jointly constituted the Guards Corps. Poles from Westphalia belonged to the following army corps: XI in Kassel and XIV in Karlsruhe.

I will discuss in more detail the VI Army Corps in Wrocław, which comprised the territories of Upper Silesia, mostly inhabited by the Polish-speaking

21 Rezmer, *Polacy w korpucie oficerskim*, p. 138.

22 Wette, *Militarismus in Deutschland*, pp. 70–71.

23 Rezmer, *Polacy w korpucie oficerskim*, p. 138.

24 J. Keegan, *Die Kultur des Krieges*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1997, p. 47.

community. My discussion will focus not only on the time of mobilization but also the tradition of creating the large units after von Moltke's reforms, not to mention the way of mobilizing the reserve divisions. The other corps developed similarly at the turn of the twentieth century. The Annex on pages 305 contain information about the deployment and commanders of all German corps, in which Poles constituted the majority during the First World War.

The Wrocław VI Army Corps (*VI. Armee-Korps*) in 1871 comprised 25 infantry battalions, 8 cavalry squadrons, and 84 cannons. Wilhelm von Tümpling, General of the Cavalry, commanded the VI Army Corps, which then gathered the Lower Silesian 11th Infantry Division and the Upper Silesian 12th Infantry Division. The Corps also included units in military reserve: two units of the Silesian Field Artillery No. 6 (*Fuß-Abt. Schlesischen Feld-Artillerie Reg. Nr. 6*), Silesian Sapper Battalion No. 6 (*Schlesisches Pionier-Bataillon Nr. 6*), and Silesian Train Battalion No. 6 (*Schlesisches Train-Bataillon Nr. 6*).²⁵ During the Great War, the Silesian VI Army Corps was commanded by General of the Infantry Kurt von Pritzelwitz in 1914, General of the Infantry Ernst August Max von Backmeister in 1914–1915, General of the Cavalry Georg von der Marwitz in 1915–1916, General of the Infantry Julius Riemann in 1916–1917, and General of the Artillery Konstanz von Heineccius. In 1871–1914, the corps underwent considerable changes. It still comprised two infantry divisions: the 12th Infantry Division of Upper Silesia with its staff in Nysa, and the 11th Division of Lower Silesia with its staff in Wrocław. The second division gathered: the 21st Infantry Brigade in Świdnica (the 1st Silesian Grenadiers Regiment No. 10 in Świdnica, the 38th Silesian Fusiliers Regiment of Kłodzko), the 22nd Infantry Brigade in Poznań (the 2nd Silesian Grenadiers Regiment No. 11 in Wrocław, the 4th Lower Silesian Infantry Regiment in Wrocław), the 11th Cavalry Brigade in Poznań (the 1st Silesian Life Cuirassiers Regiment No. 6 in Wrocław, the 2nd Silesian Dragoon Regiment No. 8 in Kluczbork, Bierutowo, and Namysłów), the 11th Field Artillery Brigade of Poznań (the 1st Silesian Field Artillery Regiment No. 6 in Wrocław, the 2nd Silesian Field Artillery No. 42 in Świdnica). The following regiments remained in the reserve corps: the 2nd Silesian Fusiliers Battalion No. 6 in Oleśnica, the Machine Gun Division No. 1 in Wrocław, the 56th Silesian Light Artillery Regiment in Nysa and Głogów, the 6th Silesian Sappers Battalion in Nysa, and the 6th Silesian Wagon Fort Division in Wrocław.

25 VI. Armee-Korps (Deutsches Reich). [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/VI._Armee-Korps_\(Deutsches_Kaiserreich\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/VI._Armee-Korps_(Deutsches_Kaiserreich)) (10.01.2013).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Poles from Upper Silesia mainly joined the ranks of the 12th Infantry Division in Nysa. It usually functioned as a compact unit. Before 1914, all its regiments conducted joint maneuvers in Upper Silesia: in Łambinowice and on the Prussian-Austrian border. Initially, the draft applied to recruits from all over Silesia, but after the implementation of a detailed mobilization plan, it applied to the ones “only from Upper Silesia.”²⁶ During the war, the division was commanded by major general Johannes von Eben in 1914, lieutenant general Martin Chales de Beaulieu in 1913–1915, lieutenant general Karl Fouquet in 1915–1916, lieutenant general Arnold Lequis in 1916–1918, and major general Georg Pohlmann in 1918.²⁷

Before the outbreak of the First World War, the Upper Silesian division comprised three infantry brigades (the 33rd Infantry Brigade with staff in Gliwice, the 24th Infantry Brigade with staff in Nysa, and the 78th Infantry Brigade with staff in Nysa,) two cavalry brigades (the 12th Cavalry Brigade with staff in Nysa and the 44th Cavalry Brigade with staff in Gliwice,) as well as the 12th Field Artillery Brigade with staff in Nysa. An independent battalion of sappers also quartered in Nysa, where the division’s command resided. Below, I list a detailed structure of the division.

The 23rd Infantry Brigade of Gliwice included the 1st Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 22 (*1. Oberschlesisches Infanterie-Regiment “Keith” Nr. 22*). It was the oldest Upper Silesian infantry regiment that carefully cultivated its tradition dating back to the early nineteenth century. Its bataillions quartered in Gliwice (staff) and Katowice. The origins of this formation dated back to the Napoleonic Wars; it was established on July 1, 1813, by order of Frederick William III. The reserve regiments (*Reserveregimente*) then emerged from the small number of line units in order to extend the Prussian army before the final battle with Napoleon I. The 10th Reserve Regiment under the command of Major von Sack formed in Kłodzko from the staffs and subunits of such three battalions. In 1813, it took part in the Battles of Dresden and Leipzig and, after the spring campaign of 1814, on the French border; its soldiers entered Paris in 1815. The same year, it received the name of the 22nd Infantry Regiment by royal order (*22. Infanterie-Regiment*). During the war with Austria in 1866, the 22nd fought in the Battle of Königgrätz, and a year later its battalion moved to Racibórz, Upper

26 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 157 im Frieden und im Kriege 1897–1919*, Zeulenroda 1934, p. 3.

27 12. Division (Deutsches Kaiserreich). [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/12_Division_\(Deutsches_Kaiserreich\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/12_Division_(Deutsches_Kaiserreich)) (10.01.2013).

Silesia. Afterward, it operated during the war with France in 1870–1871, as well as in the Siege of Paris, and after moving to Baden, it remained in the garrison at Rastatt until 1888. In 1889, the cabinet order of Wilhelm II gave the regiment a new name: the 1st Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment “Keith” No. 22 (*1. Oberschlesisches Infanterie-Regiment “Keith” Nr. 22*). The name commemorated the field marshal of the Prussian army, James Keith, who died at the Battle of Hochkirch during the Seven Years’ War. In 1890, the regiment moved to Gliwice; or, to be precise, the staff and two battalions moved there, while the third battalion moved to Bytom, and in 1913 to Katowice.²⁸

The 23rd Infantry Brigade of Gliwice also included the 3rd Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 156 (*3. Schlesisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 156*). The establishment of the regiment resulted from one of the successive reforms that aimed at increasing the number of infantry in the German Army. In 1896, the German Parliament decided to create thirty-three new regiments as a result of the merger of the former half-battalions; they consisted of about 500 soldiers and officers each. The Silesian regiment was created on March 1897, after the increase of the number of units and battalions. Initially, the regiment quartered in Brzeg. Then, its staff and two battalions moved to Bytom, while the third battalion to Tarnowskie Góry.

The 24th Infantry Brigade of Nysa consisted of the 2nd Upper Silesian) Infantry Regiment No. 23 (*2. Oberschlesisches Infanterie-Regiment “von Winterfeldt” Nr. 23*). It was the second of the two oldest Upper Silesian infantry regiments, also created from a reserve regiment by the 1813 order. It operated in the Napoleonic Wars in the Battles of Dresden and Leipzig and, after the spring campaign of 1814, on the French border; its soldiers entered Paris in 1815. The same year it fought at the Battle of Ligny. In 1849, the Regiment suppressed the revolution in Wrocław during the Spring of Nations. In 1866, it took part in the Battle of Königgrätz and, in 1870, in the Siege of Paris. For its merits, the Regiment received the name “von Winterfeldt,” in honor of Hans Karl von Winterfeldt, a general of the Prussian Army during the Silesian Wars and the Seven Years’ War. Its garrison quartered in Nysa.

Moreover, the 24th Infantry Brigade of Nysa comprised the 3rd Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 62 (*3. Oberschlesisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 62*). It was established on May 5, 1860, after von Moltke’s military reforms that aimed at extending the Prussian line units. In 1866, during the war with Austria, the Regiment operated in a military operation to eliminate the threat of an offensive

28 Kranz, *Erich Haffenstein und andere*, pp. 17–19.

on Upper Silesia from Galicia. While protecting the border, it fought in the Battle of Oświęcim on June 27. This was its baptism by fire.²⁹ During the Prussian-French War, the Regiment operated during the Siege of Paris and then the occupation of France. Its staff and two battalions quartered in Koźle, while the third battalion in Racibórz.

The 78th Infantry Brigade comprised of the 4th Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 63 (*4. Oberschlesisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 63*). The regiment was established at the beginning of the 1860s, as a part of the enlargement of the Prussian Army after von Moltke's reforms. The cabinet order of July 1859 partly extended the military duty of the younger Landwehr's year groups and the Storm Battalions (*Landwehrsturmabteilungen*), established by its battalions in Nysa, Strzelce Opolskie, and Opole, which received the name of the 23rd Combined Infantry Regiment (23. Kombinierte Infanterie-Regiment). In July 1860, it became the 4th Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 63 and received a flag half a year later.³⁰ The regiment's staff initially quartered in Nysa. In 1866, its soldiers fought in the war with Austria. During the French campaign, they participated in the Battle of Sedan and the Siege of Paris. In 1900, after the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion in China, they departed for Asia as part of the German Expeditionary Forces.³¹ The staffs of the regiments and its two battalions quartered in Opole, while the third battalion in Lubliniec. During the First World War, the Regiment received the name of "Charles I" of Austria. After a successful campaign in Italy in October 1917, the German High Command sent a special letter about this matter to the Habsburg at the request and on behalf of Wilhelm II:

Inspired by the desire to start a new chapter of faithful brotherhood of arms between our armies in these great times, I ask Your Highness to assume – among other positions in my navy and army – the position of commander of the 4th Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 63. The Regiment demonstrated the old brotherhood of arms during the Battles of Isonzo against a treacherous former ally. It supported the offensive and exceeded during the assault of Monte Matajur [a peak in the Julian Alps]. Please allow this brave regiment from now on to fight under the name of Your Imperial and Royal Highness and their epaulettes to bear the initials of Your Highness. I would like to assure you, Your Majesty, that this regiment will continually prove that it deserves this honor.³²

29 Ciupek, *Aus der Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments*. pp. 7–8.

30 F. Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 63 (4. Oberschlesisches)*, Berlin 1940, p. 15.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 187.

The epaulettes of soldiers and officers of the regiment indeed bear the letter “K” in the crown.

Furthermore, the 78th Infantry Brigade consisted of the 4th Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 157 (*4. Schlesisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 157*). The regiment was a result of another reform that aimed at increasing the number of the infantry in the German Army and the decision of the German Parliament to create thirty-three new regiments. It comprised delegated soldiers and officers of the following Upper Silesian regiments: 22nd, 23rd, 62nd, and 63rd. In 1907, it received the name of the 4th Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 157. The volunteers from this regiment also participated in suppressing the Boxer Rebellion in China. Still, the regiment was officially formed as late as in April 1, 1897. Initially, its headquarters were in Nysa and then in Brzeg, where the staff and two battalions quartered, while the third battalion remained in Nysa. Until 1913, together with its original brigade, the regiment belonged to the 11th Infantry Division of Lower Silesia, and it entered the 78th Infantry Brigade after its establishment as the third brigade in the 12th Infantry Division.³³

The 12th Cavalry Brigade comprised the 1st Silesian Hussars Regiment “von Schill” No. 4 (*1. Schlesisches Husaren-Regiment “von Schill” Nr. 4*). It was one of the oldest Silesian cavalry regiments, established during the First Silesian War in 1741. It participated in the Napoleonic Wars of 1813–1815 – including the Battles of Dresden and Leipzig – and entered Paris in March 1815. It received its name after Ferdinand von Schill, a hero of Prussian resistance against France. The regiment suppressed the Greater Poland uprising of 1848. It participated in the Battle of Königgrätz during the Austrian-Prussian War of 1866, while during the Franco-Prussian War in the Battle of Königgratz and the Siege of Paris. It was stationed in Oława.

Moreover, the 12th Cavalry Brigade consisted of the 2nd Silesian Hussars Regiment “Graf Götzen” No. 6 (*2. Schlesisches Husaren-Regiment “Graf Götzen” Nr. 6*). Its tradition also dated back to the Napoleonic Wars, when it participated in the Russian campaign. It was created in 1808. The regiment fought in the Battle of Leipzig and in the spring campaign of 1814 at the French border. The regiment suppressed the Greater Poland uprising of 1848. It fought in the Battle of Königgrätz in 1866 and in the Battle of Sedan in 1870. For its merits, the regiment was named “Graf Götzen,” in honor of the Prussian general, Friedrich Wilhelm von Götzen the Elder, an adjutant general of Frederick II during the

33 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 1–8.

Seven Years' War. Four squadrons of the regiments and its staff quartered in Głubczyce, while one squadron in Racibórz.

The 44th Cavalry Brigade in Gliwice consisted of the 2nd Silesian Uhlán Regiment "Graf Götzen" No. 2 (*Schlesisches Ulanen-Regiment "von Katzler" Nr. 2*). It was the second oldest regiment in Upper Silesian division. It was already founded in 1745. It operated in the Napoleonic Wars, including the Battles of Dresden and Leipzig. Later, it took part in the Siege of Erfurt, the seizure of Luxembourg, and the Siege of Paris during the spring campaign of 1814. The regiment fought in the Battle of Ligny during the Hundred Days. Next, "von Katzler" fought in the Battle of Königgrätz in 1866 and in the Battle of Sedan against France in September 1870. The regiment received its name after Nikolaus Andreas von Katzler, a lieutenant general who died during the Seven Years' War. The regiment's staff and four squadrons quartered in Gliwice, while one squadron in Pszczyna.

Furthermore, the 44th Cavalry Brigade in Gliwice consisted of the Mounted Rifles Regiment No. 11 (*Jäger-Regiment zu Pferde Nr. 11*). The regiment originated from the squadrons of other cavalry units and was formally created in October 1913, on the eve of the First World War. Mounted rifles were a new formation in the German Army. In substance, they were responsible for reconnaissance, patrol service, and communication, but they also could serve as mobile infantrymen. The regiment's staff and its four squadrons quartered in Tarnowskie Góry, while the fifth squadron in Lubliniec.

The 12th Field Artillery Brigade in Nysa comprised the 1st Upper Silesian Field Artillery Regiment "von Clausewitz" no. 21 (*1. Oberschlesisches Feldartillerie-Regiment "von Clausewitz" Nr. 21*). It originated from the former artillery units. After the experience of the Franco-Prussian War – the Sieges of Strasbourg and Paris and battles alongside infantry – it became clear how important for the infantry's attack is the support of artillery. In 1872, field artillery (*Feldartillerie*) – until then supporting infantry regiments in the front line – was separated from the heavy artillery and the siege artillery (*Fußartillerie*). The Silesian Field Artillery No. 6 first turned into the 6th Field Artillery Brigade and, in 1872, again into the Silesian Field Artillery No. 6 that temporarily consisted of six heavy and two light artillery batteries, divided into two units (*Abteilungen*). Its staff and one unit quartered in Świdnica, while the second unit in Nysa.³⁴ Each battery included six canons but only four of them had horse-drawn carts, whereas two

34 H. Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment v. Clausewitz (1. Oberschles.) Nr. 21*, Breslau 1923, p. 1.

cannons remained in the reserve. At the time, those were heavy six-pounder cannons (9 cm caliber) and light four-pounder cannons (8 cm caliber). Those already were a breech-loading cannons, but only the smaller ones had locks. The reorganization of the regiments occurred in 1874, which is when it received the name of the Upper Silesian Field Artillery Regiment No. 21. Since then, it consisted of three units and eight artillery batteries. At the time, the regiment started to use new explosive material C 73 (tetryl) and new cannons with breech (8.8 cm caliber).³⁵ After William II's ascension to the throne and for his first birthday – a generally celebrated event in the German Empire – of January 27, 1889, the regiment was named “von Clausewitz” after the most prominent Prussian military theorist. In 1899, four artillery regiments (6th, 42nd, 21st, 7th), that until then belonged to the corps brigade, constituted new independent brigades assigned to both Silesian divisions. The 12th Artillery Brigade that included the soldiers of the 21st Regiment now belonged to the Upper Silesian Division. In 1901, the regiment received the name of the 1st Upper Silesian Field Artillery Regiment “von Clausewitz” No 21. In 1914, the regiment's structure comprised staff and the 1st Unit in Nysa (light artillery in three batteries), and the 2nd Unit in Grodków (howitzers in three batteries) with munitions companies supporting each of the units. In 1916, the third unit joined the regiment with three artillery batteries and one more munitions company.³⁶

Furthermore, the 12th Field Artillery Brigade in Nysa consisted of the 2nd Upper Silesian Field Artillery Regiment No. 57 (2. *Oberschlesisches Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr. 57*). It was created in March 1899. Its armament and structure resembled the armament and structure of the 21st Upper Silesian Field Artillery Regiment. Its staff and the 1st Unit quartered in Prudnik, while the 2nd Unit in Gliwice.

Since the mobilization after the outbreak of the First World War also applied to the reserve corps in the German Army, the VI Reserve Corps (*VI. Reserve-Korps*) was also created as a compact unit under command of the General of the Infantry Konrad Ernst von Goßler until 1917, and then, until the end of the war, under the General of the Infantry, Kurt von dem Borne.³⁷ It also included two reserve infantry divisions, analogical to their mother divisions: the 11th Infantry Reserve Division and the 12th Infantry Reserve Division. At the outbreak of the war, the commander of the 2nd Upper Silesian division became lieutenant general

35 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

37 VI. Reserve-Korps (Deutsches Kaiserreich), de.wikipedia.org (15.01.2013).

Walther Freiherr von Lüttwitz. It comprised the 22nd Infantry Reserve Brigade (22. *Reserve-Infanterie-Brigade*) under command of major general von Leyser. The brigade consisted of the 23rd Infantry Reserve Regiment of Opole under command of Lieutenant Colonel von Passov and the Infantry Reserve Regiment No. 38 (*Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 38*) with its battalions in Oleśnica and Wrocław. Its commander was Lieutenant Colonel von Rosenberg.

Moreover, the 2nd Upper Silesian division conveyed the 23rd Infantry Reserve Brigade under command of major general Freiherr von Wilimowski that consisted of the Infantry Reserve Regiment No. 22 (*Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 22*) with its battalions in Rybnik, Racibórz, and Koźle and the Infantry Reserve Regiment No. 22 (*Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 51*) in Nysa and Gliwice.

Furthermore, the Upper Silesian division comprised the Field Artillery Reserve Regiment No. 12 in Nysa and Prudnik (*Reserve-Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr. 12*), which during the war only consisted of two units³⁸; the Uhlan Reserve Regiment No. 4 in Brzeg and Grodków (*Reserve-Ulanen-Regiment Nr. 4*); and the Sapper Reserve Company of the Sappers Battalion No. 6 in Brzeg (*Reserve-Kompanie Pionier-Bataillon Nr. 6*).³⁹

The wartime mobilization also applied to *Landsturm* units responsible for homeland defense, which consisted of older year groups of soldiers no longer in active duty. First, because of the potential Russian threat in 1914, and from guard duty needs in the back lines. No one respected this formation, which is in stark contrast to the later *Volkssturm* of the Second World War. What best pictures the combat value of *Landsturm*'s 40- and 50-year-old members is the popular joke about their guard duty in Katowice, at the beginning of the First World War: "The sentry on duty calls a person that approaches him in the darkness: "Halt! Who's there? Keyword?" The stranger thinks for a second and answers in Silesian Polish, "Oh, darn it [*pieronie*], I forgot the password!" The guard answers, "If you say 'darn it' [*pieronie*], than you belong to us and may enter."⁴⁰

Poles in Prussian Regiments Before the First World War

The specific character of conscription in Prussia, and later in the German Empire, caused foot soldiers to live close to garrisons. For instance, the soldiers of the 12th Infantry Division and the 12th Infantry Reserve Division came from

38 K. v. Hasselbach, E. Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 38*, Zeulenroda 1934, pp. 3–4.

39 VI. Reserve-Korps (Deutsches Kaiserreich), de.wikipedia.org (15.01.2013).

40 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 80, 7.10.1914.

Upper Silesia, mainly from the Upper Silesian Industrial Region, as we find in regimental memoirs. Even the members of the rather elite regiment of this division, the 21st Field Artillery Regiment, mostly recruited from “the workers of the Upper Silesian mines and steel mills.”⁴¹ It meant that they belonged to a group of large-scale industrial workers, and the members of the Prussian Army treated them with reluctance because of the great influence of social democracy in this milieu; unjustified fears in the Upper Silesian case as the influence of the Social Democratic Party of Germany and the Polish Socialist Party of the Prussian Partition was imperceptible. Therefore, after the formation of the 63rd Infantry Regiment, the administration located its barracks in the capital of the Regierungsbezirk Opole and in Lubliniec, so that it could intervene at any time. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Prussian civil administration asked the army to increase the number of the military units on the German-Russian border, as the former feared social upheavals in the region.⁴²

Cavalry conscription was not so strictly associated with the territorial division of the military districts. However, after von Moltke’s military reform, even in this case, the recruits almost exclusively came from the Wrocław area of the VI Army Corps, let alone the group of professional officers. Whereas, especially among line regiments in 1914, for the sake of the mobilization plan, conscription was only limited to the districts in direct neighborhood with garrisons, depending on the deployment of battalions, squadrons, and batteries.⁴³ It allows us to treat soldiers of the Upper Silesian regiments as the representatives of the local communities, just like in the case of Greater Poland, Pomeranian, and East Prussian regiments. The term “Polish regiments” appeared in the Prussian Partition already in the Franco-Prussian War, which referred to regiments mostly formed of Poles as there were no uniform Polish regiments at that time. However, when it comes to ethnic origin, the Poles comprised the majority of these regiments, particularly in Poznań. They were called Katschmarek Regiments (*Katschmarken regimenten*).⁴⁴ This name remained in use and popularity in Poznań even during the First World War.⁴⁵ For example, the famous Polish writer Arkady Fiedler mentions the name when thinking of 1915, when suddenly grew the numbers of deserters, those who refrained from military duty, and the hospitalized of real

41 *Das 2. Oberschlesische Feldart. Regiment Nr. 57*, ed. F. Uebe, Berlin 1923, p. 5.

42 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 15.

43 *Geschichte des Schlesischen Pionierbataillons Nr. 6*, ed. A. Tiersch, Leipzig 1906, p. 56.

44 M. Rezler, *Uwagi na temat historiografii Wojska Polskiego lat 1914–1922*, in: *Wojsko Polskie 1914–1922*, Vol. 2, ed. B. Nowak, Koszalin 1986, p. 204.

45 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgii*, p. 34.

or imaginary diseases – they were all called the Katschmareks.⁴⁶ The name was also used during the Second World War, it even appeared in the official German documents as the name for soldiers ethnically Polish but called to arms due to their registration in the third category of the Deutsche Volksliste.⁴⁷

Of course, the available sources allow no precise differentiation of the soldiers of Prussian regiments in terms of their ethnicity, it always was a true mix of regions, nationalities, and denominations. However, we may prove that the soldiers in these regiments were mostly Poles or spoke Polish at least in a few cases before the First World War, not necessarily by only referring to the very principle of conscription.

The nineteenth-century German officers from garrisons in Regierungsbezirk Opole had no doubt that their subordinates talked to each other almost exclusively in Polish. The officers described it explicitly and simply called these soldiers Poles, or so-called Poles, to differentiate them from the Poles who lived in the partitioned lands and emphasizing their lack of German-speaking abilities.⁴⁸ Poor knowledge of German or Polish origin rather did not contribute to the negative opinions about the recruits. The mixed origin of recruits was considered a typical situation in the German Empire, even if it hindered military training.

Until the 1880s and the introduction of education reforms – linked to the bills in the period of Kulturkampf – most taken for granted that the officers needed to teach their soldiers German. However, this need resulted from military necessity, not administrative pressures. Later the need gradually waned because the following generations, since the turn of the twentieth century, spoke German without difficulty after the graduation from folk schools; however, the level of this knowledge still varied greatly.

All the regiment monographs confirm the existence of special nineteenth-century schools for teaching German, which existed at various organizational levels of the Prussian Army. In the 23rd Infantry Regiment of Nysa, the recruits' complete ignorance of German justified the need for maintaining such institutions for regular soldiers, although this lack did not affect the assessment of their military skills: "The regiment mostly consisted of Polish recruits (*polnisches Einsatz*) whose training was difficult because the majority spoke no German. However, the recruits were generally skillful and highly resistant to fatigue."⁴⁹

46 A. Fiedler, *Mój ojciec i dęby*, Poznań 2006, p. 149.

47 R. Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, Kraków 2010, p. 186.

48 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 21.

49 *Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments von Winterfeldt (2. Oberschlesisches) Nr. 23*, eds. Tronchin, Naumann, Berlin 1913, p. 184.

The custom of sermons in Polish by Upper Silesian military chaplains continued until the 1890s, which confirms that the lack of German and sole use of Polish by the recruits were not an issue for the authorities that treated this as a portrayal of the actual situation on the eastern borderlands of Prussia. The authorities realistically assessed that the soldiers from Polish-speaking villages would not understand complicated messages in a foreign language: "The sermon at the mass was in Polish until the 1880s and the beginning of the 1890s, that is, until "the Polish" recruits in Nysa sufficiently mastered the German language. The progress of school education made Polish masses no longer necessary."⁵⁰

We may investigate the moods of the Poles on the basis of their attitudes toward Polish national uprisings in the nineteenth century. There is a huge difference between the involvement of Poles in the struggle for national liberation in Wielkopolska and the frequent indifference to these events among the inhabitants of Upper Silesia or Masuria.

After the outbreak of the November Uprising in 1830, the Prussian administration mobilized more than a thousand soldiers from the Wrocław corps. The person in command was assumed command Field Marshal Count August Neidhardt von Gneisenau, co-author of the Prussian military reform. The army never announced formal mobilization in the Province of Silesia but gradually increased the number of Upper Silesian troops, which eventually reached its wartime levels; the troops quickly deployed along the Russian border under the pretext of forming a *cordon sanitaire* against cholera epidemic. The whole action ended terribly, particularly for its commanders. It was not only von Gneisenau who died of cholera but also his well-known chief of staff, Karl von Clausewitz. However, the concentration of Prussian troops finished only in July 1831.⁵¹ Both 22nd and 23rd Infantry Regiments (1st and 2nd Upper Silesian) controlled the border. There was no case of desertion or refusal of service.⁵² I should mention that no military action occurred at the time, so it is not surprising that there were no cases of insubordination in the units governed with Prussian drill.

The situation was different in 1846–1848, when the Prussian army concentrated the Upper Silesian regiments in winter 1846 during the Kraków Uprising to use them in significant pacification of the Polish insurgents. The administration created at the time a mixed unit to be quartered near Mikołów and commanded by Major General von Felden. The unit was to cooperate with Austrian and

50 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 21.

51 Kranz, *Erich Haffenstein und andere*, pp. 150–151.

52 *Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments.*, pp. 189–190.

Russian troops in the suppression of the Kraków Uprising. It included the 2nd Silesian Uhlan Regiment of Gliwice and Pszczyna, the 22nd Infantry Regiment of Gliwice, and the 23rd Infantry Regiment of Nysa. The unit marched out on the night of February 24 and 25, first by train and then on foot, only to cross the border and enter Kraków on March 5, already after the insurgents' capitulation. The Upper Silesian Battalion remained there for a week under formal Austrian command and then, after a short stay near Chrzanów and Trzebinia, it gradually returned to its quarters in July 1846. Meanwhile, the administration demobilized the reserves of the remaining battalions.⁵³

Like in the previous case, no Prussian unit showed signs of lacking discipline, desertion, or reluctance to operate in indigenous Poland area. Even the internment of some insurgents who crossed the Prussian border went smoothly. At the time, the soldiers of the 23rd Infantry Regiment disarmed nearly one hundred insurgents of Kraków Uprising and led them to Koźle to guard the Polish captives.⁵⁴ The German officers only complaint in their memoirs about housing conditions and the nuisance of combat guard duty.⁵⁵ In 1846, squads and platoons operated on patrols on their own, so there were many opportunities for direct contact with the Polish population, especially since the soldiers usually resided in private homes in Kraków and, later, in Chrzanow district.

The housing conditions were not appropriate, [it was] mostly in the very poor huts of Polish peasants that did not always protect from wind and bad weather. Sometimes, there was not even straw in the quarters, and you had to use your own coat as a blanket. Food supply required requisition – insufficient due to the poverty of the local population – or collection from military warehouses at the expense of the Free City of Kraków.⁵⁶

However, the participation of the Upper Silesian regiments in the Greater Poland Uprising of 1848 was no longer limited to guard duty and marches through the Polish lands. The 22nd Infantry Regiment of Gliwice was to suppress the Uprising. When the first skirmishes occurred not far from Krotoszyn, Poles fought on both sides of the conflict.⁵⁷ The Upper Silesian troops later participated in the seizure of Raszków that, after a hard-fought battle with no great losses of the Upper Silesian regiments (two fallen and five wounded soldiers), effected in the routing of the Polish troops (we do not know the number of fallen soldiers

53 Kranz, *Erich Haffenstein und andere*, pp. 157–158.

54 *Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments.*, p. 197.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

57 Kranz, *Erich Haffenstein und andere*, pp. 159–163.

taken by the retreating Poles) and captivity of fifty-six prisoners; as the preserved report explains, they came “from the most prominent families of the Province of Poznań.”⁵⁸ The 22nd Infantry Regiment of Gliwice also participated in the operation of the Prussian troops from April 30 to May 1, 1848, that ended in the biggest battle of the Uprising: the Battle of Miłosław. The Prussians defended the key road from Nowe Miasto to Miłosław, as they used it to transfer a column of troops against Ludwik Mierosławski. Later, the Upper Silesians cut off the insurgents by the Warta River, from the Russian border. The regiment remained there until May 12, when it received information about the Jarosławiec compromise and disbandment of the insurgent troops. However, the 22nd Infantry Regiment remained in Greater Poland until October, when it received orders to suppress the Lower Silesia riots.⁵⁹ The Greater Poland operations of the Regiment show no mentions of problems due to the Polish origin of soldiers. It was of no importance for the Prussian officers, who trusted their soldiers and took no special precautions to prevent desertion or refusal to participate in combat.

The events of 1863 definitely are the most interesting in the history of Polish Upper Silesian soldiers in the Prussian Army. The January Uprising (1863–1864) caused the entire troops, whose number significantly increased in the meantime, to move to the “Russian-Polish” border. It was a way to prevent “the spread of disturbances on the Prussian side of the border; even though it turned out unnecessary as the disturbances weakened already in the second year of the fight.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, this was the first occurrence of close low-level cooperation between the Prussian and Russian troops. Joint border operations lasted for more than a year and reverberated in all the war diaries of the Upper Silesian regiments, both the oldest ones (the 22nd and the 23rd)⁶¹ and the newly formed (the 62nd⁶² and the 63rd).⁶³

Upon news of the outbreak of an anti-Russian uprising in the Kingdom of Poland, the cabinet order of February 9, 1863, put the Wrocław corps in combat readiness while about a thousand soldiers of the closest 22nd Infantry Regiment blocked the Prussian-Russian border. By August 1863, the forces of the 11th and 12th Infantry Divisions gradually joined the 22nd and formed two lines. The Prussian-Russian cooperation was no longer limited to the protection of the

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 15.

61 Ibid., pp. 208–209.

62 Ciupek, *Aus der Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments*, pp. 7–8.

63 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 15.

border, as thirty-three years earlier, but it was more direct this time. The officers of both sides regularly contacted each other and exchanged information. On this occasion, they also maintained friendly relations at the level of regiments' commands, in compliance with the contemporary tradition of a common ethos of professional officers. This rapprochement reached its peak in the 22nd Infantry Regiment after the acceptance of an invitation to a celebration dedicated to the patron of one of the Russian regiments that occurred on the other side of the border, in Częstochowa. What may sound particularly sinister is the description of signing death sentences for Polish insurgents in the background of the party:

All off-duty officers eagerly responded to a friendly invitation from the Russians. Soon, the quartermasters ordered crude wagons for transportation. At the agreed time, they arrived at the designated place for a meeting at the Prussian-Russian border, not far from the customs service near Lubliniec. They were happy to see that many Russian officers already awaited them next to the black-orange-white boundary poles, they offered a warm welcome and comfortable vehicles. The vehicles were low and not too big, drawn by three horses in a Russian way. Colonel Alexander von Stückradt from East Prussia headed this whole long parade while the Cossack regiment watched over its safety. After a two-hour journey through magnificent forests, we arrived at a town located about three miles away. Surrounded by his officers, Colonel von Ehrenroth from Częstochowa cordially greeted us in German as the German brothers in arms. He also belonged to an old-established noble family who resided in the Baltic Sea Provinces since the 1830s. The hosts served us warm food and drinks so that we could warm ourselves after the long journey and, then, we set off to sightsee Częstochowa, with its very interesting splendid monastery. A military orchestra headed this parade to celebrate the regiment's festive day and our visit. We looked with great acclaim at the sprightly and elegant look of the soldiers and the orchestra with its excellent performance. Only some Russian officers attended the closing dinner. The absent were those who received new ranks for their duty as non-commissioned officers. We became light-headed in the obvious consequence of drinking champagne from glasses. The mood was very lively during conversations in French which did not really resemble any "Parisian" exchanges. After many toasts that particularly emphasized our cordial relations, there was only one moment that cast a gloomy shadow of war on our joy. However, it made an unforgettable impression on the officers of our regiment. I mean the moment when the Russian commandant signed death sentences on the insurgents while holding a glass of champagne in his left hand.⁶⁴

This picture of a drunk Russian officer who signs the death sentences of Polish insurgents of the January Uprising is horrifying for every Polish reader. Yet, it is only a small part of the events of 1863, viewed from the perspective of the

64 Kranz, *Erich Haffenstein und andere*, pp. 175–177.

soldiers of the Prussian regiment. We may rightly attribute this account to the supranational sense of community of professional officers of noble birth, in this case even strengthened by the fact that some of them shared the same origin from the East Prussian German nobility. However, these were Polish Upper Silesians who held guard duty at the border, for whom those events had to be more than dramatic and certainly exceeded a short reflection about the “shadow of war” cast over the otherwise good party. The prospects of possible desertions in the Prussian regiments was not as distant and hard to imagine as in the previous years. Suffice to consider the case of musketeer Grzibiel, described in the annals of the 63rd Infantry Regiment’s history:

Musketeer Grzibiel from the 7th company, born in Wójtowa Wieś in the Gliwice district, served since February 1863 and performed guard duty near the mill (*Kunermühle*) by the Brynica River on the night of October 12 and 13. Suddenly, a non-commissioned officer from his company appeared; he was fully armed and tried to cross the bridge with Grzibiel on the watch. The non-commissioned officer halted only when he heard a call: “Stop! Who is there?” Then, the officer introduced himself. The Musketeer Grzibiel, who only spoke Polish, asked further questions to check whether the non-commissioned officer acted under an official order. The officer said that he was going to patrol. However, Musketeer Grzibiel did not believe him. He arrested the officer who already started to load his rifle. Later, it turned out that the officer wanted to desert to Russia due to the bad performance of his function. For his foresight and unhesitant actions, Musketeer Grzibiel was promoted to the rank of Private First Class [*Gefreiter*].⁶⁵

This peculiar story of an exclusively Polish-speaking Upper Silesian – promoted, Grzibiel stayed in the regiment for good until his death during the war with Austria in 1866 – who arrests another Upper Silesian for desertion shows the complexity of national attitudes in this region, where not only language determined the local inhabitants. However, it also proves the processes of socialization and denationalization that occurred during military duty in the Prussian regiments. During the January Uprising and despite incidental cases of such insubordination, the Upper Silesian regiments remained at the border until the very end. It was only in January 1864, when the situation in the Kingdom of Poland was under control insofar that it allowed for the reduction of security measures, and the 22nd Infantry Regiment could return to the garrison and partly demobilize. Only the 2nd Battalion of this regiment temporarily remained in the Lubliniec sector as an outpost until the end of April 1864. Zeissing, the regiment’s doctor in the garrison hospital in Katowice, took care of the five Russian soldiers

65 *Kurze Darstellung der Geschichte des 3. Oberschlesischen Infanterie-Regiments Nr. 62*, ed. Oberleutnant Petri, Berlin, pp. 28–29.

heavily injured during the fights with the Polish insurgents and nursed them back to health wherefore he received the Order of Saint Stanislaus of the third class in September 1864.⁶⁶

It seems that loyalism (to the state) spread both in the Upper Silesian regiments and the Katschmarek Regiments of Pomerania and Greater Poland. We may explain the loyalism by the tendency to adapt prevalent throughout Central and Eastern Europe even among the nations and ethnic groups that claimed special rights to use own language as official or even administrative autonomy. Nevertheless, mass-scale cases of irredentism were rare before 1914. The minorities behaved loyally even in the army of the multinational Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which is often perceived as the model of the decomposition of an eminent power due to accumulating problems of national disloyalty especially among the Slavic. Rok Stergar analyzes the attitude of Slavic countries toward Austro-Hungarian universal conscription and interprets this phenomenon not as the result of blind legitimism but pragmatic conformity.⁶⁷ This term recently grows in popularity in the context of civic attitudes the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe, especially in the borderlands, which best reflects the matter of the complex Upper Silesian behaviors. There is no room for “Prussian nationalism” that stemmed from loyalism to the House of Hohenzollern; it was an adjustment to the existing conditions. The limit for such opportunism was the inviolability of the most important values of traditionalist communities: religion and language. Despite *Kulturkampf*, the army sought no conflict in this field so the idea of attachment to “one’s own” regiment survived in Upper Silesia. Men hanged portraits from the period of military duty with pride, combatant unions were popular, and many celebrated anniversaries of nineteenth-century battles; particularly the 1870 Battle of Sedan.

However, such attitude was often put to a hard test in contact with officers almost exclusively from proper Prussia or Germany. The officers often referred to the popular motif of their civilizational superiority over the Polish-speaking population. Some of the idealistic Prussian commanders directly spoke about the necessity of spreading culture in the East. The famous concept of “the bearer of culture” (*Kulturträger*) appeared infrequently, but we easily find descriptions of German superiority over others at the time. This is how we should interpret the

66 Kranz, *Erich Haffenstein und andere*, pp. 175–177.

67 R. Stergar, *Die Bevölkerung der slowenischen Länder und die Allgemeine Wehrpflicht*, in: *Glanz-Gewalt-Gehorsam. Militär und Gesellschaft in der Habsburgermonarchie (1800 bis 1918)*, eds. L. Col, Ch. Hämmerle, M. Scheutz, Essen 2011, p. 144.

behavior of Colonel von Goszicki, who welcomed the Polish recruits as people “physically and spiritually handicapped.”⁶⁸ However, this expression of utter contempt for another nation did not only result from the evaluation of the national traits of Poles. It primarily stemmed from the mission “to enlighten the recruit” that functioned in the armies formed by universal conscription. Such view lives to this day in many European armies – also Polish – as a humorous transformation of “the civilian into a human.” We frequently find all manner of simplified beliefs about the slow-witted conscript from a village in such nineteenth-century stories: the lack of hygiene, long hair, and unrestrained tendency to drink vodka are to be his typical attributes. The second part of the same description emphasizes the positive features of the Polish recruit after training, which proves that this contempt did not refer to all Poles on face value.⁶⁹

A Prussian officer in the regiment primarily emphasized the training of his soldiers. He was inspired by the apotheosized Clausewitz, so the officer perceived his duty is to build a modern well-trained army, capable of participating in total war. In the opinion of Prussian officers, the Poles met those criteria not after the process of denationalization, but after the imposition of other civilizing norms. This was the real goal of the activities of German commanders: military training based on mutual understanding, impossible without learning the German language; self-reliance on the battlefield; trust for the superiors; and general education, increasing often required by modern military tactics, particularly among the non-commissioned officers.

These actions constituted no harassment but simply formed the necessary element of social modernization, effectively implemented through universal conscription. Inspired by idealistic German philosophy, some Prussian officers regarded the modernizing task not only as duty but also a mission that was to enable the promotion of at least the gifted part of their subordinates who quickly achieved the ranks of non-commissioned officers.⁷⁰ The army was a good place for these people to complete the necessary general education. Therefore, the regiments had elementary schools with additional military subjects. The recruits received lessons on many levels. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the 23rd Infantry Regiment possessed as many as ten such institutions, which constituted a coherent educational system:

68 Kranz, *Erich Haffenstein und andere*, pp. 144–145.

69 *Ibid.*

70 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 21.

Ten different schools in the regiment started education on November 1 and worked in the same way. ... The Nysa school taught soldiers in two classes counting, reading, writing, spelling, stylistics, geography, and history. The best students also received introduction to geometry. Whereas the first battalion gathered the best non-commissioned officers from all units to be promoted to the rank of sergeant [*Feldwebel*], who learned mathematics, geography, German language, and writing letters. Moreover, the majority of young soldiers already learned reading, writing, and counting in their companies, under the supervision of officers and sergeants.⁷¹

The circumstances forced the Prussian authorities to implement such procedures. If the majority of recruits in these regiments came from Polish-speaking areas, it was only natural that to train these non-commissioned officers because they were more likely to reach their subordinates. In turn, it meant social advancement for many of the recruits. This group included regimental or even divisional writers who later often continued work as officials at lower posts.⁷²

No wonder that the fascination with German military power on the eve of the outbreak of the First World War grew in popularity as a result of paramilitary associations' activities and press propaganda among the youth. The breakthrough was visible in the grand celebration of the centenary of success over the Napoleonic army, treated as the German national liberation war. According to the memoirs of Arka Bożek, then happened a change of attitude toward the Polish recruits even in the army. The barracks became open so that families could finally visit the training grounds of their sons, which was previously unavailable. In the first period of the First World War, it aroused the enthusiasm and hopes for a quick victory among the young people from the eastern Prussian districts and other German lands.⁷³

The activities that were part of the training of the Polish recruits also resulted from the modernization efforts; that is, the desire to create a modern society capable of waging a future total war with modern technology and military tactics by all the reservists. Although such behavior resulted in general alienation and the abandonment of army's social functions (*Kriegergesellschaft*) – today often called “the Prussian soldatesque” – it also contributed to major civilizational

71 *Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments.*, p. 187.

72 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 21.

73 Teresa Kulak writes about this change of attitudes in 1913 on the basis of the printed version of Arka Bożek's memoirs (*Pamiętniki*, Katowice 1967) in her *Postawy społeczeństwa polskiego na Górnym Śląsku w okresie I wojny światowej '1914–1918'*, in: *Spółczeństwo polskie*, ed. M. Wojciechowski, Toruń 1996, pp. 10–11.

changes, not necessarily motivated by ideological Pan-Germanism. What was a derivative of these activities was the mutual trust between subordinates and officers typical for a civic army. While analyzing this phenomenon, we must conclude to our astonishment that, before 1914, neither side noticed any contradiction between the German nationalism of a Prussian officer and the Polish language of the Upper Silesian recruit.

The Recruit's Training

Regular training of Polish recruits in the Prussian army was not easy, especially during the period of accelerated preparation of soldiers for the war of 1914–1918. Back then, there was no time left for anything, hence only basic military training was conducted. Thanks to the written memoirs of conscripts, we have an excellent insight into the process of such training. We find out how it looked from the letters of Kazimierz Wallis, trained in 1915–1916 in Ścinawa. Wallis arrived there from his hometown of Rozbark in Bytom, after all the medical examinations conducted during the annual review of conscripts (*Musterung*). A journey to the regiment usually began on a regular train, although during the war, the soldiers usually traveled in wagons specifically adapted to transport the army, which included additional benches.⁷⁴ The first days at the unit were always difficult. It was necessary to adapt to the new place. For many recruits, the primitive conditions were shocking:

We arrived at Steinau [Ścinawa] yesterday at eight in the morning. Music accompanied us on our way to the barracks (the Old Factory). The town is very small with 5000 inhabitants. We slept on straw mattresses on the ground. It is a bit cold here, but they stoked the furnace in the morning. ... We got up at five in the morning and, after dressing up, went with the bowls for coffee (the day before, each of us received a straw mattress, three blankets, and a bowl). Bitter black coffee, we ate our bread with sausage.⁷⁵

They could move from the floor to beds only after three months: "Tomorrow we will sleep in beds (until now, we slept on straw mattresses under four blankets. What a pleasure.)"⁷⁶ On their first day, the recruits also received uniforms and all the necessary equipment. Since the end of the nineteenth century, German conscripts were very well equipped. They could not complain about weapons

74 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 25.11.1915, Zbiory Specjalne Biblioteki Śląskiej w Katowicach.

75 Ibid.

76 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 12.02.1916.

or the uniform after the general change of its color from blue to *feldgrau*. The conscripts only complained about the unwieldy sapper equipment.⁷⁷

Proper duty started on the second day at the unit. The conscripts initially learned about the daily routine, then concentrated on the daily activities of personal and subunit hygiene and the proper behavior toward superiors (drill). Depending on their personal characteristics, the non-commissioned officers could either truly facilitate the process of adaptation of the young recruits or quickly turn their everyday life into hell on earth. Wallis' immediate supervisor turned out to be his countryman: "the non-commissioned officer is a very good man . . . from Katowice."⁷⁸ The officer evidently differed in his behavior, both from other non-commissioned officers and, above all, from the officers, because the Polish recruit maintained this positive judgment of his German supervisor throughout the entire period of duty in the army, and Wallis always spoke about the officer with many compliments:

Then, I ended up with my friends in one room, and at last I got a good non-commissioned officer, a man called Reiche from Katowice. He is a short man with a short-trimmed moustache. Intelligent, good-natured, not cocksure and full of pride like others here but quiet and good-hearted to all.⁷⁹

There was a huge gap between the world of officers and an ordinary soldier. This very strong caste-like system was not only the result of a carefully cultivated ethos of the professional officer but also a number of privileges. These were executed in the daily service and on the frontline, which resulted in the effective separation of the officer from their subordinates. They traveled by train at least in the second class, while soldiers traveled in the fourth class or even in the livestock cars. The officers had separate quarters at the stops and frequently demanded the quarters for their exclusive use. The batmen assigned to the officers conducted simple work for them, such as cleaning shoes and uniforms, errands, and cleaning of the company apartments. The officers received better meals from the field kitchen and much more cigarettes and alcohol. The same differences applied to pensions in the event of injury or death.⁸⁰

Of course, the biggest disproportions applied to wages. Before the outbreak of the First World War, a younger officer (lieutenant) received up to 300 marks of

77 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 26.

78 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 25.11.1915.

79 Ibid.

80 B. Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg, Wahrheit und Lüge in Bildern und Texten*, München–Zürich 2009, p. 214.

salary per month, along with a food supplement. A regular soldier received only fifteen marks. It is true that in peacetime an officer allocated part of his pay to the savings account, the library account, fencing, and horse-riding, but the pay gap between his income and the incomes of non-commissioned officers and soldiers remained huge.⁸¹

The conscript's days in the first period of his stay in the unit were practically the same:

We have to sweep and keep order all day long: in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. Everyone lies under the bedcovers, five minutes before nine in the evening. The only exception was the soldier on duty [*Stubendiensthabender*]. He waits for when the non-commissioned officer in a helmet comes at nine to receive report about the unit [*Korporalschaft*], its count, whether everything is on place, etc. Later, the soldier on duty turns off the light and goes to bed. We get up at five in the morning and I got used to it. Now it's six o'clock. I've already put my clothes on, said my prayer, washed myself after breakfast and I've cleaned my shoes and canteen.⁸²

During the first days, the conscripts spent a lot of time on gymnastics that aimed at preparing the infantrymen for the big physical effort in the field duty and during marches. Wallis even praised it despite winter, "because after a whole day, gymnastics in the snow can only be good for your health."⁸³ It was very difficult to prepare for a strenuous march with a full load that weighed over thirty kilograms. The load was gradually increased. Before entering the regiments, conscripts received instruction to only take military shoes made from stiff material, always a little too big to avoid abrasions that later caused deep wounds. The weather did not matter. During one of such exercises, Wallis, who joined the training unit in the winter, waded through "the knee-high snow in the meadows by the Oder River."⁸⁴ After a month, they marched distances that were considered elementary for a trained infantryman, that is, for about thirty kilometers. They covered such distance at a speed of about four to five kilometers per hour.⁸⁵ It was an extreme physical effort supplemented with tactical exercises:

As usual, we headed for the march exercise at 7.15 am. *Feldmarschmäßig* [in full marching order] with military bags and boots, with drill clothes and cleaning brushes. Everyone received ten blind cartridges. We marched with the 1st Company, there were

81 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 26.

82 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 26.11.1915.

83 Ibid.

84 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 12.02.1916.

85 On January 27, 1916, Wallis covered a distance of thirty-six kilometers in eight hours (The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 27.01.1916).

two trumpeters, three drums, and three flutes at the front. We walked through various villages. After almost four hours of marching, we came to the manor Buhl. Here we did *Gefecht in offeneren Gelände* [battle engagement in open terrain]. The 1st Company marked the enemy. We reached the distance of one hundred meters and started shooting. It was difficult to see the enemy through the fog. After shooting, we carried out an assault on enemy positions. Then we stopped in the forest for half an hour. Then we marched once again. At three o'clock, we headed via Danitsch to Steinau. We were very tired after the long march, so there was lunch.⁸⁶

The first month of training also conveyed shooting exercises were. The issuing of weapons was always a major event. Already since the beginning of the twentieth century, Gewehr 98 was the basic weapon of a German infantry regiment. The Upper Silesian regiments received it in 1902–1903.⁸⁷ It took several days to get to know this rather complicated gun. The conscripts learned by heart the names of all its elements, practiced folding and unfolding it, cleaning, and troubleshooting.

Wallis got his own rifle already after five days at the unit. Under the supervision of an officer, the head of the company, and all non-commissioned officers, the whole company learned to hold, load, and unload their Gewehr 98.⁸⁸ Afterward, they learned how to shoot and, interestingly, still in 1915 in a file, often in standing position, despite the experiences of trench warfare in the West.⁸⁹ They did these exercises even when the troop was on the frontline:

I have just returned with a few of my shooting companions from Schiesstadt [the shooting range], which was temporarily set up here. A thick wall, a heap of ground in front of it to catch bullets at a distance of thirty meters, and a machine gun with auxiliary gun carriage that made the shooting hard because you have to use your bare hands to hold all the pressure and control it, but it is easier to carry than the heavy machine guns. And we had to shoot at a twelve-centimeter-high target with figures four centimeters high and wide. You had to aim precisely to shoot something. We shoot away 1000 bullets. . . . After that, we clean the rifles, which means completely disassembling them. Then, we are free.⁹⁰

The conscripts also spent much time on bayonet fighting exercises. This skill was very important in the two previous centuries, but decreasingly useful on the frontlines of the First World War. However, the training system still considered

86 Diary of Kazimierz Wallis, 28.01.1916.

87 Ciupek, *Aus der Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments*, pp. 7–8.

88 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 30.11.1915.

89 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 7.03.1916.

90 The letters of K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, Saarbürg 22.02.1917.

it decisive in infantry's frontal attack. The trainers wanted to accustom soldiers to attack at full strength, without any rules. As a result, there quite often occurred injuries, even serious ones:

Once the downpour stopped, there continued bayonet combat training with masks and without masks; everyone received a wire mask to protect their face from thrusts. In addition, everyone received a thick armor filled with hemp to protect the breasts and abdomen from stabbing. A thick glove for the left hand. Then, the stabbing begins. One thrusts while the other avoids it, then the other way around, and so on. It is up to dexterity to push a thrust away and quickly thrust the opponent before he lifts the rifle in defense. There are no rules during the fight, but everyone aims at making the opponent incapable of fighting. If one has no more strength to thrust or defend, he catches the rifle in both hands, the barrel in the left and the breech in the right and strongly throws it in the opponent's face, so that the opponent falls or quickly jumps towards the opponent, throws the rifle aside, and they start to fist fight and wrestle.⁹¹

After a short time, the military training also included tactical exercises. Until 1914, despite some need to hide the shooter, trenching was still usually absent from training. The emphasis was on attack as the only type of maneuver. Both officers and soldiers were reluctant even to think about any tiresome "digging," while the creation of complex positions on the trench line, during tactical exercises, was completely absent from the tactical training instructions.⁹² However, when Wallis was in Ścinawa, the situation started to change. As he wrote after two months: "At the moment, we are only marching, practicing bayonet combat, digging trenches, and throwing hand grenades."⁹³

Over time, all the acquired skills were combined – including long marches, shooting at the target, and combat training – into a full-day training with all the elements. It was very tiresome, which made the soldiers complain:

Yesterday, we had marching exercises. We left Steinau at 7.15 in the morning. . . . Then, we did the *Gefecht im Felde* [field fight] exercise. We shot with the blank bullets. Then, we attacked. After the exercises, we retreated. At three in the afternoon, we were back in Steinau. One could only imagine, how tired we were after seven hours of marching. We ate dinner, there was sea fish and mashed potatoes. And it tasted very good after the march. For supper, coffee and sausage. At nine, we go to bed.⁹⁴

They also often imitated the real battlefield by shooting right over soldiers' heads to make the conditions resemble real war:

91 Diary of Kazimierz Wallis, 5.01.1916.

92 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 31.

93 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 21.01.1916.

94 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 29.01.1916.

Yesterday afternoon, we marched. We left at two in the afternoon. Then, we rested from four to quarter to five. The sun shined nicely. Lieutenant Walter came after us. We kept on marching. Here in the forest, we had exercises in setting up outposts. We split into two units. One unit quartered in the forest at a distance of 600 meters from us. We performed *Feldwach* [field guard], *unteroficierposten* [non-commissioned officer post] and, hidden in the forest, we headed forward. It was getting darker, we could not see the enemy when suddenly dark enemy figures started to crawl out of ditches from all sides. We violently fired blank cartridges and after a while the enemy retreated. We called back the patrols that were sent out, and we marched with singing to Steinau. We reached home at eight in the evening. We had seasoned herring and coffee for supper.⁹⁵

Such exercises often happened at the nearby training ground in Nowa Kuźnia near Żagań. Even before 1914, it was one of the traditional training grounds for the Upper Silesian regiments, next to the nearby Łambinowice.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, the training was conducted both at the unit and on the military grounds in conditions that were not bad enough to complain. Interestingly, the conscripts themselves and Kazimierz Wallis himself admitted in the wartime that such tiresome exercises are necessary to have a chance of survival on the frontline:

I've been doing well so far, of course that the service is unpleasant, but still bearable. We thought that now, after Neuhammer [Nowa Kuźnia], we would rest more, but it is not the case. Now, we will have General's inspection in three weeks. So they goad us to work more than before. Sometimes, I get tired of everything, when I feel like it is too much, but the thought that it will all pass and will not always be like that returns balance to my mind.⁹⁷

Since Wallis was an eternal optimist, as he wrote many times in his letters from war, he even found the positive sides of his stay in the Prussian regiment and accepted the Prussian drill:

Military duty is difficult but only occasionally, for example some exercises and drills with guns. But free exercises, shooting, etc. are interesting and easy. Even though the duty is sometimes difficult, everything comes with joy, singing, and cheerfulness, and it will come easily. One has to always try to do his best and the stay at the army will be alright.⁹⁸

They were getting accustomed to have the day filled with any possible activities so that there was no time left for leisure:

95 Ibid.

96 Ciupek, *Aus der Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments*, pp. 7–8.

97 The letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 20.01.1916.

98 The letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 16.01.1916.

In the morning, duty begins at seven in the morning with theory until eight, we march out around eight to practice until noon. Dinner is at noon. Until 1.30 pm we have to clean our shoes and uniforms, which often are more grey than blue, after many hours in the mud. We exercise again from 1.45 till 4.30 pm. We clean our rifles from 4.30 pm to 5.30 pm, clean the uniforms from 5.30 pm till 7 pm, etc. And then the *Gewehrgriffe* [weapon drill] exercises. After that, we have a lesson of singing and passwords. At 7.30 pm, there is supper. Then, we sweep the floors and get ready to sleep. At nine in the evening, we turn off the lights and no one dares to move.⁹⁹

The food was very modest, unvaried, and rarely sufficient to feed soldiers after increased physical strain so that they would not feel hungry. For breakfast, everyone received flat black coffee without sugar and one kilogram of bread with an increasing amount of rye and potato flour, later also bran (*Kommissbrot*). It was collected in advance for four days. Sometimes, there also was a bonus like fat, cured meat, and marmalade. Lunches were usually filling. Suppers were just like breakfasts, although usually with something warm like groats, cooked vegetables, or cured meat.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, the correspondence in the first months in training mostly unsurprisingly concentrated on food, the senders requested provisions from home, properly packed so that they will reach them edible. Even when Wallis was well adapted in Ścinawa, he still complained:

We receive the amount of bread that is barely enough. But there also are those who eat their bread quickly and then have to go on without bread for the next two days; sometimes they have money so they buy something to eat or receive some from others; otherwise they must starve. Thank God, I have not suffered hunger yet.¹⁰¹

But Wallis constantly misses diversity in food, so as he may avoid eating only bread all mornings and evenings: "Send me just a box of butter, three-quarters of lard can is too big to carry in the backpack;"¹⁰² "Don't send me sausages, I still have fat and honey, and that's enough for me."¹⁰³ Sometimes, he sent an entire list:

Send me lard, but wrap it in parchment, because I already found a suitable box, and there is not enough space for the second can; also one notebook, one pair of footwraps, writing paper (a few copies may be with the header of *The Catholic*), a tiny bottle of cherry juice, salt in paper, one pair of thick stockings with for change, ten *Patenknöpfe* [press studs], a few (5) newspapers because paper is useful, a little bread, not much, because I can't find white bread anywhere without money, don't send me sugar nor

99 The letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 18.11.1915.

100 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 25–26.

101 The letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 20.01.1916.

102 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 3.01.1916.

103 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 6.01.1916.

Eucaleptuz [eucalyptus sweets] because I still have some. Include a little bit of rubber plaster (*Kautschukpflaster*).¹⁰⁴

In this first period of duty, free time was an exceptional luxury for soldiers. Wallis mainly spent his free time writing letters and organizing his wardrobe. Exceptions were Sundays and holidays, if he was not on guard duty, when he could use his time on his own. These days the main attraction were more abundant and more varied meals. In the morning, the conscripts went for mass to a nearby church, divided by the confession Catholic and Evangelical confession.¹⁰⁵ After returning to the barracks, all had time off. Since the soldiers initially could go to the city, Wallis spent his free time on what he liked the most, namely reading. Everyone waited for the festive dinner: “For dinner was goulash, dried fruits, and unpeeled potatoes. It tasted great,”¹⁰⁶ he wrote on a Sunday in January. There was an exceptionally attractive meal on the occasion the Emperor’s birthday: “For dinner 3 noodles with sauce, pork, and apricots compote. It all tasted great. After dinner, each of us received a small bottle of beer. . . . We had sausage and coffee with bread for the supper.”¹⁰⁷

Karol Małłek, who resided in Ostróda, was much more critical when it came to the relationships in the training units. The Mazurs who trained there suddenly found themselves at the very center of the centuries-old Prussian drill, in which non-commissioned officers and officers treated them as second-class people, while the training almost resembled the eighteenth-century Frederician system. It only lacked corporal punishments, abolished long ago. Małłek describes his first day of duty in the field artillery regiment as follows:

A wake-up call at 5.45 am. . . . Punctually, we heard the sound of trumpet. There was murmur and rumble in the barracks. We ran toward the stable. . . . The first stable initiation happened there, allegedly because we were late, even though it was five to six. Lance Corporal Hesse beat those unlucky, and he soon was to concentrate on our group. Hesse was a forty-year-old Alsatian of outstanding merit, because he wore the Iron Cross of the second class. . . . Our Lance Corporal was called Bäckle. . . . He arranged us in line according to height and began to tell us about our duties. “Everything here must be in order, understood?”, he started, “The guy, who arrives at the stable after me, will be beaten,” he threatened. Bäckle assigned horses to us. . . . Then Hesse gave each of us a currycomb and a brush and yelled: “Putz! Putz!” We started to clean the horses as good as we could. Farmers knew how, so they began from the horse’s head to the hind

104 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 21.01.1916.

105 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 22.01.1916.

106 Ibid.

107 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 27.01.1916.

legs. Moreover, they used the cloth. They put the horse's dirt through the brushes to the currycomb and with the currycomb to the porch. But those with no rural background were in a bad position! They brushed the horses here and there without any order. The two Lance Corporals strolled around the stable in a porch and closely watched their subordinates. Suddenly, they started whipping the our backs: "You wayward lices!" . . . After such a morning "warm-up," we quickly washed manure off of our hands and sweat of our foreheads with stable tap water, then we ran to the barracks to wash ourselves more thoroughly, put on clean uniforms and long shoes, and breakfast. . . . At eight. . . . we started to trained the drill and listened to commands "Attention!" and "At ease!" The Corporal first showed us the basic movements and then told us to repeat them. We did everything excellently. He particularly liked my movements. I learned them already from Wendt during gymnastics classes at the Brody school. After two hours of exercises, we mastered this introductory lesson. It was time for break. We ran to the stable. . . . Everyone stood by their "assigned" horse, facing the porch. "The horses and harnesses that hang on the poles belong to you. All this must be kept clean and tidy! Understood?" shouted groom Breisack. Then, Breisack gathered us by my Quatern and described this horse, the saddle, and the individual parts of the harness. Next, he showed us how to fold and unfold the felt, put it on the horse's back, and how to fit the girth, tie and untie it, and bridle the horse. . . . Finally, the sergeant began to teach us how to get on the horse and ride bareback. . . . Finally, after an hour of that torture, we heard the command yelled by the two Lance Corporals, "Go to the stable! *Putz! Putz!*" . . . It was only after feeding and watering the horses that we washed our hands and ran to eat lunch. It was already half past noon. They cheated half an hour from us again. For dinner we had pea soup with potatoes and some canned food. We ate it all and went home. Almost an hour. We went to beds and immediately started snoring. In half an hour, we heard: "Aufstehen!" Oh, how unwilling we were to get up! Some of us cried that we had to go to the square again and be ready for further activities. We marched off to the lecture hall to listen to the sergeant who told us about field artillery and batteries. We listened to him without any clue what was going on, because he spoke in a very difficult manner for a long time, while we were all tired and sleepy. . . . After the lecture, we quickly put on our drill uniforms and again ran down to the stable. Here, both Lance Corporals shouted: "Putz! Putz!" . . . During the assembly, the Head of the Battery introduced us to tomorrow's schedule, which did not differ from today's . . . The only difference was that three of our friends were assigned to twenty-four-hour stable duty. We performed it every sixth day. For dinner, we received half of mess tin of tea, ninety g[rams] of liver sausage, and one kilogram of bread for two days. . . . We barely ate and rested a little when it was already eight o'clock, time for cleaning. We started to clean our uniforms, shoes, leather, and other things. After an hour, everything was squeaky clean. Shortly before ten in the evening, we were in beds, waiting for the sound of the trumpet, and for the lights to go out.¹⁰⁸

108 K. Mańtek, *Z Mazur do Verdun. Wspomnienia 1890–1919*, Warszawa 1967, pp. 212–219.

Interestingly, this kind of rigorous training did not differ much from the training of one-year volunteers; the only difference was that the superiors did not use violence toward their subordinates in the latter case. However, all the emphasis was on the implementation of thoughtless automaticity of behavior on the battlefield, and this was achieved by repeating the same actions in constantly induced stress; through haste, screaming, and physical effort at the verge of human capability:

Duty was very hard in the first half of the year. At least three hours every day were devoted to learning stunts with rifles. Excellent precision was attained by a huge amount of energy and effort and a complete stupefaction of recruits who started to move like automatons. Blisters appeared on their hands, knees stiffened, muscles contracted. We exercised on empty stomachs from five to six in the morning, then one hour after breakfast, and again one hour in the evening. After a few weeks, field duty started. The non-commission officers had here the opportunity to go hard on those intelligentsia-students! We were hurried until we passed out in the midst of sharp insults, screams, and rants. We listened to juicy vulgar vocabulary and amazing associations of concepts, for example, "You stand like a pregnant canary," "Quicker! Curl up like an oiled lightning!"; "You walk like a lice on stomach!" And if someone made a mistake in a stunt or a phrase, he heard the terrible sentence: "Eine Stunde nachexerzieren!"; an hour of disciplinary punishment. Let's add to that those disciplinary exercises – an opportunity for the corporal for extraordinary abuse – always occurred during the time devoted to a two-hour lunch break. "The theory" taught by non-commissioned officers had a specific meaning. It consisted of learning by heart the names and addresses of all the superiors from the corporal to the lieutenant; and from captain through the commander of the company and the general to the admiral. Rifle cleaning was a separate ceremony. It lasted an hour a day. Despite our greatest efforts, we could never please the corporal, who was always dissatisfied with what he controlled.¹⁰⁹

However, the duty of officer candidates changed over time. The breakthrough moment was when they left the barracks and started living in the quarters:

Only after four-five months of elementary training, when we could properly salute, make stunts with rifle, even march "like at parade," change guards, clean rifles, polish shoes until they shine, and polish the room till it looked like a marchioness' chamber, we could finally move out and rent a room in the city (for fifteen marks a month). At that time, each of us was assigned a cleaner from an older year group (third year of duty), who was a jester, an old hand, who cut his teeth on the duty and knew all the secrets, and he knew the ways to trick the corporal, and even the sergeant.¹¹⁰

Only then, the commander of the subunit assumed command and conducted field training. The period of duty in the military training area sometimes lacked

109 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, pp. 14–17.

110 *Ibid.*

the disparaging harrassment of non-commissioned officers, and some of the young Poles even recalled it as a useful time of great adventure of youth:

The culminating moment of the one-year military duty was the concentration of troops in one infantry division with artillery and auxiliary units, and two battalions of naval infantry. . . . Compared to the drill and training yard in Kiel, this service was light and even interesting. Marches, exercises in beautiful plain-air, in vast heathlands, in the heat of the summer, mock skirmishes and battles, none of it was arduous and it offered sport-like satisfaction. Besides, military duty attracted me with physical training, light-heartedness, and the cheerful life outside of the classroom. We attended interesting lectures, particularly conducted by some captain of the general staff who acquainted us, "one-year volunteers" and aspirants for reserve officers, with secrets of tactics at the lowest levels of chain of command of platoon and company./I listened carefully to use my experience as an instructor in the Rifle Squads, so as to effectively beat the Germans in the future. I used my skills soon, in 1918, in Poznań and in Poznań Region.¹¹¹

Despite the arduousness, the duty at the training unit was one of the best periods in the soldier's life during the war. The tragedy began once the mobilization started, and they went to the front, not only because of the nightmare that the trench warfare turned out to be but also the necessity to face the enemy units, which also consisted of Poles. Before the war, about 300 thousand Poles served in the armies of the Partition armies: in the Russian Army 165–200 thousand; in the Austro-Hungarian Army 55–60 thousand; and about 40 thousand in the German Army. After the general mobilization in August 1914, the number of the mobilized soldiers increased to about 3.3 million Polish soldiers who fought against each other during the four years of the war.¹¹² The Russian Army numbered 1.196 million Poles, the Austro-Hungarian Army 1 million Poles, and the German Army 780,000 Poles.¹¹³

111 Ibid., pp. 14–17.

112 Rezmer, *Polacy w korpusie oficerskim*, pp. 138–139.

113 M. Leczyk, *Sytuacja polityczno-militarna Polski w pierwszej i drugiej wojnie światowej – podobieństwa i różnice*, in: *Pamiętnik XV Powszechnego Zjazdu Historyków Polskich*, Vol. 1, Part 2, ed. J. Staszewski, Gdańsk 1995, p. 120, bases his numbers on the calculations prepared by Kazimierz Rosen Zawadzki, *Historia Polski*, Vol. 3, Warszawa 1974, pp. 23–25.

II. First Fights in Autumn 1914

The Mobilization

After the war, all authors of the memoirs unanimously state that – at the end of July 1914 – no one seriously anticipated the outbreak of a war, not to mention the possibility of a worldwide conflict. One may find a lot of evidence that the abrupt turn of events was a great surprise to everyone in Germany. Some officers were on leave. The field training exercises became a routine of little intensity due to the heat wave that occurred in summer of 1914. It was only after the Kingdom of Serbia rejected Austrian government's ultimatum that many realized the threat of war. A breakthrough moment for the officers and soldiers on active duty was July 31, when they received an order from the headquarters, signed by Wilhelm II, "The State of Imminent Threat of War" (*Zustand der drohenden Kriegsgefahr*); according to the plan, it meant the beginning of mobilization. Already this signal meant that the regiments to participate in frontier actions had to prepare themselves for immediate combat.

In the evening of July 31, Wilhelm II stood on the balcony of the Berlin Palace and addressed these famous words to France and Russia: "We will show the enemy, what it means to irritate Germany!" (*Dem Gegner werden wir zeigen, was es heißt, Deutschland zu reizen!*).

Full mobilization started on the very next day, in the afternoon of August 1. Although Wilhelm II kept reassuring the public about his peaceful intentions, he openly admitted that –in his opinion – attempts to annihilate the German Reich recently abound. All German newspapers published his throne speech. In the Polish western territories, much of the public attention also focused on Wilhelm II's speech to Berliners gathered in front of the royal palace, in which he reassured them about the unity of all Germans during the imminent war: "Gentlemen, you read what I told my nation from the palace's balcony. [Since now] I know only Germans! As a proof of my determination to get through misery and death together, regardless the differences between parties, estates, and confessions, I order party executives to approach me and solemnly pledge it."¹¹⁴ On August 2, Germany declared war on Russia and on France. On August 5, Wilhelm II reauthorized the Iron Cross, a military decoration only

114 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 63, 8.08.1914.

granted in wartime, since the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹¹⁵ The Great War began.

The enthusiasm in the first days of the war was particularly big in the cities, also in Greater Poland and Upper Silesia. However, it only occurred in some social circles. Modern historians quite unanimously reject the idea of a common euphoria after the declaration of war on Russia and France. In fact, as much as it was popular among the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia, working-class families did not share the sentiment. A similar situation occurred in borderland territories inhabited by national minorities. The conviction about general enthusiasm resulted from the festive mood on the streets and on squares of large German cities, sustained by daily press and state officials.¹¹⁶ The inhabitants of Upper Silesia, Greater Poland, Masuria, and Pomerania also cautiously looked at the Germans who indulged in this collective madness, particularly at mass volunteers. The majority of Poles soberly assessed the situation: "The biggest fool is the one who voluntarily joins the army, oh he later regrets it, but it is too late."¹¹⁷

Later reluctance toward paramilitary training imposed on young men further confirms the lack of enthusiasm of the whole society. So-called Youth Brigades (*Jugendwehr*) were to prepare boys under seventeen years old to wartime conditions. It was a structure formed in the German Reich as early as in 1896 and tasked with the military training of the youth before they began active duty. Since 1911, the Youth Brigades belonged to the nationwide German Youth Association (*Jungdeutschland-Bund*). The organization closely cooperated with combatant soldiers associations in the recruitment of members. During the war, the Youth Brigades were required to cooperate with schools in the introduction of paramilitary training to all the youth in units specifically formed for this purpose. Retired soldiers, non-commissioned officers, and officers participated in this training. After the outbreak of the war, the ministers of war, education, and internal affairs ordered the introduction of obligatory military training for young men over sixteen years old, beginning with the school year of 1914/1915.¹¹⁸ In Upper Silesia, the poor turnout at these trainings was a constant object of

115 Graf v.d. Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith (1. Oberschlesisches) Nr. 22 im Kriege 1914–1918*, Berlin, pp. 20–22.

116 J. Bölsche, "Ein Hammerschlag auf Herz und Hirn". *Der Mythos von der Kriegsbegeisterung der Volksmassen im Herbst 1914*, in: *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Die Ur-Katastrophe des 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. S. Burgdorff, K. Wiegrefe, München 2010, pp. 54–58.

117 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia 8.10.1916.

118 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 79, 9.09.1914.

complaints.¹¹⁹ The reluctance toward hard training – focused on military drill and gymnastics – was particularly noticeable in the summer, when there was more work at households because all working-age men were conscripted. The participation of local notables in training helped very little to promote mass enthusiasm to fight for the Kaiser.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of enthusiasm toward the war, loyalty prevailed, in which the pledge of allegiance to the German homeland and emperor played a substantial role. However, today such an assertion may seem unexpected, especially because it often conflicted with political beliefs of Kaiser's subjects. One of the thousands of conscripts wrote: "The mind boils of outrage when seeing the violation of the Polish soul. Let the Germans fight for their Vaterland. Why are we supposed to fight for them? For a matter that is alien to us. But there is no escape. [We swore] the oath!"¹²⁰ Such a spirit appears in the memoirs of the soldiers from Greater Poland,¹²¹ Pomerania, Masuria, but also Upper Silesia.¹²² The Prussian authorities did not doubt Polish loyalty and even emphasized the fact that the Poles act like most of German citizens. The position of Polish national leaders further reinforced this conviction, even the National Democrats in Greater Poland emphasized in 1914 the necessity of Polish loyalty toward the German authorities, despite the internment of Polish activists and the ban on publishing or strict censorship of the Polish press.¹²³ Such appeals appeared in Pomeranian *Gazeta Toruńska* (Toruń Daily: "Let us not delude ourselves! Let us keep calm and caution, we must fulfill our duty, we cannot help it")¹²⁴ and in Upper Silesian *Katolik* (The Catholic: "The one who cares for his head must avoid any hassle with the authorities and behave as quietly as he can, he must care both for his and another's discipline, for order").¹²⁵

119 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 78, 30.09.1914.

120 G. A. Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza. Przeżycia wojenne na froncie zachodnim 1914–1919*, Śrem 1934, p. 6.

121 Fiedler, *Mój ojciec i dęby*, Poznań 2006, p. 141.

122 The group of scholars who claims this includes Mieczysław Wojciechowski, *Spółeczeństwo polskie w Prusach Zachodnich w dobie I wojny światowej (1914–1918)*, in: *Spółeczeństwo polskie*, p. 59, who bases on the reports of the head of the Gdańsk police, but also Teresa Kulak, *Postawy społeczeństwa polskiego na Górnym Ślasku w okresie I wojny światowej (1914–1918)*, in: *Spółeczeństwo polskie*, p. 12, who bases on the report of Bytom Landrat.

123 Kulak, *Postawy społeczeństwa polskiego na Górnym Ślasku*, p. 12.

124 Qtd. after Wojciechowski, "Spółeczeństwo polskie," p. 54.

125 Qtd. after Kulak, *Postawy społeczeństwa polskiego na Górnym Ślasku*, p. 2.

On August 1, the news about the mobilization initially spread by word of mouth, but the announcements started to appear already in the afternoon, also the one about *Landsturm* mobilization. A peculiar placard regarding this mobilization preserved to this day was prepared by the German military in bizarre Polish to exclusively address the Polish-speaking inhabitants of the eastern provinces of Upper Silesia. The aim was probably to make it understandable for the older generation, who never partook in the advantages of the universal mandatory German education. With its peculiar language in the Upper Silesian dialect with many Germanisms, this document is today hardly understandable even for Poles. The legible translation reads:

Immediately today, after the publication of this announcement, [one must] report without waiting for an order. [This refers to] all non-commissioned officers and men with military training moved to *Landsturm* – including those moved from guard units, i.e. all non-commissioned officers and men moved to *Landwehr II* or Navy *Landwehr (Seelandwehr)* – who are below forty-five years old, of the following types of arms and units: infantry, naval infantry, marksmen, cavalry, railway troops, stretcher carriers, all naval non-commissioned officers, feldshers, sanitary non-commissioned officers who served at least for half a year, military treasurers, gunsmiths, gunsmith assistants, all sailors trained in gunfight, craftsmen, and tailors. Moreover, those who do not belong to *Landsturm* and who voluntarily want to join. . . . Those from the Rybnik province [should report] to Rybnik.¹²⁶

Masses of worshippers appeared at church services all over Germany on the next day, on Sunday. The emperor ordered this Sunday to be a nationwide day of prayer. The officially designated day for common contemplation unexpectedly turned into a more profound reflection on the imminent tragedy and the possibility of losing close relatives. The mood at homes was often gloomy, particularly among the elderly. Józef Borzyszkowski follows various journals and diaries to describe this Sunday in Pomerania in the following way: “Today is

126 *Plesser Kreisblatt*, 3.08.1914, Sonder Beilage: “Landsturm – Aufruf, Landsturm’s invocation:” “Dzisiaj a to sarażki za Publicznosci tej Wiadomosci, bez czekanioł Orderu stawić. Wszyscy Unterofficieri i wybudowane chłopci od Landsturmu i od Gardy, to jest wszyscy Unterofficierzy i hłopi, którzy Landwerę albo wodne broni II. Aufgebodu do Landsturmu przesztcząpili, a jeszcze nie pełno 45 Lot starzy są, od następujących Klasów i Części: Infanterio i wodno Infanterio, Mysliwcy, Cawalrjo, Train, Nosiciele chorych, Wszytce Unter officierowie od Mariny, Podlekarze, Zanitetunterofficieri i co poł roku szuzyli, Wypłacielowie, Strzelbyrobiciele, Strzelbyrobiciele pomocnicy, wrzeszy Sgwerem weuczeni hłopi od Marine, rzamnieszniki, krawcy. Tysz ci nie do Landsturmu najlezciciele, którzy od siebie sami stompic chcą. . . . Te skryzu Rybnik lerzonce in Rybnik.”

Mobilmachung [mobilization]. Oh, Holy Virgin and Saint Joseph, intercede grace on our behalf so that we benefit from this Epiphany.”¹²⁷ The bells rang in Pomeranian cities as people visited churches “with lamentation.” Many confessed their sins because they expected the worst. For the sake of their relatives, people often funded crosses and chapels for the benefit of the conscripted.¹²⁸

The outbreak of the war resulted in the immediate mobilization of German first-line units; it looked similar in all regiments. The Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 157 received the order at 2.45 am on July 31. According to the mobilization plan, the first battalion and machine gun company had to prepare in six hours to move out to the border. Horses arrived at the regiment already at 4 pm of the same day, while at 7.30 pm, the battalion and company were prepared to move to Kluczbork, which was the concentration site.¹²⁹ The Field Artillery Regiment No. 21 – that belonged to the same Upper Silesian 12th Infantry Division – received the order about the imminent threat of war at 3 am. Immediately, each battery prepared four cannons with a team of horses, an ammunition carrier, a reconnaissance vehicle, one cart with provisions, and reserve horses to march out. The troop was accompanied by ammunition columns, each consisting of twenty-seven vehicles (twenty-four of them had a team of six horses!). From the very evening of July 31, confiscated horses arrived at the regiment – assigned earlier in the mobilization plan – in order to move this mass of equipment and wagons. Soldiers collected their combat uniforms while horses were fit with new harnesses. First batteries of the regiment were ready to depart at 6.30 pm, when they received a repeated order about the threat of war.¹³⁰

Similarly, the Infantry Regiment No. 47 and the Infantry Reserve Regiment No. 37 mobilized in Śrem, Greater Poland:

Finally... mobilization! Loud posters announce to everyone: “Mobilization!!!” The youngest cohorts of reserve troops immediately [go] to regiments, levy in masses to man bridges, edifices etc. They will report on the second day, the older cohorts of reserve on the third, fourth, and fifth. . . July 31, 1914, is the first day of the mobilization. A true human migration. . . herds of horses. Patrols walk around the city. The bridge is blocked by on both sides by harrows. . . Such mood dominated the first days of the mobilization

127 T. Głowczewski, *Z południa Kaszub*, ed. J. Borzyszkowski, Gdańsk 1982.

128 J. Borzyszkowski, C. Obracht-Prondzyński, *Doświadczenia wojny w świetle wspomnień Pomorzan*, in: *Spółczesność polskie*, pp. 75–76.

129 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 11–13.

130 H. Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment v. Clausewitz (1. Oberschles.) Nr. 21*, Breslau 1923, pp. 9–10.

in Śrem, a provincial town adorably located by the Warta River, where the second battalion of the forty-seventh Prussian infantry was stationed. Here, the mobilization to the Reserve Regiment No. 37 applied to young soldiers, mostly Poles. The order was... on the fourth day! There reports the local youth, supported with an ample battalion of reserve soldiers from Pleszew and the region, in order to fulfill their hard duty to – the invader. By the emperor's order, [they are] to become victims of the Moloch of war. They answered the call! Summoned, they were incorporated into the company and assigned lodgings.¹³¹

The reserve soldiers spent August 1 preparing for railway travel. The arriving soldiers and volunteers received combat uniforms, arms, ammunition, satchels, and supplementary equipment.¹³² This thirty-kilogram equipment of an infantry man was very rich but – as they soon learned – it excessively constrained soldier's mobility during fights. The uniform of a German infantryman of 1914 consisted of a masking field-grey jacket, according to models from 1907 and 1910 (*Feldrock 07/10*). However, in many regiments, the soldiers still wore the old blue uniforms, visible from afar due to their intensive color, which made them perfect targets for sharpshooters, just like the French and Belgian uniforms.¹³³ The eight-button jackets fastened under the neck. Hannover-type regiments' buttons were decorated with the royal crown (Kazimierz Wallis belonged to such a regiment). During the war, these were replaced by simplified combat shirts with covered buttons (*Feldbluse 1915*). The regiment's number ornamented the epaulettes. In the case of Hannover-type regiments, they received an additional inscription "Gibraltar," in memory of the fights against Napoleon: "We wear a cerulean band with the inscription "Gibraltar" on our left arm below the elbow. This signifies the remembrance of battles we fought in Gibraltar... I sent my old shoulder straps with number 51, because I now wear number 79."¹³⁴ A red trimming ornamented long trousers (model of 1910), while the long leather shoes (*Marschstiefel 66*) enjoyed little popularity among the soldiers, despite their sturdiness. There were obviously solid but very rigid, and particularly the new pairs caused painful abrasions that were hard to heal, which often turned into bleeding wounds during long marches.¹³⁵ German soldiers wore a leather belt with a brass buckle ornamented with the emblem of the land in the German Empire (model 1895). The belt had a leather pouch with sixty cartridges (model 1909), a bayonet

131 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 2–3.

132 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 23.

133 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, p. 29.

134 The letters of Kazimierz Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, Russia, 18.08.1916.

135 R. Leick, *Das große Sterben, Der Erste Weltkrieg. Die Ur-Katastrophe des 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. S. Burgdorff, K. Wiegrefe, München 2010, p. 64.

sheath, and a defensive grenade (model 1913). The helmet (popular *Pickelhaube*) or, actually, a leather crash helmet with a characteristic brass tip, had a special masking plain weave cover in field-gray with a big red regiment number over the forehead. The soldiers in the rear wore a round cap (*Mütze 10*), according to the regulations, which forbid them to walk in the open without headgear. The red band of the cap included country colors and imperial colors above them. In 1915, the cap cut was simplified; it remained round but lacked the colorful band, only the trimming and two colorful symbols.¹³⁶

A typical German infantryman carried on his back a satchel (*Tornister 95*); initially strengthened with cowhide but, later, produced from plain weave. There was a rolled-up raincoat strapped around the satchel and, below it, the food bag (*Brotbeutel 87*) with a belted canteen. In 1914, canteen were enamel (*Feldflasche 93*) but, later, aluminium (*Feldflasche 07* and *10*). It was all supplemented by the attached metal mess kit (*Kochgeschirr 10*).¹³⁷ The satchel generally contained personal belongings and personal hygiene utensils (soap, comb, sometimes a little mustache comb) and often also a sewing kit in a special metal case, because the uniform had to always be clean, regardless the weather and length of service. Later, soldiers also received playing cards ornamented with military motifs (generally the Old Maid), and in the West they also received pictorial pocket German-French dictionaries. For identification, every soldier had a military identity card (*Militärpass*) and an identification badge in a leather case carried around the neck (*Erkennungsmarke*).¹³⁸ Noteworthy, Kazimierz Wallis describes this baggage in a letter to his father: “I already wear boots, marching trousers, and a forage cap. Here we received: 1 pair of boots, 1 pair of hemp shoes, 2 pairs of stockings, 2 pairs of trousers (marching and white), 3 pairs of pants (underwear), 3 shirts, 2 neck bands, 1 *Litewka modra* (blue jacket), 1 pair of *Pulswärmer*, 1 *Kopfschützer*, 1 pair of gloves, 1 forage cap, 1 towel, 1 belt.”¹³⁹

Not all regiments had the best uniforms and equipment. Everything happened in a rush, especially the preparation of soldier equipment, because time was of key importance when one hoped for victory. As a peasant of Greater Poland that joined the army recalls: “Everyone received necessary elements of military equipment [on the second day after the conscription], except for the bayonet and rifle. They did not hurry with handing out uniforms but only threw around

136 F. Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre. Armes, uniformes, matérielles*, Rennes 2006, p. 14.

137 Ibid.

138 Ibid.

139 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia 26.11.1915.

the necessary number of stuff – and it was handled. No one cared if the uniform was much too bigger or too small. The same for the boots. The chamber non-commissioned officers tended to viciously put helmets on soldier heads: sometimes they put in normally but, sometimes, time they pressed it with all their might while holding the by the metal tip; after such a procedure, the helmet fit everyone, regardless if it reached the ears or remained on the top of the head. We received navy-blue uniforms with grenadiers' badges and white facings; besides that, various trousers, black pre-war trousers, or grey field ones; all of them had one thing in common: they were raggedy.¹⁴⁰

Of course, each infantryman received a rifle. It was the famous Gewehr 98 (caliber 7.92 mm); a perfect rifle, produced until the very end of the war, loaded with stripper clips (with box magazines that held five cartridges). Gewehr 98 weighed 4.14 kilograms, barrel measured 740 mm. It was a precise and reliable weapon with the range of an effective gunshot that amounted to 1000 meters. A true novelty was the gun sight that allowed soldiers to conduct very precise fire.¹⁴¹ The second a soldier started to fight, he put a bayonet on the gun barrel; a bayonet with a flat edge (*Seitengewehr 98/05*) carried by the soldiers in a special etui on the belt (model 1898). During the war, the more popular bayonet was a similar one but with serrated edge, 50-centimeter-long (the serrated edge was 36.8 centimeters long). It was initially produced for sappers and soldiers of train subunits, mainly for wood cutting. However, it was ill-famed; it is easy to imagine how terrible wounds it could inflict by stabbing. The rumor had it that the French and the British lynched German soldiers who carried that particular type of bayonet. Therefore, its use gradually declined.¹⁴²

An artilleryman's hand weapon looked differently. Apart from the classic uniform, his equipment consisted of a helmet with different artillery tips and a short cavalry rifle with a cartridge belt for fifty sharp cartridges in place of a Gewehr.¹⁴³

While filling the satchel with prescribed supplies was not difficult, it was almost impossible to carry more things during the long march or train journey, when one had to always hold a rifle, as Wallis writes: "When we depart, we will be able to take as few things as possible because it is horribly difficult to carry so much military stuff. I can only take smoked bacon that you sent me, a can

140 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi 1914–1967*, p. 57.

141 C. McNab, *Broń strzelecka XX stulecia*, Warszawa 2010, p. 218.

142 Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre*, p. 86.

143 Małek, *Z Mazur do Verdun. Wspomnienia 1890–1919*, p. 227.

of sugar, a jar of marmalade, powdered soup, and Formamint tablets [to heal inflammations of the oral cavity]. We will receive bread before departure.¹⁴⁴

It was a real challenge for quartermaster units to hand out all the equipment to dozens of thousands of soldiers. Before receiving a uniform, each soldier had to undergo examination. Next, he received soldier's pay from the regimental paymaster. The paymaster also regulated the payments for confiscated horses. The authorities especially strictly supervised the handing out of identification badges with special lanyards. Furthermore, the officers could use the stand for sharpening sabers and sharp-edged side-weaponry. In the end, the individual gun squads and ammunition columns in artillery regiments collected live ammunition for the cannons.¹⁴⁵

The barracks of the regiments, whose combat units immediately went to the front line, were quickly populated by the reserve soldiers. Garrison cities cheerfully greeted new arrivals at railway stations, as they immediately transferred to their old barracks, often accompanied by the reserve officers who greeted them. After collecting uniforms and equipment under the command of reserve officers – under whom they most often previously served during active duty – they soldiers sent to the company with which they participated in the annual exercises in the military training area.¹⁴⁶ In the first stage of the supposedly fast mobilization, such a way of conscription resulted in situations, in which the soldiers and officers recruited at the beginning of the war mostly came from the garrison's vicinity. For example, the Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 62 partly comprised soldiers from Saxony and Silesia in active duty, but the reserve soldiers that quartered there on August 1 stemmed exclusively from Upper Silesia.¹⁴⁷

Adhering to the instructions on posters and in press, young men came in the scheduled day and hour from garrison cities and surrounding villages. Special decrees determined how the conscripts had to look when arriving to the military unit. They had to arrive on time, sober, after thorough washing, and in clean clothes. The conscripts who did not report in the place of conscription, were late, or did not obey the instructions were subject to a significant penalty payment (up to thirty marks) or five-day arrest.¹⁴⁸ Paweł Nowak recalls his conscription

144 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia 9.02.1916.

145 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 9–10.

146 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 25.

147 Ciupek, *Aus der Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments*, pp. 7–8.

148 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 6, 21.01.1914; *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 12, 11.02.1914.

to Landwehr's Silesian corps in the following way: "After a short simple parting with wife and two kids, I left my home on August 2, 1914, at 5 am, and, according to the mobilization plan, I responded to my homeland's summons in Bytom, at the scheduled place and time so as to be enlisted to *feldgrau*."¹⁴⁹

Before leaving the barracks, soldiers participated in a mandatory march through the city's streets, which aimed at convincing non-believers that the German Army is strong and efficient. This is how the send-off of the Infantry Regiment No. 22 looked like: "Equipped with military tools, there stand the companies in perfect order, tightly together. These marvelous healthy men from Saxony and Silesia, but also the Upper Silesian reserve soldiers."¹⁵⁰ Similarly, the regiment in Śrem paraded among the crowds of city dwellers: "Stretched in long lines, companies occupied the market square in Śrem. Wagons on the sides. The commanders assume command over the companies. All city dwellers appear to accompany their relatives to the railway station. The heavy backpacks are set and filled with various treats. In groups to the right! And a long line of a marching column heads toward the railway station. Wives, children, fiancées, parents, siblings, and friends accompany both sides of the column. Last look at the town hall, the church's tower, and the sky-blue ribbon of the Warta River. A steaming train is ready. The soldiers fill the cattle wagons with benches."¹⁵¹

The process of the mobilization was not everywhere the same; sometimes there was embarrassment. For instance, the reserve soldiers of the Infantry Regiment No. 157 did not arrive as regularly as they were expected, and their physical condition did not meet officers' requirements. After all, maneuver warfare required the infantry to march at a proper pace. On August 6, the regiment was ready to head off but only after it departed as a whole toward the military training area in Hajduki Nyskie, it turned out that the military competences and the synchronization of subunits were far from the requirements of German officers. Returning after the strenuous march on a scorching day, the reserve soldiers were so exhausted that their march through the city streets was called off due to their miserable appearance.¹⁵²

The confiscation of horses, or strictly speaking, their adaptation to military duty, was an even bigger issue. Each horse underwent a veterinary examination

149 P. Nowak, *Moje przeżycia na Syberii 1914–1921*, Zbiory Specjalne Biblioteki Śląskiej w Katowicach, p. 1.

150 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 25–26.

151 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 6–7.

152 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 11–13.

and – while there was no question about the quality of carthorses – there were very few good saddle horses for officers. Fitting them with new harnesses and adapting to work in teams of sometimes even six horses required a lot of effort.¹⁵³

Border Struggles

Until August 6–7, quartermaster services in garrisons feverishly – but in an organized manner – raced against time to prepare hundreds of thousands of soldiers for transportation in trains. Meanwhile, some units on active duty (professional officers and conscripts) took part in the fights at the borders already in the first week of the war. The Poles in Kaiser's army had to traditionally shield the Russian frontier, according to the mobilization plan, by virtue of their nineteenth-century experience. Some regiments had to support the protection of cities from possible sabotage, even if they stayed in garrisons and did not directly participate in action.

There were many reports of any possible dangers in the first weeks of the war. Particularly those concerning spies. The entire Prussia gossiped about a French car filled to the brim with money (or golden ingots) that purportedly headed to Russia.¹⁵⁴ Although ridiculous, the gossip became so popular that the soldiers of the Infantry Regiment No. 157 and the 21st Field Artillery Regiment seriously searched for this imaginary car. The French dressed as Germans were said to drive the car accompanied by elegant ladies.¹⁵⁵ In turn, Greater Poland saw a modified version of the gossip, according to which there were three cars filled with gold, which were to flee from Germany and attempt to cross the German-Russian border. Therefore, military patrols thoroughly frisked all the encountered cars.¹⁵⁶

In the first days of August, artillerymen from the Nysa regiment participated in another action, no less grotesque. This time, it was the military authorities who raised the false alarm. On August 3, the commanders of the 12th Infantry Division informed that French aircrafts were seen in central Germany heading toward Silesia. It was a complete absurd in regard of contemporary technical abilities and the range of military aircrafts. However, two batteries were prepared in Nysa to resist this imaginary air strike. Interestingly, some cannons even “noticed” these aircrafts in their mind's eyes and, on August 3–7, fired a few shots

153 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 9–10.

154 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 63, 8.08.1914.

155 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 11–13.

156 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 2–3.

which, in turn, caused panic among civilians and their irrational belief that there will soon happen a French attack.¹⁵⁷

Just after the outbreak of the war, there was a real military action on the border between Upper Silesia and the Kingdom of Poland. The aim was to occupy the Dąbrowa Basin and the city of Częstochowa. Since the repartition of Polish territories during the Congress of Vienna, the boundary line between Prussia and Russia created a considerable danger for the Central Powers, because it disjoined Austrian Galicia and Prussia. It was particularly unfavorable for Silesia, which was not protected by any water barrier. While creating the strategic plan, the German General Staff assumed that only one out of eight German armies will engage in the fight in the East – the Eighth Army under the command of Colonel General Maximilian von Prittwitz und Gaffron that consisted of army corps I, XVII, XX, one cavalry division, and Landwehr units – while the Habsburg monarchy will take the main initiative.¹⁵⁸ However, early wartime decision postulated the preventive march into the western parts of the Kingdom of Poland in the very beginning of the war in order to even out the frontline and push an even theoretical danger away from Silesia, before *Regierungsbezirk Opole* sends its echelons toward the western front.

The ones to realize this maneuver were soldiers on active duty from the Upper Silesian garrisons. A tragicomic incident preceded the entire operation, although one might question the credibility of this account, considering that it refers to press coverage; even if it appeared before the introduction of pre-publication censorship. The information probably aimed at reinforcing civilian morale and strengthen their belief in the German Army's primacy over the Russian Army. On July 31, the company of Katowice from the 22nd Infantry Regiment conducted routine field training near the so-called Three Emperors' Corner. On the way back, its members looked with interest at the border bridge between Mysłowice and Modrzejów. When a Russian guard spotted the German unit, as the journalist recalls,

he hastily hid behind the bridge, and he did that with speed "unusual for Russians." He stayed there until the German soldiers returned to marching. He then came out and fired two warning shots in the air. He reported to the rittmeister and captain that he saw Prussian soldiers next to the bridge. However, the company at that moment was already on its way to Katowice singing its songs.

157 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 10–11.

158 Keegan, *Die Kultur des Krieges*, pp. 204–206.

According to further press coverage, there were fifty deserters from the Kingdom of Poland to the German side already before the outbreak of the war.¹⁵⁹

The opinion about Russian soldiers' morale was not high in Germany at the beginning of the war. Particularly after the Russo-Japanese War, people knew about the growing problems of the Russian Empire. The above description sought to ensure the soldiers and civilians about that fact. Russia was presented as a barbaric and backward country, and Cossack soldiers personified this characteristic. There was no trace left from the brotherhood of arms of the second half of the nineteenth century. Since the very beginning of the First World War, the Cossack was a synonym of homeland's enemy. Popular leaflets and playing cards, published in thousands of copies, contemptuously presented the Russian soldier as a primitive ragamuffin with a long untrimmed beard and a bottle of schnapps in his hand, his rifle on a string instead of a belt, wearing a huge winter cap and a too long military greatcoat.¹⁶⁰

The Russian destruction of border bridges on August 1 did not prevent the quick seizure of undefended Dąbrowa Basin and Częstochowa by the Upper Silesia regiments. During this few-day-long operation, some subunits of the 22nd Infantry Regiment marched out of the barracks already in the morning on August 1 in order to position themselves by the frontier near the Three Emperors' Corner; the third battalion from Mysłowice to Szopienice and the first battalion from Szopienice to Milowic. The second battalion followed them as back guard with the regimental orchestra. After a week, they were replaced by soldiers of Silesian Landwehr under the command of General Remus von Woyrsch. After crossing the border on August 3, the Germans seized Sosnowiec, Będzin, and Częstochowa without a fight, before the offensive in the Western Front even began.¹⁶¹

The flags, cheering, and flowers accompanied the soldiers of the rearguard battalion at every venue, who was followed by the regiment's staff. When on August 2, at 12.45 pm, war was declared on Russia, supported by a squadron of the Uhlan regiment and half of the fifth battery of the Field Artillery Regiment No. 57, the marching soldiers moved toward the line Mysłowice–Będzin–Grodzic. Later, they did not perform military but guard duty; they guarded bridges, protected railway stations, blocked road, and guarded mines.¹⁶² The

159 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 61, 1.08.1914.

160 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Wahrheit und Lüge*, p. 81.

161 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 64, 12.08.1914.

162 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 23–25.

troops from Mysłowice seized Dąbrowa Basin without a fight, while tactically communicating with Austrian troops from the First Army, which already seized the borderland Olkusz and Wolbrom. Somewhat symbolically, the commanders of both German and Austrian armies met close to the Three Emperors' Corner. On August 7, the Landwehr's 23rd Infantry Regiment replaced the 22nd Infantry Regiment's troops along with the accompanying cavalry and artillery, which belonged to the guard duty and then returned to garrisons in Katowice and Bytom. The mobilization finished there, and trainings continued in military training areas, so there was a possibility to merge subunits on active duty with the subunits of reserve soldiers.¹⁶³

Further north, the Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment No. 63 performed similar duties. At the time of mobilization, half of the squadron of the 11th Mounted Rifles (*Jäger-Regiment zu Pferde Nr. 11*) joined and together they protected the border by Częstochowa. On August 2, shooters, all battalions of the infantry regiment, and two batteries of the Field Artillery Regiment No. 57 concentrated in Lubliniec.¹⁶⁴ At that time, there appeared a piece of information that the Russian cavalry and infantry were spotted at an important railway junction of Herby and Częstochowa. The information originated from a pro-German priest from the Herby parish. It turned out to be partially true, but there occurred fights for the control over the railway station with the Cossacks. The soldiers of the Upper Silesian regiment managed to retreat by finding an engine, which they used to reach their own troops under Russian cannonade. At 3 am, the commander of the Infantry Regiment No. 63 ordered to conduct an attack toward Częstochowa with the main forces; that is, with the first and third battalion along with the staff in Lubliniec, the second battalion in Kuźnica, and the mounted riflemen near Lisów. After crossing the border meanwhile abandoned by the Russian, the march deep into the Kingdom of Poland turned out much more difficult than the march of the troops in the south that came from the direction of Mysłowice. There were constant skirmishes with some unidentified Russian troops in the forests. Moreover, there were first casualties; seven injured soldiers, including two heavily injured, were sent to the field hospital in Lubliniec. At night, a patrol also recognized a strong Russian cavalry unit, and according to several accounts, there were still major Russian units present in Częstochowa that were ready for a counterattack. Yet, the German units continued the march undisturbed throughout the next day. Despite the announcements, there were no regular

163 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 25.

164 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 37–40.

Russian units in Częstochowa. The day before, a local military commandant issued an order to abandon the city. Therefore, the Germans entered the city convinced about a total cave-in in Russian resistance. Unexpectedly, there were some shots fired toward the marching soldiers of the second battalion in the vanguard. Just after the end of fire – ascribed to Russians soldiers in civilian clothes – the commander of the regiment ordered the execution of two persons. Whereas, the city was obliged to pay contribution. The houses, from which the shots were fired, were demolished. However, the situation in Częstochowa was still unsteady and the soldiers were not allowed to spend the night in city lodgings. They pitched a bivouac outside the city. The regiment remained in Częstochowa until August 7, to be replaced later by the Landwehr's Infantry Regiment No. 51 and return to the barracks in Lubliniec and Opole.¹⁶⁵

One of the Poles, that served in Landwehr's corps, admits that the German soldiers committed violence toward the local population:

After a week of field training, we marched out through Gliwice and Prussian Herby toward Russia. ... following the retreating Russians, because we were the Silesian Landwehr Corps that was to protect the borders. After a few minor skirmishes, we reached the Vistula River and a bridge built by the Austrians, by the village of Józefów near Kraśnik, where we came into contact with the Austro-Hungarian Army. Although the people in Russian Poland were scared and reserved, we could not complain about the lodgings. Jewish people were more arrogant than scared. And so, for example, in Kazanów people rejoiced when we marched in and sighed with relief as they were freed them from the Cossack scourge. However, I have to admit that even among us there were unremorseful elements that ought to answer for the damages they did.¹⁶⁶

Presumably, the Landwehr regiment was responsible for the August violence in Częstochowa, and not the troops that marched into the city on August 4.¹⁶⁷

On August 8, occupational administration was established over the whole seized eastern zone by the former border with the Kingdom of Poland, from Kalisz – bombed in the first days of the war – up to Będzin, seized without a fight in the south. The reports on war booty in the first days of the war drew much

165 Ibid., pp. 37–39.

166 Nowak, *Moje przeżycia na Syberii 1914–1921*, p. 1.

167 A monograph on Częstochowa gives the number of killed that amounts to four, and blames for the violence in Częstochowa on the fire caused by the German soldiers themselves, not on the reprisal for shooting the German troops. Unfortunately, there is no source to confirm this information. Cf. R. Kołodziejczyk, *Zmierzch niewoli. U zarania niepodległości*, in: *Częstochowa. Dzieje miasta i Klasztoru Jasnogórskiego*, Vol. 2 *W okresie niewoli 1793–1918*, Częstochowa 2005, p. 302.

attention in Greater Poland and Silesia. The press eagerly reported on the matter. Only in the first week, the Upper Silesian regiments looted from the Dąbrowa Basin nine cars and twenty horse carts driven by Russian coachmen and escorted by the Prussian soldiers. They brought to Bytom uniforms, coats, furs, and high leather boots from confiscated storages. Particularly valued were saddle horses confiscated from the Cossacks in Będzin and allocated to officers that constantly complained about the shortages in this regard.¹⁶⁸ The officers headed out to the Western Front on these new mounts.

The troops from the corps of Gdańsk and Olsztyn also engaged in Eastern Front actions. The situation looked different here. Those were German troops that found themselves in the defensive. Germany did not plan to take any offensive actions in the Eastern Front, because it focused on the Western Front and the fastest possible elimination of French forces from the war, even before the full mobilization of the Russian forces. The unforeseen triumphs of the Russian Army in East Prussia forced the German staff to counteract the events, even at the cost of weakening the strength of the Western offensive. The German Eighth Army under the command of General Paul von Hindenburg – who replaced Colonel General Maximilian von Prittwitz und Gaffron, deemed responsible for the defeats in the first weeks of the war – contained the Russian offensive in East Prussia only after a month, in the Battle of Tannenberg (August 26–30) and the First Battle of the Masurian Lakes (September 8–10). However, at that time, there began the sequence of Austrian defeats in the Eastern Front.

After pushing away the Russian threat in East Prussia, Germany came to help the army of Franz Joseph I to prevent it from suffering a defeat in Galicia. On September 28, 1914, the German Ninth Army formed for this very purpose headed under the command of Hindenburg from Silesia towards Radom. This very day, the Austrian counteroffensive began under the command of field marshal Conrad, which reached Warsaw and Dęblin. However, the San River defeat of the Austrians who escorted the right flank of German troops thwarted Hindenburg's and Conrad's plans. The Russians conducted a huge assault toward Cracow and Poznań. It forced Hindenburg to order a retreat of the Ninth Army (on October 27) and form a line of defense that stopped the Russian offensive in the Battle of Łódź at the turn of November and December. The Austrians also managed to defeat the Russians in the Battle of Limanowa (December 3–14). At the beginning of December of 1914, the fights weakened and the Eastern Front

168 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 64, 12.08.1914.

was established on the line: Great Masurian Lakes – the Bzura River – the Rawka River – the Nida River – the Dunajec River.¹⁶⁹

In August and September 1914, the immediate danger that menaced East Prussia caused it to assume extraordinary preventive measures. Apart from the mobilization of Landsturm in the eastern military districts, all men that could still serve in the field joined the ranks of first-line troops. The order also applied to the Poles of Warmia and Masuria who had to face fighting against their compatriots for the first time. The Poles that served in the Russian Army were recognized among the fallen Russians:

A company [in Olsztyn], formed from the survivors and freed prisoners, was to maintain order and prospectively restrain the Russian offensive by blasting the bridges and destroying the railway line. . . . The company in which I served “retreated” from Olsztyn and wandered around the Warmia district and later the Szczytno district. . . . We heard the cannons pound, but we fortunately never encountered the enemy. Meanwhile, Hindenburg defeated the Russians in the Battle of Tannenberg. The Russians were in Olsztyn only for a day. Unexpectedly, the Germans invaded there and organized a bloody wedding. Reportedly, among Russians corpses, people found Polish soldiers who they identified by their scapulars, holy medals, and prayer books. Where can't you find Poles, after all.¹⁷⁰

Such encounters between Poles became routine not only in East Prussia but also in Galicia and the fights in the Carpathian Mountains.

To the West

Since August 8, the 12th Armored Infantry Division's regiments successively moved toward the Western Front in trains. The dispatch procedure developed surprisingly well, despite the many military transports passing through the railway junctions of the Upper Silesian Industrial Region. As many as sixty-four trains passed in eight hours through the medium-sized railway junction in Żory, already during the fights in the Eastern Front; that is, at the peak of military transportation needs. It means that individual trains passed the station every seven-and-a-half minute. All of them passed through Żory without delays or

169 Recently, a thorough coverage of these operations appeared in: M. Neiber, D. Jordan, *The Eastern front 1914–1920. From Tannenberg to the Russo-Polish war*, London 2008 (Polish ed.: Warsaw 2010).

170 K. Jaroszyk, *Wspomnienia z Prus Wschodnich (1908–1920)*, ed. W. Chojnacki, Olsztyn 1969, p. 35.

jams, which only testified to the precision of German mobilization plan developed over the years.¹⁷¹

Most of the military transports headed west, toward the already ongoing German offensive conducted according to the Schlieffen Plan. The Belgian border was the target. This was where the entire Upper Silesian division was sent. As a rule, the soldiers did not know where the concentration place; however, close to Wrocław, they already guessed that they headed towards the Rhine.¹⁷²

The Upper Silesian regiments headed to the frontline in separate transports. The 62nd Infantry Regiment was one of the first regiments to arrive at the Belgian border. Having departed on August 7 in Racibórz, the full transport with reserve soldiers then comprised eighty-four officers, 3307 soldiers and non-commissioned officers (three battalions of about 1000 soldiers each), and 236 horses. Furthermore, it consisted of wagons, field kitchens, sanitary wagons, victualer wagons, and ammunition.¹⁷³ The scorching summer strongly heated the transport wagons, decorated with flowers and yellow branches, but numerous civilians gathered at every station offered beverages to the soldiers. Upper Silesians treated alcohol prohibition of soldiers as an excessive precaution. After all, the former used to drink beer every day, so they could not understand why they were not allowed to make use of the well-equipped Bavarian station buffets. The extraordinary enthusiasm of civilians in 1914 only partially compensated for the prohibition. The civilians zealously provided the soldiers with food, small gifts, and flowers. Welcoming committees hastily started to form at individual localities, which were to exclusively care for military transports. After four days, the 62nd Infantry Regiment arrived at Mettlach near Saarbrücken, from which it marched through the Saar Basin and Luxembourg to reach the Belgian border on August 19.¹⁷⁴

On the other hand, the 22nd Infantry Regiment departed toward the west a few days later, between August 11 and 12. Before that, the soldiers attended masses at garrisons and the listened to speeches by battalion commanders, who delivered them in front of soldier ranks already with weapons, satchels, and full military kits on their backs. Afterward, columns of soldiers marched through city streets, packed with people, to the railway station. There was a huge enthusiasm at every Upper Silesian station where the train stopped, but also at German stations.

171 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 71, 5.09.1914.

172 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 11–13.

173 Ciupek, *Aus der Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments*, pp. 7–8.

174 *Ibid.*

Boisterous propaganda and anticipation of imminent victory drowned out the initial anxiety of the Germans. The power of military transports created an illusory sense of grandiose strength and superiority of Kaiser's troops.¹⁷⁵ The train traveled through Wrocław, Legnica, Zgorzelec, Bautzen, Dresden, Bamberg, and Worms. It unloaded in Saarbrücken, beyond the Rhine, on August 13.¹⁷⁶ Later, the 22nd Infantry Regiment marched for four days, to the Belgian border near French Lorraine, to the concentration place. In Luxembourg and Walloon Belgium, the marching soldiers already encountered hostile reactions from the locals, particularly after crossing the Meuse, where they quartered near Esch. The same situation occurred by the Belgian border, when the division turned towards the huge fortress of Longwy.¹⁷⁷

The transport route of the Infantry Regiment No. 157 was different. Eighty-five officers, 3292 soldiers and non-commissioned officers, and 236 horses set out from the garrison.¹⁷⁸ From Dresden, the train headed south to Heilbronn, but it eventually arrived at Saarland. The sense of anticipation for imminent victory dominated the German railway stations. No one doubted the scenario of a darting success and the return of soldiers at the very latest for Christmas. People chorally sang patriotic songs on platforms. Frequently, enemy caricatures decorated train cars. There appeared a writing on one car that bellicose declared: "Here you can declare even more wars!" After all, during the Regiment's journey south, Japan declared war on Germany.¹⁷⁹ However, the most frequent were the incredibly popular sayings and rhymes, such as "Every shot a Russian,/Every bayonet stab a Frenchman,/Every kick a Briton,/Every slap a Jap." Or, "Your Lordship journey directly to Paris" (*Herrentour direkt auf Paris*). Beside the common saying, "God punish England!" (*Gott strafe England!*), there frequently appeared and addition, "He will punish it" (*Er strafe es!*).¹⁸⁰ Later, when the situation required the use of cattle wagons in trains, the soldiers themselves self-mockingly replaced these writings with other, like "Nine horses or forty-six soldiers" (*9 Pferde oder 46 Mann*).¹⁸¹

175 Bölsche, "Ein Hammerschlag auf Herz und Hirn," pp. 54–58.

176 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 25–26.

177 *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

178 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 14.

179 *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

180 P. Englund, *Piękno i smutek wojny. Dwadzieścia niezwykłych losów z czasu światowej pożogi*, Kraków 2011, p. 24.

181 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Wahrheit und Lüge*, p. 38.

Like the Upper Silesians, the soldiers from Greater Poland also traveled west. However, the dominance of the Polish element played a significant role here. Some of the transports were more Polish than German, and only after supplementation in German lands, the ethnic ratio evened:

The entire journey [to the Western Front] lasted five days and four night. It was the best opportunity to get to know our bedfellows. Shared plight made us all into devoted brothers. There was Stachu Mikołajczak, Wojtek Magnuszewski, Szyszka, Cwojdziański, Bartkowiak, Szczepaniak, Kostański, Łazanowski, Skrzycki, Tomczak from the Bińków neighbourhood, Roźniarek from Ludwikowo, Dubert from the Kórnik area, Górczak and Kolendowicz from Mchy, the postman Konarkowski from Chwałkowo, and many, many others. We fraternized similarly with folks from Pleszew: Ulichnowski, Sikorski, Antczak, Nowak, and others. There was not a more ideal community around the world than ours. Polish language was the omnipotent ruler in our transport, while the thought or judgment of one applied to the whole group. . . . Those few Germans who came with us felt a bit uneasy, but a transport of Germans from Westphalia joined us already at the first lodging in Beckingen. Now that our regiment is complete, our non-commissioned officers and officers are exclusively German.¹⁸²

However, the carefree atmosphere quickly disappeared, even before the first fights, when they faced the weather conditions. The necessity of organizing additional training for the reserve soldiers before departure foretold the coming difficulties. The first long march of the Infantry Regiment No. 157 from Saarland through Luxembourg to the Belgian border turned out to be a nightmare for many soldiers. Not only the heat but also the undulating terrain caused many difficulties. The soldiers were unprepared for such an extreme effort. The satchels turned out to be overpacked as full equipment became a burden. They began to fall beside the road on the first day. To make things worse, the confiscated horses also proved too weak to drag carts packed with ammunition and equipment. The soldiers managed to keep a wagon in a column only thanks to an additional horse team. Moreover, the provisions were lacking. There was a constant lack of drinking water. Already in Luxembourg, supply officers faced difficulties with obtaining food due to their lack of experience. There was no shortage of food but, rather, the Luxembourgiens treated the Germans “reluctantly,” to put it mildly. Only over time, they decided to use a carrot-and-stick approach toward them, but also toward the Belgians and the French: “However, a little pressure and cash worked wonders.”¹⁸³ When the Infantry Regiment No. 157 finally reached the concentration place after the two-day-long march, it had to

182 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza.*, pp. 9–10.

183 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 17.

remain there until August 18, just in order to allow the exhausted soldiers and animals to rest, but also to conduct additional training that aimed at developing the organization of marches in columns. Only then was the regiment ready to move to the frontline.¹⁸⁴

The soldiers of Poznań regiments faced similar difficulties. One of them recalled the march in August 1914 as a torture, especially because they once walked seventy kilometers in a single day (!), which was twice the quota predicted for an infantryman in the German pre-war plans:

We already walked about fifty kilometers today. The sun burns, our faces and eyes are deluged with sweat that eats into our dried larynxes. Further and further without rest. One after another collapses and, after a short break, continues to slog onward so as not to lose his regiment in the ocean of people. Finally *halt*. The kitchens arrive and hastily serve food. Other columns march next to us, not only on the road or besides, but across the country, through the grains, potatoes, broken fences, and rails. Constantly onward and onward in some kind of a crazy rush. They banned us from drinking water because the wells are supposedly poisoned. We cannot overcome our thirst. The thirsty mob over a stream that flows along a burned village. They scoop water with hands, some fill hip flasks and vessels, some drink directly from the stream. Suddenly a command: "Prepare yourselves for departure." We haven't finished eating. Some pour away the rest, some pour it into hip flasks. There was no time for rest. The stragglers barely managed to catch up, and now – keep walking – there is no time for eating. . . . We march forward again. Our legs refuse to walk, refuse to flex, they are like trees, but after a hundred meters they get used to it once again and our boots steadily but stiffly hit the ground, stirring clouds of dust. We already marched more than sixty kilometers today – nearly seventy. We should rest. We have been marching since 2 am and now it is 5 pm.¹⁸⁵

The 63rd Infantry Regiment faced similar difficulties during their march. After a nice three-day-long journey by train, when they received gifts and singing at stations, they had to march over stone paved roads, which turned out to be grueling for the reserve soldiers, only one week in the regiment. It was not only the heat and burden but now also boots and footwraps that exaggerated the torture. Abraded feet were a real issue for the medical services because, over time, they caused deep wounds that required ambulatory treatment that removed a fair number of infantrymen out of active duty. Its consequence was the considerate slowing of the march of regimental columns that became increasingly stretched. The coachmen still had difficulties driving new horse teams due to shorter initial

184 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

185 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 12–13.

trainings. After arriving at the concentration place, they incessantly practiced marching and shipping.¹⁸⁶

The way to the frontlines looked slightly differently for the artillerymen of the 12th Infantry Division. They also departed from Grodkowo and Nysa on August 7–8 and, after three days, reached Saarbrücken. Also in this case the mood was exquisite, and even the lack of beer or wine was not an issue. The soldiers enjoyed the delightful landscapes through train windows. The transports indeed traveled according to mobilization schedules, but at a very slow speed of twenty to thirty kilometers per hour, which allowed the soldiers to cherish the surroundings. The soldiers of the 21st Field Artillery Regiment did not struggle so much with constant march due to the higher number of carts that could carry some of their own equipment. Quite surprisingly, descriptions of this march do not reveal hostility from Luxembourgiens, which was an issue for the infantrymen. After the war, many cordially recalled the people of Luxembourg who willingly sold food for German marks. In the lodgings, the incredibly hospitable Luxembourgiens were to admire the burly German bodies. Some recall an anecdote about a reserve officer who bathed under a bridge as local girls suddenly showered him with flowers from the bridge. The situation was ironically summed with words: “Oh, if only his beloved wife could see this.” Thus, we should not be surprised that, at the moment of their arrival at the destination, the artillerymen were in exquisite moods.¹⁸⁷

At the moment of concentration and after crossing the French border, the Pomeranian regiments joined the First Army, key in the 1914 campaign. Initially, the Silesian VI Army Corps operationally belonged to the Fourth Army commanded by Duke (*Herzog*) Albrecht of Württemberg. The V Army Corps – which included the VI Reserve Army Corps – of the Fifth Army stood to the left of the Silesians. The V Army Corps was commanded by the successor to the throne (*Kronprinz*), Wilhelm Hohenzollern. At the beginning of the war, the Silesians fought against the Fourth French Army under the command of General Fernand de Langle de Cary, that were also to conduct an offensive toward the Ardennes. This French Army consisted of II Corps, Colonial Corps, and XII Corps.¹⁸⁸ The troops of the V Army Corps of Greater Poland faced the Third French Army under the command of General Emmanuel Ruffey (since September 1914, under

186 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 41–42.

187 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 11–12.

188 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

the command of General Maurice Sarvail). This Army consisted of IV, V, and VI Infantry Corps along with the 7th Cavalry Division.

Baptism of Fire

Most soldiers remembered particularly well their first combat with the French and the Belgians. Baptism of fire is something extraordinary in the life of a recruit. For the first time, they had to face the fact that they must kill and may be killed, while their closest friends fall on the battlefield. They had to learn that not always would they kill someone anonymous, but sometimes they would stab the bayonet in the back of an enemy that stood right next to them. Later, frontline experience allowed the soldiers to partly accustom to the state of constant threat of life and participation in a mass murder, but the first time was a true baptism of fire for every young man. Furthermore, it was an opportunity for officers to assess the preparation of their troops and readiness for absolute submission to orders, even if the commander was about to send them to inevitable death on the battlefield.

Often, extreme exhaustion and emotions from battle made soldiers stop thinking rationally, which eased them into submission. The automatism of trained motions blunted their decision to go under enemy's fire. A man from Greater Poland recalls his first fight as a dramatic experience:

We hear a command: "Form an extended line! Down – up – march, march, down, and up etc. . . . Don't be afraid boys, the French shoot too high so they won't hit anyone." – yells Captain Moebius [a battalion's commander]. The French are well hidden. . . . The fire increases with every moment. . . . We push on in jumps. Fire increases from the left. We have to pass this oat field, the French must be there. We reached the oat field, where the French stand up here and there, fire a shot, and hide again. We have to capture this field by force. Hard as rock, the oat hinders our march. The French sit in the middle of the field. We push on slowly and carefully. Our line thickens, supported by other units, but we do not lose contact. We ready cold steel and rifles. Suddenly, two French heads come up two steps in front of us and fire simultaneously. We are fast enough to evade them and avoid death. At the same moment, our companions came out from the left and managed to knock them down. . . . There are so many dead bodies as sheafs on the field. We hear a trumpet. It is a signal to attack. From the left, we begin to hear a constant "Hooray!" There are fewer shots ahead. "Assault!" We run. Several fall. Each step a fallen man. We finally reach the line, but the French are not there. Where are they? We scramble from the line toward the hilltop, but we cannot look to the other side. Every man who does that – immediately drops dead. Bodies of soldiers, rifles, satchels, and helmets, they all roll down the mountain. The entire viaduct is covered with injured

who cry for help. The dying wheeze, shiver, and roll their eyes. Those no longer in need are stretched in unimaginable poses.¹⁸⁹

Rossignol

On August 22, 1914, the Upper Silesian regiments underwent their baptism of fire in the battle against the French near the Belgian village of Rossignol, in Wallonia, precisely in the triangle between Luxembourg and the French border, near Tintigny, in the province of Luxembourg. This small village at the foot of a low hill was hid in the forests. Its name became the symbolic first place of mass Polish deaths in the Kaiser's Army from the Upper Silesian regiments who fell during the First World War. It was in Rossignol where the soldiers learned what consequences await the civilians, when the former witnessed the execution of inhabitants on the order of a German commander. The fights for this village exemplify the tactics of the German troops at the very beginning of the war.

The entire battle area lied within the zone subject to the VI Army Corps, whose commander had two infantry divisions at his disposal (the 11th and the 12th), while the French had three divisions supported with artillery corps and two colonial divisions. The Upper Silesian regiments were to conduct the assault.

When the Upper Silesian division approached the village from the east, German scouting reported that the French troops are rather small. But the reconnaissance was imprecise; what probably hindered it were dense forests and well-hidden subunits of the Colonial Corps. While approaching Rossignol, the Germans unexpectedly encountered strong fire of the French avant-garde from the forest near the village. It was then when the subunits of the Regiment No. 157 first encountered the advance guard:

The advance of the Second Battalion of the Regiment No. 157 was very slow due to forest density and strong enemy resistance; the commanders of companies and platoons had to get used to a constantly changing situation; squads and individual shooters always shifted fire to greater distances, but it soon turned out that the enemy hides on the trees. Our musketeers were especially delighted in shooting down those "tree shooters" like sparrows.¹⁹⁰

With toil and considerable losses, they tried to push through the forest step-by-step, to its southern edge that went along the road from the village of Les Fossés. Initially, their own artillery did not conduct fire because it was unable to fire at

189 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 14–16.

190 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 18.

the forest with German infantry mixed with small French subunits or even individual soldiers. Meanwhile, support French troops reached Rossignol and forced the German Second Division to intensify its offensive. It was the 63rd Infantry Regiment that was to perform the assault from the west. Similarly, this direction required the soldiers to push through a dense forest, not to mention they had to follow a scheduled azimuth and not along the road. Dense underwood made it difficult for the soldiers to move capably. On the other hand, the French knew these positions well, so they assaulted from hiding and immediately retreated whenever the companies of the 63rd Regiment were about to concentrate. Even the cavalry subunits that moved along forest clearings participated in those counterattacks. The “tree shooters” also participated in this action. When the frontline regimental units finally reached the edge of the forest, before a small hamlet of Termes, they found themselves in front of the fields between the two villages. The terrain was flat and bare for about two kilometers. It was under fire from Termes, conducted by perfectly hidden shooters able to precisely observe the German offensive. The commander of the Infantry Regiment No. 157 abandoned his plan of the frontal attack on Rossignol due to the lack of support from the West and, instead, decided to head toward the French units in Termes that attacked him from the flank. From now on, they could rely on artillery support on open ground so, with the help of the battery from the 57th Field Artillery Regiment and a machine guns company, they managed to drive the French out of Termes.¹⁹¹

Thanks to that, they could use the artillery to cannonade Rossignol, which allowed the infantry to exit the forest under covering fire and gradually approach the town. The war diary of the 57th Field Artillery Regiment describes this crucial part of the battle as follows:

To our joy, at four in the afternoon we finally received the order to prepare the battery for the attack. The Second Unit was the first to exit the forest [from the direction of Termes]. It moved west from the road. The Fifth Battery under the command of captain Ulrici moved from our side, the first to exit the forest [north of Rossignol]. Its commander quickly found good ground and fired from a howitzer at the church tower. His shot was spot-on as we could immediately see fire and the machine gun's cannonade ceased. Happy with the success, the entire battery then bombarded the village with enemy troops, which started fires everywhere. The artillery men could see it clearly because there appeared white smoke from every window and rooftops under fire. However, the

191 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 45–46.

French also shot precisely, using both their artillery located on the hill behind the village and their shooters. Those were the well-trained and experienced colonial units.¹⁹²

Despite artillery support, the infantry assault on the village unexpectedly claimed many lives. It was the Infantry Regiment No. 157 that incurred particularly large losses:

The enemy still stood fast; our units were completely pulverized; many commanders died or were injured. The non-commissioned officers took over their tasks; Seidel, Lauterbach, Michalski, Pownug, the battalion drummer Heinze, and others who managed to regather the units and platoons and continue attacking. As the only one with relatively small losses, the Twelve Company finally showed up on the road that led to the village; however, its soldiers were so scattered [after the fights in the forest] that it forced captain Troschke to form them into a company from scratch. He did it so loud that the battalion commander beside him exclaimed: "Troschke, if you keep on yelling, the French will begin to flee." There was a large oat field to the south of the forest, but the oat was reaped, and oat ricks lay all around the field. The French shooters of the colonial units craftily hid behind or even inside them. In order to check the ricks, the soldiers had to pierce each with a bayonet, which gave much joy to our soldiers, who mostly came from villages. Musketeer Gukatsch, who skillfully and jocularly performed his task, called his neighbor: "Darn it [*pieronie*], Józek, do the French pay you for helping them with the harvest?"¹⁹³

German propaganda tried to paint the soldiers of colonial units in a bad light by stereotyping certain groups. Due to the fact that all of the Allies – the French, the English, and the Belgians – had colonial troops, the propaganda started to depict the war as a racial conflict, contrasting German culture (*Kulturvolk*) with uncivilized people of color. Playing cards for the soldiers turned out to be a good medium to spread this idea since the Old Maid was usually presented as a naked Zulu warrior, a Moroccan in jellabiya, or an Indian in a turban.¹⁹⁴ Over time, this primitive propaganda proved successful. The fear of a sudden attack of the Senegalese or the Moroccan, creeping like a shadow, also greatly afflicted the Poles in Kaiser's army, particularly during trench warfare, where there frequently were patrols that aimed at capturing enemies. A Kashubian in the German Army complains about that in his memoirs:

Neither the English nor the French scare me, only the blacks; I would rather not meet them. Why? – I asked. Because they are masters in crawling on the ground. You stand

192 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 17.

193 Original "Pierunna, Josef bis Du auch auf Erntearbeit bei den Franzosen?" qtd. after Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 20.

194 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg Wahrheit und Lüge*, pp. 69–70.

listening at the front of the trenches in the middle of the night and the wind rustles, so you cannot hear this black devil sweep along the ground until you have a knife in your stomach. It is too late then. Eh – said Herman – you would have to be asleep, otherwise you would hear someone approach. – Believe me, you cannot hear this Moroccan devil approach, it is so shrewd. There were already cases of people found dead on their duty with bayonets in their chests on the hill 304 [near Verdun].¹⁹⁵

The above banter about the Polish Upper Silesians fighting against the French hidden in haystacks evidences that the language barrier was still an issue in the German regiments. An officer of the 21st Field Artillery Regiment that took part in the battle frankly admits that the liaison officers who arrived with dispatch spoke German badly and the stress made him corrupt the language even more. In bad German and with some Silesian vernacular, the dialogue developed in the following manner:

“Sir Major allows himself to say, should shoot 500 meters to the right” (*Der Herr Major läßt sagen, 500 m nach recht soll geschossen werden*). He sat on a bike and rode down the road. After about half an hour, he returned: “Sir Major allows himself to say, the fire is good but 300 metres further” (*Der Herr Major läßt sagen, das feuer ist gut, aber 300 m weiter*). He sat on the bike and rode down the road towards Les Bulles. Fearless and solitary.¹⁹⁶

Equally humorous is a press coverage during the first months of the war that also emphasizes the clear distinction between the German regiments and those dominated by Poles. It was published as a war correspondent’s material in many Upper Silesian journals. It is hard to determine whether it was authentic, or was it written only for propaganda purposes. Entitled “Colonial Troops,” the text precisely illustrates the ethnic structure of the Upper Silesian regiments, known to the German commanders. According to this correspondent, the French doctor in captivity was to tell the following story in the field hospital:

The Bavarians are unbeatable when it comes to melee combat. But – the French doctor added – there are other troops in the German Army that cause panic among the French ranks. Those people are unstoppable and indestructible. They speak a strange language that is not German, and they must belong to colonial troops. Every time, when it comes to fight with bayonets, they yell: “Hoppla pieronie nabok zpyskiem!” [Oy, rasacal, move your gob aside!]. They annihilate everyone who resist them. No one can stop their offensive and the hits of their rifles.¹⁹⁷

195 B. Potrykus, *Wspomnienia Kaszuba spod Verdun*, Warszawa 1939, p. 23.

196 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 19.

197 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 75, 19.09.1914.

This grotesque depiction of the Upper Silesians purportedly aims at balancing the cruelty of the French colonial troops, who also fought against the Upper Silesian regiments in the beginning of the war.

In reality, after the end of the fights on August 23, the scenery of the battlefield at Rossignol was bleak and did not correspond with the humorous press coverage. The trenches, that separated the fields, were full of fallen soldiers. Mixed German and French corpses lied behind hedges, on the grass, on the meadows, and in the fields.¹⁹⁸ The fights continued long after breaking into the town. After the battle, the morale was far from being euphoric. Despite the exhaustion, many of them could not fall asleep. The awareness that almost every company suffered great losses during the assault was overwhelming. All the time, one could hear the cries of the injured in the village abandoned by the French that gave the made other soldiers restless. “The premonition of imminent death, so imminent that it completely preoccupied their minds”¹⁹⁹ exaggerated the already depressive mood. These scenes also miserably affected the soldiers of regiments who did not participate in the battle but only observed. Although they were part of other regiments, the view of the fallen and injured soldiers deprived the members of the 21st Infantry Regiment of any satisfaction after the successful battle (only one member of this regiment died, while three others were injured): “We were not happy. We were glad because we managed to seize Rossignol, but we also witnessed those horrifying bloody losses.”²⁰⁰

All the soldiers who participated in the fights for the first time felt the same. The image of corpses disheartened soldiers, particularly at the very beginning of the war, when their senses were not yet blunted, which was to happen after the experience of the never-ending trench warfare. A soldier from the Poznań regiment describes the moment when he saw the battlefield covered with corpses:

We slowly and carefully press forward. We move again, once in columns, once in an extended line, and bury all the bodies we encounter. Most of the corpses are blackened. We have the impression that they are niggers. Puffed lips, eyes shine with whites, turgid bodies, bulging stomachs. Swarms of flies and worms all around the place. We do not have to look for them because the putrid smell can be sensed from afar. We usually bury them immediately on site. Two trowels deep – covered with ground, anonymous – only a clod of earth is a sign that there lies a soldier. We only take off his identity badge.²⁰¹

198 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 17.

199 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 21.

200 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 18.

201 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 22–23.

Also, it was quite a disappointment that the famous, supposedly perfectly prepared German war machine did not prove itself in logistics during the first battle. The care for the injured left much to be desired. There was a shortage of corpsmen and stretcher-bearers. Regimental musicians had to help with removing the injured from the battlefield. Initially, the entire medical staff observed the battle from a distance, in the style of nineteenth-century battles. Overloaded sanitary wagons could not transport the constantly rising number of injured from first-aid stations to the field hospital; they proved especially useless in places without roads. The injured had to be transported through forests on one's shoulders or on stretchers. Due to the lack of direct contact with the troops, it was hard to properly locate first-aid stations to gather the injured. A desperate medic of the 63rd Regiment tried to reach the first line himself at the edge of the forest before Termes in order to assess the situation. All those faults were later amended, and the troops received an order to regularly inform the dressing stations about their location. Due to the fact that the sanitary wagons were too heavy for rural roads, they were deprived of excessive load, while the number of stretcher-bearers was increased to the decline in regimental orchestra posts.²⁰²

The view of the injured made a strong impression on the soldiers who approached the first line of the front. The artillerymen were astonished and scared when they saw the first lightly injured infantrymen headed toward the rear on their own: "One of them sustained his arm with a bloodshot band, another one had his head muffled, some soldiers in pairs or trios walked without legs, sustaining each other. They called to us "Forward! Forward!" or "These bloody asses shoot from the trees."²⁰³

The medical care at the field hospital was better. Here, the long-time preparation and conclusions derived from previous wars in the second half of the nineteenth century proved especially useful: the requirement to select the injured and deliver medical care in a fixed order according to the level of injury. A doctor of the Regiment No. 157 reported after the battle that his staff managed to block the bleeding and avoid infection in most cases of the injured who managed to arrive at the field hospital.²⁰⁴

However, the amount of German losses was very high. The Infantry Regiment No. 157 lost eighteen officers and 163 soldiers. Among the injured were twenty-one officers and 379 soldiers; there was no information about 159 soldiers,

202 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 47–48.

203 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 16.

204 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 21.

even though some of them later turned up. The general loss in the German Army amounted to 1700 fallen and heavily injured soldiers, which was horrifying in light of the fact that it was a battle for a small town.²⁰⁵

But the amount of the French loss was even higher. The Third Colonial Division alone lost 1700 soldiers, according to the French reports. The overall French estimate of the loss suffered because of the situation amounted to 4000–5000 fallen and heavily injured. The French particularly suffered from artillery fire, but infantry actions were equally ruining.²⁰⁶

The memories of the French and German soldiers were the same. They all remember the masses of killed people:

On August 22. . . . What massacre! The busy road is full of broken carts, injured soldiers, dead horses, and fallen soldiers who lie in a bizarre tangle. Leaves and broken branches constantly fell and covered this maze. In a trench, I saw the commander of my artillery with pink foam coming from his mouth. The ambulance full of injured, shot by all kinds of bullets, yelling, groaning. A doctor major who sat at the wheel with a big red blood-stain on his chest seemed as if only waiting for his death.²⁰⁷

An unexpected epilogue to the Rossignol battle happened on the following day. The soldiers of the Upper Silesian regiments finally felt like conquerors in a partly ruined town, still crowded with civilians who did not leave the village with the French troops. The Upper Silesians started first war looting. During the scouring of houses, they often decided to exchange their sweaty military vests and pants for confiscated underwear, even one that belonged to women.²⁰⁸ Moreover, they no longer had to obey the rule that only the quartermaster units provide the supply by buying food from the local farmers in Belgium and Luxembourg, a rule meticulously obeyed until very recently. When a provisioner of the Regiment No. 157 found a bullock in the forest, he no longer cared about finding its owner. He immediately killed the bullock, however, he did that “not strictly in compliance with the art of butchery [he shot the bullock].” After quartering, the bullock ended up in the kitchen’s kettle.²⁰⁹ Similarly, another subunit of the regiment, after cleaning up in a nearby stream during the bivouac, brought another trophy. They “caught” a “wandering” chicken and found additional food

205 Ibid., p. 22.

206 Ibid.

207 P. Failin, *J'étais à Rossignol*, par le Caporal-clairon, Paul Failin, du 3.R.I.C., www.rossignol.free.fr (27.02.2013).

208 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 23.

209 Ibid., p. 24.

products and wine. The supply officer indeed wanted to give a Belgian woman of nearby household a worthless requisition bill, but she refused to take it and said with anxiety that the chicken is not hers. The bill ended up at the door because the owner was unknown.²¹⁰

The following day, the situation in the village after the battle and robberies was very tense. At 8 am, when part of the Infantry Regiment No. 157 received the order to depart, some suddenly noticed shots coming from basements, windows, and attics. At that time, many French captives waited at the church square to be led to the front support area, as they found themselves in the middle of a chaotic firefight. Here and there, the Germans torched local houses in order to bring the situation under control (there were as many as 184 burned houses). Similarly, the 63rd Infantry Regiment found itself under fire during their bivouac. Armed infiltrators (*Franktireurs*) were burdened with the responsibility for the assault, because one could find civilian clothes in some satchels of captives. The commander of the Infantry Regiment No. 157 ordered his soldiers to meticulously search through the entire village. Two civilians with rifles were executed next to a burning church. The execution's proceedings were dramatic. It happened in the middle of a burning village, next to the church that was its central point, from which – at the very moment of the death volley – “the cross fell [from its tower] to the ground on the bodies of the executed”.²¹¹ After the Upper Silesian division departed, 108 Rossignol inhabitants were arrested and accused of attacking German soldiers; ninety-one were executed.²¹²

The German soldiers' fear of the French partisans not always had a rational basis as it did in Rossignol. Sometimes, it was just an excuse for robberies, as mentions by one of the Greater Poland soldiers who fought in France along the Bavarians:

We approach a village. Assault it and clear of Franktireurs. The Germans rule this place as if it was their own already on the first day. One house is still closed. They use gunstocks to open the door and windows. Our two Bavarians move inside fist. The kitchen, they again use stocks to open cabinets and drawers. A clatter of shattered pots and, in a flash, there is a big pile of shards in the middle of the kitchen. They use stocks to open the next door. The bedroom. A pale young woman in bed. They remove the eiderdown that covers her, she sits upright on the bed and points out at the baby lying next to her that was born a couple of days ago. They hit her thigh with a stock. She jumps off the bed and folds her hands, begging them to save her and her baby. “Are you crazy! To treat a

210 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

211 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

212 *Les necropoles, Rossignol*, www.rossignol.free.fr (28.02.2013).

sick woman like that” – Zaklicki tells them, interceding for her. “Oh, you must be her friend! She may hide a Frankiteur under her bed” – two Bavarians answer him. . . . The woman lies in her underwear with the child on the floor next to the wall, she trembles, looks lurid, but cries and begs no more. They turn the bed upside down, threw everything out of the wardrobes in the niches, they even broke the paintings that hang on the wall and throw them at the middle of the room. Because a Franktireur could have also hidden behind a painting. The house is full of soldiers. They look everywhere. The same destruction in every room. All the things onto a single pile. Savage lust of destruction.²¹³

Similar civilian tragedies occurred in the first months of the war in front of many Poles. Bogdan Hulewicz recalls two particularly dramatic situations. The first is the bombardment of the already-seized Belgian Louvain by the German artillery. All the inhabitants had to leave their houses for an attack on a German patrol. However, before that happened, the Germans attacked with incendiary ammunition, which caused a sudden fire that overtook the majority of houses and burned nearly 1000 houses; many Belgians remained at homes as they did not believe that the Germans would decide to bombard an unprotected town.²¹⁴

A Polish officers candidate suffered even more during the execution of two innocent young Belgians who were thought to be spies:

The boys came from a nearby village. They rode down the road on bikes and every one of them was thought to be a spy. There was an order to shoot down every cyclist close to the brigade (*Alle belgische Radfahrer im Bereich der Brigade sind zu erschiessen*). Bikes are good, they will be useful to the company. Boys received an order to dig ditches: they were executed on the spot. Until the very end, they did not understand what is going on. They rode this road every day; they were sixteen years old. . . . During the bivouac, the soldiers commented on the bombardment and burning of Louvain. No one mentioned the execution of “the cyclists-spies.” They knew that captain Rabius did not like it. They praised the bombardment of the city: “after all, they did not shoot at us when we were in transport. The Franktireurs are criminals, they deserve punishment, they shot at us.”²¹⁵

There is quite a grotesque story about the use of this – popular during the war – word to describe French infiltrators. In 1914, at the very beginning of the war, the state prohibited the use of many popular French words in German language. The sole exception was the word “Franktireur” because, as it was explained, it signifies “the enemy’s disgrace so no one could possibly replace it with a German word.”²¹⁶

213 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 19–20.

214 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, pp. 24–25.

215 Ibid., pp. 26–27.

216 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 77, 26.09.1914.

Cutry

Other regiments also underwent their baptism of fire, although, it was not always as bloody as under Rossignol. In all cases, it happened in the third decade of August, 1914.

Moving to the fortress of Longwy, the 22nd Infantry Regiment came under artillery fire behind Niederkorn (near Esch). It was the first time that the soldiers could witness the consequences of field artillery shrapnel and light bullets assault. The troop did not suffer any losses. Everything was like during the maneuvers. When the fire stopped, the local civilians treated the soldiers to milk and buns.²¹⁷ At the beginning of the war, the fear of shrapnel fire was very high because they wreaked havoc among the infantry and the cavalry in the nineteenth century. Cartridges, usually filled with more than 200 leaden bullets, usually exploded in the middle of a column or in front of an assaulting infantry.²¹⁸ Kazimierz Wallis describes his first encounter with such a weapon as a dramatic experience:

At 5 am, there began shrapnel fire from both sides. The shrapnel exploded at our left, behind nearby trenches. The shrapnel are something terrible when you see it for the first time. Only slowly can you get used to it. Way off in the distance, you see a flash of the shot, then a few seconds of silence. Soon, you can hear a hum and whizz of approaching shrapnel. After that, they explode with a bang louder than the sound of any powerful grenade heard from close distance, and then thousands of iron fragments spray in every direction. You see a fireball, how it blows out with a crash, particularly in the darkness. If a shrapnel explodes right above the ground, then an entire cloud of soil and stones rises above the ground. Yesterday, we sat in dugouts during the fire. Only after each shot could we check to see the effects of each shot. In a half an hour, the shrapnel fire stopped.²¹⁹

After the transition to trench warfare, the effectiveness of such ammunition considerably decreased. Shrapnel were only effective in open field combat.

On August 21, the German soldiers finally crossed the French border near Hussigny. The village was already conquered, there was a German flag on the church tower. The effects of war were quite clear here: Hussigny was partly burned and ruined while few civilians, including women and children, stood frightened in front of the houses that were left. Here also occurred an attack that many associated with the French infiltrators, when someone fired the German dragoon cavalcade.²²⁰

217 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 28–29.

218 *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918. Ereignis und Erinnerung*, ed. R. Rother, Berlin 2004, p. 111.

219 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia 4.07.1916.

220 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 29.

For the 22nd Infantry Regiment, the baptism of fire happened during the clash near Cutry, on August 22–23. The unit's task was to break the line between the fortress in Verdun and Longwy. The fortification was surrounded by the ring of villages conquered by Germans in the French department Meurthe-et-Moselle in Lorraine. After reaching the hills near Cutry, a regiment found itself under artillery fire that fell the first soldiers. Two companies of the Third Battalion turned into an extended line to the east of the village, in which the French shooters hid in houses, still perfectly visible due to their red trousers ("visible as poppy blossom"). A single machine gun fired from the church tower and ceased only after a gunshot exchange with the German machine gun company. Nevertheless, the German infantry assault collapsed; but after the arrival of the heavy artillery at the nearby hills, the German's could shell the village and the church. It was then that there occurred a rare instance of a classic line infantry assault, unusually in this trench warfare:

They were so sure about their victory that they started an assault without waiting for the cover of their own artillery. With the bayonets, drums, and trumpeter's command "Forward!", they reached the burning village, totally oblivious to the fire of their cannons, as they ran screaming "Hooray!" They pushed the enemy out of Cutry after a short fight, also with civilian participants.²²¹

At 3.30 pm, the French conducted a counterattack preceded with artillery fire. They completely destroyed two batteries of the German 11th Field Artillery Regiment on a hill. All horses and almost entire cannon service died. At 5 pm, shrapnel and artillery shots bombarded Cutry while the French attacked the western part of the village, abandoned by the Germans. The fights ceased in the evening.

Only after dusk was it possible to again form the troops scattered during the fights. The field kitchens struggled to provide even the one meal during this day. In expectation of long fights on the hills south of Cutry – for the first time – the Germans started to entrench, out of fear of another French offensive.

However, the battle slowed on the following day. The French retreated under the cover of night. Around the constantly bombarded Longwy fortress, four kilometers away from Cutry, all towns burned, which created a gloomy background in the first days of the war. The losses of the 22nd Infantry Regiment suffered were quite high, taken into account the extent of fights: twenty-four soldiers died and 118 were injured, including eight officers.²²² Two days later,

221 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

222 *Ibid.*, pp. 30–34.

another forty soldiers, including officers, fell and as many as 346 were injured – 28 were reported missing – during a similar operation conducted to seize the Longuyon village, situated further south in the same department. Overall, it meant that over 500 soldiers were removed from the fights in the first week, which makes 17 percent of the initial composition of the regiment.

Baslieux

At the very moment of the transport's departure from Wrocław, the 38th Infantry Regiment of the reserve VI Army Corps consisted of eighty-four officers and 3229 soldiers.²²³ On August 24, the unit reached the frontline near Longwy after marching from Saarbrücken.²²⁴ It became part of the Fifth Army under the command of the German crown prince (eventually, the V Army Corps from Poznań and the VI Army Corps from Silesia also became part of the Fifth Army). The Fifth Army was to move to the Meuse River.

As the reserve unit, the 38th Infantry Regiment underwent their baptism of fire during the battle between the villages of Laix and Baslieux on August 22, 1914. The fights started during their march towards Longwy. They Germans first started shooting towards the French noticed due to visible blue jackets, which was when the battle commenced. The Germans did not have a good knowledge of the French positions. Later, it turned out that the French hid on the edges of the fields and forests that surrounded the village; some shooters hid again in tree crowns. Moreover, the French artillery constantly shelled the Germans from the flank. A journal of a company commander offers a description of the infantry attack, so rare during the later stages of the Great War:

We reach the forest edge without firing a shot. From here, the road goes uphill. I command the troop in the advanced squad with two companions, including a brave musketeer Schramm and his First Team. I have my bayonet firmly placed on the rifle, as do others. The company follows us in a certain distance. After a couple of minutes, we stop dead in our tracks. Four or five French shooters appear about twenty steps before us. At first, both sides are surprised. But at that moment, I pick up my rifle. It banged almost immediately. Schramm fired simultaneously just over my right shoulder. A French bullet flied under my left elbow and killed one of my people. Neither me nor Schramm were shot. Whereas the French turns around, throws his rifle away, and runs the other way, into the bush. Similarly, the other French hastily disappears without firing a shot at

223 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 4.

224 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

us. We run fast and follow them, soon to find a French shooter near his rifle with arms splayed out in a pool of blood. He was shot right in the chest. . . . It is difficult to push forward as one may easily lose his orientation in a dense forest. It would be impossible without a compass. However, the French weaken under constant fire, leaving fallen and injured soldiers behind. I can still hear a sound of whistle that a French officer used to command his people. . . . Finally, the brush thins. We run forward with our bayonets on rifles and a loud "Hooray!" The French shooters run away. A couple of them are stabbed to death with bayonets. There is a savage scene at the forest's edge. As far as the eye can see, our infantry presses forward under the shots of an invisible enemy. Many fallen lie on bloodstained ground. Distant hills smoke with heavy black-yellow clouds from the shots of French bombs filled with picric acid; nearby we see fires from the shelling of nearby villages. Battle noise thunderously echoes in the forest. Our shooters also sustain heavy fire in the forest. The bullets that hit smooth beech trunks buzz in the air like hornets. They swiftly break the branches that fall with a deafening thud. A regiment before us suffered much. Our shooters gain ground with difficulty. The terrain rises like an artificial hill. We can clearly see the enemy. The French shooters lie in a field of grain in three rows, one after another. They probably still wear peace-time uniforms as their red trousers glisten. Individual shooters rise like hares and just as quickly disappear after each shot in the high grain.²²⁵

Nevertheless, the French of the 12th Infantry Division retreated in the evening from the village, now to be occupied by the Silesian regiment.

Always Marching

The majority of regiments from the eastern German provinces participated in a couple of episodes of the big German operation that occurred in the autumn of 1914. Starting with the crossing of the Meuse, the Battle of the Marne, the so-called Race to the Sea, and ending with the creation of the trench front-line. However, from the viewpoint of regular German soldiers, the war in 1914 differed from what their fathers described about the campaigns of 1866 and 1871, and even more from those mythologized victorious narratives about these wars which they read about at German schools. Instead of a single big triumphant victory and an effortless march after a fleeing enemy, there began a campaign in which both sides sought to gain strategic advantage. It was the beginning of the end of German staff officers' dream of an immediate victory on the Western Front according to the Schlieffen Plan.²²⁶ Even worse, the German Army was not

225 Ibid., pp. 11–12.

226 M. Gilbert, *Pierwsza wojna światowa*, Poznań 2003, pp. 96–98.

logistically prepared for such an abrupt change of the plans. No one prepare a backup plan.

First fights occurred within a relatively limited area. But it was time for battles of key strategic importance, whose range was only graspable on staff maps. For an infantry soldier, it was a chain of never-ending marches and gunshots, hardly understandable because he no longer pressed west, which previously was a visible sign of the campaign's success. First such complications occurred already during the forcing of the Meuse at the end of August. This peaceful and harmless river without backwaters, dozens of meters wide, should not have been an obstacle for the winning army. The sappers prepared a bridge for the Upper Silesian division, near Cesse, in a partly forested area that nonetheless remained under constant fire of the unseen enemy, this time well-prepared. Therefore, when the soldiers of the 63rd Infantry Regiment walked in line in an area that even lacked bushes, they became an easy target for the French, so the battle began to resemble other fights that were to occur in following three years:

Enemy shots whizzed and screeched in the air. They flew over our heads like invisible flies. The air directly trembled because of explosions, the soil erupted nearby, while its surface was already engraved with craters after the bombs. Bullet after bullet! The artillery fire, the rifle shots, and the rattle of machine gun locks created a horrifying music.²²⁷

On this day, the troops of the entire Twelfth Infantry Division had to eventually retreat, returning through the ill-fated bridge to the other side of the Meuse.²²⁸

The 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment crossed the Meuse near Dun-sur-Meuse a couple days later, on September 1, only to experience a similar situation. The bridge over the river in the village was only partly ruined, so the sappers set primitive wooden platforms for temporary transit, using pillars and a small islet that stuck out of the water. However, French machine gun fire from the western part of the village was so heavy that the sappers had to reinforce the beachhead to maintain the position on the other side of the river. Only afterward was it possible for other battalions of the regiment to move, even though under relentless fire of the French artillery.²²⁹

The battles on the Western Front were extraordinarily fierce in that period of the war. On September 2–3, the 22nd Infantry Regiment fought severe battles near Montfaucon-d'Argonne, close to the strategic road from Reims to Paris, while heading west from Coutry and Longuyon. Lined by many hills and covered

227 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 52–54.

228 Ibid.

229 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 24–25.

with forests, Argonne area was the heart of the events. The French quartered on the wooded hills behind Romagne-sous-Montfaucon as they saw the German columns along the road from the east from afar. Thus, the French could use their heavy artillery to shell from a long distance, probably with the intention to later counterattack with infantry. The sole shelter for the German shooters were the partly unmown farmlands and brushes near a tiny stream. The smoke from the shelling covered the entire terrain.

The French artillery was experienced and they haystacks points of reference for the bombardment. The only solution was melee combat to push the French out of their towering position in the hillside forest. It could only be achieved by assaulting head on. Therefore, the Germans decided to attack with bayonets after breaking through the hill. They partly achieved their goal in the middle. They killed the French that surrendered on the spot. However, the attack stuck at both flanks. There was no communication between the assaulting companies of the regiment. Moreover, there was no possibility to deliver ammunition under the relentless artillery fire. Add to that a daring counterattack of the French, completely untypical in the further course of the First World War but so frequent in its first stage.²³⁰ This was an assault under open banners performed by soldier who walked upright in a thick line under the command of officers on horses. This allowed the 22nd Infantry Regiment to keep its positions in the trenches despite overwhelming French numbers.²³¹

However, the general advantage of the French became increasingly visible due to the dramatic tactical situation of the Upper Silesians, who attacked up the hill and struggled with ammunition shortage. The German field artillery also started to lose with the French heavy artillery. The Germans had to abandon the hill, and the soldiers, particularly those from the reserve company, did that in a panic. Worse yet, the German artillery started to shoot their own troops during the retreat, despite the Germans unwrapping their battalion banners in the act of despair to show their positions. Only after an officer on horse fought his way back to report about the badly located suppressive fire did the artillery begin to act in support. This was when the Germans brought heavy mortars with 210 mm grenades from the divisional reserve to strengthen their shelling

230 Equally surprising for the German near Loos in 1915 were the British officers at the head of the close columns of the soldiers on the horses, who walked towards the fire of the German gun machines. See J. Keegan, *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Eine europäische Tragödie*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2010, p. 286.

231 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 46–48.

capabilities. Nevertheless, the Germans with astonishment observed how the French started another counterattack, under brutal shelling, according to the tactics of conducting an offensive at all costs, regardless the number of casualties. In one day, the 22nd Infantry Regiment lost thirty soldiers, saw 240 injured, and was missing 19.²³²

The shelling of own troops was not a rare occurrence in the First World War. In the first stage of the war, when individual units constantly moved, it required the artillery to master the precise movement of fire in front of the assaulting infantry as the use of curtain fire was still virtually unknown. The Silesians of the Infantry Regiment No. 157 experienced it during one of the episodes of the Battle of the Marne, in mid-September. While the companies of this regiment were in position near Villotte in Lorraine and began their assault on the French hiding in the brush, at the same time the artillery started firing at them, wreaking havoc and causing captives to escape during the turmoil. An entry in the regiment war diary only a month after the fight confirms that it was not a rare case as it had happened “many times before.”²³³

In September maneuver warfare was about to cease. Both sides were unable to conduct a considerable attack to threaten the frontline that was just taking shape. The last larger battle of the Silesian Regiments was that of Varennes and Montfaucon-d'Argonne in September 22–30, 1914. It happened after the defeat in the Battle of the Marne. The German troops tried to maintain the line of the Argonne, which separated the area of Ile-de-France and Paris from Lorraine, between the valleys of the Aisne river in the west and the Meuse in the east. This would secure the possibility to commence the siege of the Verdun fortress, which until then blocked the German units, because it disabled the possibility of a French attack from the flank.

The 22nd Infantry Regiment played a key role in this battle. The infantry attack on the hill before Montfaucon-d'Argonne happened on September 22, preceded by a cannonade. The French parried the German assault already in August, so they were well-prepared for defense. The French commenced rifle and machine gun fire from deeply hidden trenches and trees crowns. Moving within a small forest was very difficult. The Germans succeeded in capturing it and 150 captives only after a day-long battle and great losses. In the following days, the French did leave Montfaucon but – when defending the road to Verdun – they also fortified a nearby small village of Malancourt, located about five to six kilometres

232 Ibid.

233 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 29.

away. The patrol that headed there did not recognize French fortifications. On September 29, when the assault at Malancourt started, the Germans fought for every house as they tried to capture the church in the heart of the village, from which the French shelled the main road that cut across the center of this small village. The shelling was so heavy that – even after the German troops forced their way into the village – the attack stuck for two hours in front of the church wall. Only primitive pikes, hastily constructed under fire, allowed the soldiers to breach the church's wall. When the soldiers finally entered, the French captured them in a cross fire from both sides, which stopped the attack again.

The breakthrough happened only when an Upper Silesian named Walluda, from the Second Battalion, managed to crawl to the wooden church gate, dug a hole, and slipped inside a wisp of straw on fire. The gate quickly burst into flames. It was then when the French surrendered, while some of them jumped out of the windows in uniforms partly burning. The frontal assault on the church happened by the sound of drum played by the last living drummer. The attack was conducted by another Upper Silesian named Lassok, in place of the fallen warrant officer, who walked with an unwrapped banner. Overall, there were fifty captives. The entire village was burnt by the order of the German headquarters as a punishment for such fierce resistance (“a sea of flames testified to the execution of the order”). This decision had disastrous consequences because the regiment quartered in the neighborhood much longer than anticipated, but without lodgings, the “companies had to move to their old positions south of Montfaucon.”²³⁴

Already in the first weeks of the war, people gradually became aware about the distinct nature of the conflict due to the high number of casualties. With the development of the war, field medical care for the injured started to lack. Both sides required months of experience to improve their procedures. The number of injured and the nature of their injuries greatly exceeded the projections about the war before 1914 and the conditions for which the sanitary services were trained during peace. Guarantees about a “civilized” war with few casualties turned out to be empty promises. There were special articles about it in the press. The famous surgeon from Wrocław, Hermann Küttner, author of many academic textbooks on surgery and orthopedics – for example, as the co-publisher of the prestigious series *Ergebnisse der Chirurgie und Orthopädie* (Surgery and Orthopedics Results) issued since 1910 – claimed before the war that the rate of the injured and fallen soldiers in wars constantly decreases. But

234 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 64.

he based his analysis on the Frederician and Napoleonic Wars, during which this rate amounted to 22–26 percent of all soldiers. According to Küttner, this rate in the wars of the second half of the nineteenth century amounted to only 16 percent, while in the Boer Wars it amounted to 12 percent. Küttner argued that the application of improved defense measures against artillery fire would eventually decrease casualties even more, supported by the advances in medical service.²³⁵

However, the course of events was different, as we read in a dramatic description of the fate of the injured from the reserve 38th Infantry Regiment after a shelling:

The injured yelled and complained, lying in the field for many hours. With partly cracked limbs, they tried to crawl back or forth as they dragged their trunks with their hands. It lasted almost the entire day because, when the enemy artillery noticed their attack collapsed, it began shelling our trenches and the forefield with bombs and shrapnel with such intensity, that repeated corpsmen attempts, with a white flag and without it, proved futile. The French crawled towards nearby bushes to fire at everyone. The artillery shelled at the trenches from positions behind the frontline. Only during the following night did we manage to bring other injured to our posts despite enemy fire, including the captain, to dress their wounds and send to the rear. Or to at least let them die in peace and warmth, if the medical art could not help. However, most injured lied in the battlefield for two days and nights in rain and wind as they decayed alive and died. Many of those whom we managed to bring back (about 180 people) had to die.²³⁶

The growing piles of fallen soldiers in front of battle stations incited terror. Corpses lay on both sides of the frontline. The soldiers gradually started to understand that the war they initially treated with enthusiasm changed into a never-ending horror in front of their very eyes. Already in mid-September, the usual and constant view by the Meuse River were numerous corpses that lay in the fields on both sides of the river. At the time, this view still instilled people with terror but – during full-fledged trench warfare – it became casual: “On partly reaped fields, there are corpses in red trousers and blue jackets that resemble red poppies and blue loggerheads.”²³⁷ Several days later, another soldiers of the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment saw a view near Verdun at dawn that would not differ much from the sights that accompanied the majority of soldiers throughout the following four years: “In the morning sun, about ten meters from our frontline, we saw about fifty alpine shooters on the resistance wire, in their blue cloth jackets and trousers, hanging with their heads down and legs up. All dead.”²³⁸

235 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 66, 19.08.1914.

236 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 38–39.

237 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

238 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Since the beginning of the war, there emerged logistic problems whenever the assault of the multimillion German Army halted. Already in August, one could observe that the provisioning in the German Army grows increasingly deficient. After all, the war was not to last for long. The Germans did not prepare for the circumstance of quartering at one locality for more than one day. They thought that, if anything, blitzkrieg will cause provisioning problems in the field kitchens at the back of the cavalcade, which also turned out to be the issue. The necessity of operating in the same neighborhood for many years created many difficulties with the provisioning of regiments. After all, the units carried only a small supply for soldiers and fodder for horses. From the viewpoint of a regular soldier, it was food that played the key role in their trust for superiors and faith in the successful nature of this enterprise.

Provisioning proved insufficient already after entering occupied Belgium. During long marches, there always appeared reports of supply problems. The supporting troops complained the most, particularly field artillery regiments who lacked own kitchens. In the minds of staff planners, they were to use the kitchens of infantry regiments, but it turned out impossible, particularly during combat, when the kitchens were unable to serve enough food even for their own battalions. Eventually, the last resort was the good will of Belgians who would sell something to the German supply officers.²³⁹

However, during the arduous march west, this source dried up after crossing the French border. Initially, the troops encountered abandoned villages with basements filled with various goods, like lard in earthen pots and wine in barrels and bottles. The inhabitants hastily abandoned their houses, often leaving bread and meat on the table.²⁴⁰ Already in September, these good times ended. In Aubréville in the Argonne area, marching at Verdun at the beginning of September, desperate soldiers of the 22nd Infantry Regiment were catching wandering chickens for roasting. Fortunately, orchards were full of fruit, so they ate delicious apples, peaches, and plums. To an extent, the tradesmen that accompanied the regiments redeemed the situation, but they sold almost exclusively drugs: snuff, tobacco, coffee, and sometimes chocolate.²⁴¹ The soldiers badly felt the lack of these goods, so they often invented strange substitutes. One of the Upper Silesians of the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment was to replace the deficient tobacco with ground coffee, which was included in military rations. It seems that

239 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 15.

240 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

241 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 53.

the experiment did not succeed because, “[when] smoking real mocha, it produced a hellish smell. But its taste was quite good. However, people who did not smoke, had to avoid this big cloud of smoke.”²⁴² In the regiments of Greater Poland, the soldiers dried any type of leaves, chopped them, and after smoked in pipes but, as one of the smokers recalled, it was “awful. The smoke stings the lips, the nose, and the eyes. So, we ask each other if they have any proper cigarettes. We go to other companies, but the misery is the same everywhere.”²⁴³ Capture of abandoned livestock was a daily occurrence. As a rule, no one waited for the cooks but killed the animals on the spot and divided their meat between the companies. Such situations awakened farm instincts in some soldiers, particularly those from villagers. During the retreat along the Argonne area to Moselle, when a company of the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment saw a couple of cows that mooed and moved along with the unit, the company did not kill them – due to the lack of time – but at least milked them so that the cows would not suffer due to full udders.²⁴⁴

By mid-September, cases of finding cows, pigs, or poultry became rare. The houses in conquered towns were found empty. The troops had to settle for the provisions of their own field kitchens, rated rather bad. As one of the soldiers of the Upper Silesian 21st Infantry Regiment writes:

We receive some beef roast, but it is terribly tough because they killed the animal only a couple hours ago. Everyone regrets that we do not have a mincer. We are very hungry, and we miss sugar that we lack for many days. Everyone envies the person with a piece of chocolate. Our horses also suffer terribly. It is cold, rainy, and there is little food. Oat field are already ravaged. The division advises us to reap and thresh but how, when we are supposed to march all day and night.²⁴⁵

As an extreme case, let us consider the example of eating raw goat meat by soldiers from Greater Poland, in the autumn of 1914:

Kaptojnät jabbed something “it is here! it is phere!”, he says in an undertone. I jab with my bayonet as well and I hit something soft. I reach toward the bayonet and I grab a shaggy bulk. In disgust, I withdraw my arm. What can it be? It must be a Senegalese because he stinks, I recall the daily order saying that the French brought their colonial troops, whom we should capture alive. “I hold him, I hold him! – says Kaptojnät louder and pulls something – Help me!” Despite my disgust, I grab a tuft of shag as if it was a beard, and we strenuously pull it toward the middle of the road. We grabble it. What

242 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 33.

243 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 24.

244 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 35.

245 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 32.

is it? It has horns! It is a goat! An old goat!!! . . . Our companions take the trophy and carry it up, while we remain at our post. . . . The goat's pelt is already peeled off and lies in the corner. They quartered the bulk with bayonets. The soldiers detach pieces of meat from the bones with whatever they have, and they mince it on a dirty board; they want to make minced meat. "Who has salt?" It turns out that we have only two lumps of salt. Too little, but we have no more. If only we had onion. . . . we put the still smoking bloody carrion on dry bread and eat it, drinking coffee, which they brought in the meantime. Some even praise it, "Tasty!!!" Hunger is the best seasoning.²⁴⁶

Due to the fact that the troops constantly march, the terrible accommodation conditions should not surprise us. Bivouacking in August may have been pleasant, but the weather in September started to rapidly worsen, and the increasingly frequent cold rains badly impacted the dobbins, the basic pulling power of the German regiments. Even in August, the soldiers sometimes voluntarily camped in the open air near the Meuse River to provide all the horses with a roof. The animals were frazzled and badly nourished, sometimes with only fresh reaped oats. The rains and the resulting mud required constant movement. Cart and wagon wheels foundered in mud, so then the soldiers had to pull them. It was particularly onerous in artillery regiments, which became useless without efficient horse teams. Already in August, the heaviest howitzers received four horses each.²⁴⁷

Ubiquitous moisture had soldiers dream of dry uniforms. Any short break in the march was used to pitch tents or build primitive huts and dry the clothes by the fireplace. During one of such rare occasions, when they hardly make a weak fire "the soldiers [of the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment], mostly naked, dance like wild rascals in steamy smoke around a weak fire."²⁴⁸ One of the soldiers from Greater Poland recalls that after eight weeks without taking clothes off, their uniforms were ingrained with dirt and stinking, they looked like "savages."²⁴⁹

These conditions naturally impacted the health of soldiers. Bad colds were more frequent, and there were some cases of dysentery due to the lack of clean drinking water.²⁵⁰ What partly compensated those toils were the moments of relaxation near the frontline. The soldiers longingly looked at the striking French women. Without any knowledge of the French language, their interest was received as a sudden fascination and desire to experience a short love affair:

246 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 41–42.

247 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 21.

248 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 33.

249 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 32.

250 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 58.

In Rarécourt we stopped to let another brigade pass to Brabant. Dark-haired and dark-eyed maidens stood in front of pretty rustic houses of a yet unscathed village. Initially, they suspiciously observed the resting Prussians. It did not last for long, since they quickly lost any restraint toward the Krauts. The girls started to sing and tease them, make quick friendships, or bring plums and apples.²⁵¹

In fact, the Germans themselves saw the immensity of destructions they brought to “the sweet France.” One of the soldiers of the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment frankly writes:

The combat zone near Arrancy looks horribly, no book could describe it and no mind could imagine it. Burning villages with people full of fear surround us, there is polluted air everywhere and the ground is full of animal corpses; frantic, roaring and partly horribly mutilated cows abound. Moreover, everywhere we can see there lies household equipment, underwear, and parts of French arms. In all of that, we hear the moans and cries of the injured soldiers who are mostly dying. Be tough, my heart!²⁵²

There were many cases of robbery²⁵³ and rape that happened in front of the eyes of Poles who surely participated in those crimes. The absence of women instigated further foul crimes committed by the extremely exhausted soldiers of the German Army, which no army drill could prevent. Therefore, these crimes were overlooked by the superiors, as we read from a description of a rape attempt on a French woman in a church during the bivouac of the regiment from Poznań:

At night, one of the guards tries his chances with sleeping woman [people slept on the church floor]. He draws near and grabs her. She wakes up, there is a sound of scrabbling, other people wake up. “What is going on there?” asks the watchman. The woman says something in French and hides further behind her people. “Calm down over there.” The soldier returns to his position and breathes heavily²⁵⁴

The German staffs clearly started to realize that the plan of the offensive on the Western Front collapsed. It was not only the defeat in the Battle of the Marne but also the exhaustion of the soldiers that determined the situation. Bogdan Hulewicz, who witnessed these events as a regular soldier and an officer of the German staff, describes his impressions:

We were incredibly exhausted, undernourished – considering our mobility, we always had insufficient provisions – discouraged by the adversities, often soaked to the bone, and cold. We formed a passive mass and even the zealot volunteers lost their battle spirit.

251 Ibid., p. 54.

252 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 21.

253 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 27.

254 Ibid., p. 26.

At that moment, I realized that the most important thing in terms of soldier morale are – apart from trust for the commander – his living conditions: good nourishment, dry uniform, comfortable boots for the infantrymen, and the possibility to repose after the toils of march and fight. The heaviest enemy fire is less depressing for the soldier's psyche than hunger and drenching rains.²⁵⁵

The author of the history of the 22nd Infantry Regiment completely agrees with this statement. Aware of the later fate of the Regiment, he aptly describes September as the closure of the first stage of the war: “The capture of Malancourt ends the maneuver warfare.”²⁵⁶

What was about to begin on the Western Front was the much longer and much more horrible trench warfare.

255 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, pp. 43–44.

256 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 64.

III. In the Trenches of the Western Front

Already in autumn 1914, the war on the Western Front transformed into a trench warfare, unexpectedly for most of the staffs on both sides. Therefore, in 1915 the administration decided to make organizational changes in the German Army. The aim was not only to increase the number of soldiers on the front-line and, consequently, the number of divisions but also to regain the ability to perform maneuvers on the stabilizing front, which required the flexibility of command and control that was difficult to achieve at the corps and army level. Therefore, the decision emerged to create a separate headquarters – the General Commandant's Office (*Gruppenkommandos*, *Generalkommandos*) – at individual sections of the front, whose staffs would remain in one place and decide on the operational allocation of individual divisions. Simultaneously, the composition of new divisions changed. In the future, they were to have only one infantry brigade, not two as before. At the same time, the brigades were to grow to three regiments. Thus, every division that previously consisted of two brigades – each with two regiments – there remained an additional regiment that could serve as the basis of a new division.²⁵⁷

Hundreds of thousands of Poles had to fight for survival in the trench warfare for almost four years. It completely changed both the previous manner of conducting warfare and the everyday war routine of a soldier. Until then, bigger armies participated only in short campaigns. No side prepared to wage war for many years with the participation of incessantly recruited and hastily trained new groups of soldiers, who disconnected with their everyday life for good. In this regard, the First World War became the first mass experience for a whole generation; not only for the people who lived in areas directly affected by the war. Customs, routines, behaviors, and language caused the early maturation of young people not at schools and at home, but in the trenches. The Poles who joined the ranks of the Russian, Austrian and German armies shared this experience on all three sides. However, the in German uniforms were to fight for the longest time and in an army that made the greatest sacrifice of blood.

257 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 47–48.

A Soldier in the Trench

The trench was the most significant and most frequently mentioned experience of the Western Front in the First World War. After the formation of the frontline of 700 kilometers, both sides extended the – initially provisional – fortifications by creating three lines of trenches and connecting ditches that altogether amounted to 40,000 kilometers of trenches. As much as the circumference of the Earth.²⁵⁸

Since then, Poles wrote in letters about the “war in ditches;” from the German “Graben” which means “a ditch, a trench.” But when one looks at the history of the regiments, one easily notices that not everyone shared the same experience. Each segment of the front was specific. Moreover, the trenches were formed spontaneously, when no one expected the soldiers to stay there for a few years. Some regiments dug their trenches in a hurry, without a plan and without a deeper consideration of how the individual positions should look like in order to properly fulfill their function. In the other regiments, although mostly at lower headquarters levels (divisions, regiments, battalions), the military leadership wanted to prepare the positions for autumn and winter, well aware that there was no chance of a quick end to the war. When it turned out that the latter were right, there began an exchange of observations and technical tips on the front.

Trench warfare for a long time remained a completely new and unknown phenomenon to German staff officers. Only over time did the German General Staff began to meticulously collect all information on the subject, because earlier they completely ruled out the possibility of anything blocking the simultaneous offensive of all German armies. Although, some of the wars at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries proved that such a situation was theoretically possible, Berlin regarded them outcomes of their scope and their local nature. Staff members remembered the incident of the Russo-Japanese War, specifically the Battle of Mukden, when Japanese soldiers managed to remain entrenched for two weeks despite incessant Russian attacks, inflicting huge losses on the Russian side. However, it seemed unreal in Europe, where millions of soldiers remained on the front that extended as far as hundreds of kilometers. At the same time, the development of defensive measures and the increasing capabilities of new firearms, particularly of machines guns, were still underestimated. Moreover, before the outbreak of the war – and for many months later – a German recruit tactically trained during exercises and maneuvers only how to perform an attack. The Germans reluctantly thought about “digging.” They regarded it as another

258 V. Berghahn, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, München 2009, p. 67.

temporary inconvenience and additional unpleasant effort, necessary only when stuck under enemy infantry fire attacking in line.²⁵⁹

As late as in September 1914, the field posts were mostly rough and ready. The Germans expected an imminent offensive after the defeat at the Battle of Marne. They still often pitched tents for the night instead of temporary dugouts.²⁶⁰ Usually, as in nineteenth-century campaigns, there were attempts to find accommodation in nearby houses. Only since October did the construction of permanent stations begin. Moreover, the construction was stimulated by division orders, which noticed the large losses from artillery fire aiming at units camping in the open air. First, it was necessary to secure ammunition against the shelling, then the formation of temporary dugouts.

Initially, infantry trenches emerged out of the necessity to protect the army against gunfire. The strength and accuracy of infantry fire during the war steadily developed. On August 31, 1916 – during one day of the most intense battles along the Lys River in Belgium (Dutch *Leie*) – the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment fired 20,490 cartridges, including machine gun ammunition. It means that one shooter shot 200 bullets, assuming a battalion per front section, that is one thousand shooters.²⁶¹

The protection of the stations was indispensable when soldiers were to eat, sleep, dress, wash, and clean the guns in relative calm. Soon, during a longer stop, the commanders had no need to order soldiers to dig. The soldiers did it on their own initiative, and later only carefully poked their heads out of the trenches. Thereby, already in the autumn of 1914, the digging resulted in the merging of shooting positions, linked ditches connected teams, platoons, companies, and sometimes even battalions.

Anywhere a unit arrived, the soldiers first dug holes for the infantry, then they deepened them for the soldiers to kneel, and eventually even more, to support a standing position. Later, they formed connecting ditches, usually within the section of a company. Then, it was time to construct observation spots, that is places for checkpoints that sent reports about enemy movements even under shelling, thanks to the higher walls of this trench. The connecting ditches meandered, filled with communication spots, shooting stations, and observation points, usually provided with mirrors to observe the enemy. After digging deep enough, the

259 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 31–32.

260 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 35.

261 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment Nr. 38*, p. 145.

walls were strengthened with timber beams. The soldiers dug obliquely, covering the sides with fascine so that the ground would not collapse. Therefore, they cut down all the surrounding forests in the immediate support area of the front.

In time, the soldiers put wooden platforms grills at the bottom of the trenches because of the water and mud. Each company occupied a complete separate segment; usually marked with a letter. Trenches, connecting ditches, and forested areas in the immediate surrounding received their own names from the soldiers; for example, Kaiser (the Emperor), Hindenburg, Pritzelwitz (German commander's surname), Jägerwald (Hunting Forest), Zahnbürstewald (Toothbrush Forest).²⁶²

Finally, the soldiers constructed dugouts. The first ones were still quite primitive and according to prewar military instructions. After digging a hole in the ground, they put wooden balks on top and slightly strewed them with soil. Inside, one could only lie down or sit, if needed. Only much later did the custom of constructing solid shelters at the first line catch on, which had to have two- or three-meter layer of soil above the timbering. At that time, other materials also came into use, such as straw, wood, wireworks, sandbags, corrugated sheet, and rarely mortar; although there later even appeared concrete and ferroconcrete, which likened the trenches to permanent fortifications.²⁶³

There were numerous simple devices for observing the foreground in the trenches: mirrors, binoculars, hearing aids, jamming transmitters, bells, and alarm devices; all were important for the safety not only of guards but also of all soldiers in the first line. On the other hand, there were usually also indicatory bullets in many colors that informed the artillery about the need for a barrage or supporting fire placed by the machine gun stations and mortars in ammunition depots, apart from bullets and cartridges. Lavatories were very important in the trenches. Their constant overflow and the lack of outlets was a true nightmare for those who remained in one place for too long. After all, the surroundings of lavatories were warehouses with tinned food, water, sometimes vegetables; often in battle conditions, food transports from field kitchens did not reach the first lines for a few days, so the soldiers had to eat only canned meat or fish with rationed bread. The worst thing was access to clean drinking water, so – despite epidemiological threat – they used rainwater from bullet craters.²⁶⁴

262 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 36.

263 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

264 *Ibid.*, p. 31–32.

Paradoxically, there was no shortage of water by the trenches. On the contrary, the soldiers constantly struggled with subcutaneous water flooding the trenches. The special commandoes emerged from the regiments, managed by sappers, initially responsible for building drainage ditches by, say, directing water into enemy tunnels if the area allowed. Although, it was second-line job, the conditions were similarly gruesome. As Stanisław Drygas recalls:

We were supposed to operate the special pumps around the clock. The pumping was pointless because the water just kept on returning to arterial ditches. Tired of this fruitless work, we gathered small ladders that were to lie in the shooting ditches, and we tied them into piles. However, the water carried them away. One time in the early morning, a colonel responsible for the segment came for an inspection. A young lieutenant walked beside him. Suddenly, near our box, we heard someone scream and curse. We poked our heads out. The colonel stood up to his knees in water, while the colonel tried to pull him out. We jumped out to give them a hand. Dripping with water, the colonel yelled at our *gefreiter* [lance corporal]: “What is your task?!” The *gefreiter* stretched out like a string: “I am supposed to link the first frontline and the battalion’s headquarters.” “Bullshit,” the colonel roared, “you are to pump water!” We grabbed the pumps but to no avail; the level of water never lowered.²⁶⁵

The first winter forced the soldiers to prepare the dugouts more solidly. They used birchwood and moss. Soon, not just a segment, but every dugout had its own name like Villa Gretel, Bissige Hunde, El Pepinito, or Liebeslaube. The surrounding houses started to gradually become the source of equipment: tables, chairs, doors, beds, dishes, carpets, and even a piano. True rarities in the internal exchange between the troops were metal furnaces and hanging oil lamps. The latter did smoke, but they were still better than the smellier carbide lamps, quite widely used, or tin lamps with fat as fuel. The dugouts usually had one entrance; only later constructions of larger permanent rooms had two entrances for the sake of better ventilation. The openings were covered with tent fabric to, at least partly, prevent the unexpected inrush of war gases. Despite the attempts to ventilate the rooms, the air was heavy, not only due to stove smoke but also the vaporization of always damp clothing. Moreover, the rooms were filled with the stench of blood, ether, unwashed bodies mixed with the smoke of poor-quality tobacco, and food that was not always fresh. All these elements joined into a barely tolerable mix, and only to those who inhabited the rooms. Others could not spend there more than a few minutes without plugging their noses and seeking fresh air outside. However, numberless hordes of rats, mice, lice, and fleas eagerly settled in as the procedure of catching them became an everyday ritual in the trenches.²⁶⁶

265 S. Drygas, *Czas zaprzeszyły. Wspomnienia 1890–1944*, Warszawa 1970, p. 234.

266 *Ibid.*

The soldiers spent every break in the fights on maintaining and enforcing the trenches. They constantly supplied trench “furniture.” Due to the imminent winter at the turn of 1914 and 1915, the soldiers mandatorily equipped dugouts with small stoves, with the help of the quartermaster units. They entrenched stationary machine gun stations. Later, first-line sappers also prepared similar spots for small mortars and cannons (*Panzerkanone* and *Revolverkanone*); the light infantry mortar caliber 75.8 mm was the basic model, used earlier by sappers, it became standard for infantry regiments since 1916.²⁶⁷

Therefore, cannons were also entrenched, and there were permanent posts prepared for them in artillery regiments. These field artillery trenches appeared 25–30 m behind the first line of infantry.²⁶⁸ At the early stage of operations, when the artillery had no strong defense against fire, the enemy could easily recognize it due to the way it conducted fire. Therefore, artillery positions also quickly turned into an expanded trench line, although the conditions of artillerymen were much better than those of infantrymen, because there was no need to create posts for individual artillerymen and they were not exposed to gunfire. Each cannon service had its own dugout which included a commander and five soldiers. Besides, there were one or two dugouts for senior non-commissioned officers, one for liaison officers, and a separate dugout for officers. Cannon positions were also entrenched, but their positioning allowed the cannons – relatively stable – to partly rotate around their axes. That is why the soldiers prepare the basis from platforms or bunks under gun carriages that settled heavily in the ground after a few shots. Later, the soldiers strengthened the bridgehead. There were beams in front of it on which the firing indicators were marked, so that the gunner could determine the azimuth on his own, without the help of an aimer. From the top, the cannon was cased with bunks that protected it against shrapnel from enemy shelling. Trenches extended from ammunition carts and carriages to niches, in which the ammunition lay underground, protected from moisture and fire.²⁶⁹

Since 1907, field artillery batteries had new cannon models 96n/A, which already had a recoil mechanism and a metal shield to protect the aimer and the gun loader. The muzzle velocity also increased, as did their penetrating ability and range. Similar developments occurred in howitzers in 1911 when – along with the hydraulic recoil mechanism and protective shield – they received prismatic

267 Ibid., p. 36.

268 Ibid., p. 38.

269 Ibid., pp. 40–41.

sight, which increased its firing angle and eliminated the need of rotating the cannon to shoot again (it was also used in the 96n/A cannon).

The Germans were proud of the equipment of their trenches and – whenever they had an opportunity to compare – they appraised enemy trenches. In fact, the opinions on this subject coincided with the opinions of the English and French soldiers, who appreciated the reliability of German preparation for the winter and the equipment of their dugouts. However, sometimes German descriptions show signs of national stereotyping that consists of an emphasis on the discipline of German troops and their tidiness in contrast to the conditions of the enemy camp. We may find proof of the stereotyping in a diary of the Infantry Regiment No. 157 near Ypres in 1915, which includes a remark made after a temporary occupation of the English trench:

Ah, how did this [English] post look like! Partly filled with water, partly completely levelled to the ground; terrible dugouts and there was huge mess and uncleanness everywhere. There was garbage lying everywhere and a terrible stench. It is unbelievable that these people were able to breathe there.²⁷⁰

The trenches were necessary because – to some extent – they were a protection against the constant artillery fire that caused the greatest number of casualties; that is, the trenches sheltered soldiers from what terrified them the most on the battlefields of the First World War. However, it soon turned out that, the initially thin one-meter masking layer of soil above the soldier's head did not prevent tragic consequences of heavy artillery shelling, particularly due to the steep arched trajectory of howitzers and mortars bullets. Heavy mortar shelling was possible even from a very long distance and, if precise, led to the complete devastation of ground fortifications (caliber 170 mm and 250 mm), not to mention heavy siege mortars.²⁷¹ The use of spigot mortars (*Ladungswerfer*, mine throwers) was even more damaging. Only applicable on short distances due to limited accuracy, if they found a trench, the explosive load of several kilograms could completely cover the dugout.²⁷² The soldiers were horribly afraid of the shelling of spigot mortars:

Mines, they are something terrible. These huge iron cylinders weigh about fifty kilograms. They have a round shape, like a cylinder, so they call them "Marmeladeimer" [marmalade bucket] or "Flügeladjutant" [winged adjutant] for their wings. . . . The whole ditch looks like a pile of debris. Many dugouts tipped over, our machine gun stand is

270 Ibid.

271 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 64.

272 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 56.

destroyed. We had to excavate the machine guns from the debris and carry it a few hundred meters to the side under mortar fire. I have to finish, because they are shelling again, I have to be by the rifle again.²⁷³

However, with time, a special tactic was invented to minimize the losses caused by spigot mortars. The soldiers had enough time to estimate the approximate location of the fall of a mortar, and thus also to escape from the threatened segment, because the devices flew not too high and quite slowly, with a characteristic hiss.²⁷⁴

However, the direct strike of an artillery grenade in the trenches led to a massacre of everyone in the surrounding spots and there was actually no protection against it. As one of the Poles from Pomerania wrote:

[A]t some point, I lean my head out. A little lower, a little further down the road, a bunch of people, maybe five or six. A whizz and a bang; a grenade hit almost the very middle of the group. Soil, shreds of clothes, human body parts are falling on us. I am struck dumb! There is no trace left of these people. This very moment taught me more than the three months of training and long theoretical explanations about the war and field service. An old colleague of mine was unmoved by the view. I did not dare speak to him. . . . We enter the area under heavy fire. Every now and then, we protect ourselves by going to a roadside ditch. There are deep grenade crates on the road. . . . Then a whizz and a bang! As if someone pulled a string, we find ourselves in a ditch. The singing stopped. At the same time, our ears are filled with the terrible screams of injured soldiers. The grenade hit the very middle of a singing company. One soldier with a torn leg cries out loud. Another one lies halfway down, stretches out his right hand and calls out: "Nehmt mich weg!" [Take me!] Nearby, someone clings with his face to the ground, with a deep wound in his head, quivering every second, as if he was embraced by death. Two dead men fell on top of each other. On the edge of the crater, there is half a man with his head hanging over. There are young people that lie there: torn apart, broken, and killed. Their faces, until then cheerful and beautiful, now look as if someone whipped them with a lash: they are massacred and twisted in pain.²⁷⁵

Due to growing threat of the artillery shelling, the military units started to build new bunkers; this time from concrete. Hence, the units that built them under the supervision of sappers were called *Betonkommandos*. In the first instance, they started to use concrete to build staff buildings, which could not be moved from place to place because the change of position caused many troubles with

273 The Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia 29.07.1916.

274 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 142.

275 J. Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, Gdańsk 1975, pp. 6, 8.

communication. Sometimes, additional circumstances caused the necessity of meticulously planned and executed works conducted in compliance with the art of engineering. In the Battle of Ypres, the soldiers of the 157th Infantry Regiment had to build a tunnel between two stations, despite soft ground, because a road separated two lines. The tunnel was 800 meters long, lighted with electricity, and it was used to relocate the supply, ammunition, and, sometimes, even the disassembled cannons' elements. Moving through the tunnel was always a lottery, especially during the day. It was dug in very shallow, while the ground layer over the heads amounted only to one meter, with no wooden bars to strengthen it, as in most dugouts. A strike of a gunshot in its vicinity could cause the collapse of the tunnel.²⁷⁶ The experience from the construction of concrete bunkers was a beneficial inspiration for transforming part of bunkers into a line of permanent fortifications in the very last phase of the war. Designed in such a way, these defense positions immediately had their rooms divided according to intended use, with electric lighting even in the first line.²⁷⁷ In spring of 1917, *Betonkommandos* were responsible for the preparation of the famous Siegfried and Hindenburg Lines. Meticulous observations conducted by the sappers from the very beginning of the war allowed the Germans to create massive constructions, reinforced in the forefield with barrages made of ferroconcrete and barbed wire.²⁷⁸

The distance between their own trenches and enemy trenches varied depending on the structure of the ground. It was generally the distance of 400–500 and sometimes even 700 meters, between Arras and Lens, where part of the Upper Silesian regiments quartered in front of the Tenth French Army and First British Corps, for two long months in the first years of the war. However, in the southern part of the segment and also anywhere where the area was rolling – for example near Lorette – the distance shortened into 80–200 meters. It definitely facilitated the night escapades into the no man's land (*Niemandland*; forefield).²⁷⁹

The forefield became the area of only small patrols due to their high danger. If the enemy noticed any motion, he immediately reacted with firearms or artillery shelling. After several months of experience, defense measures in the forefield were extended – especially because it was easy to reach the enemy's trenches during an unexpected night assault or during frequent actions of the pointmen who tried to catch captives. Barbed-wire barrages were strengthened for that

276 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 89.

277 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 121–122.

278 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

279 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 68.

reason.²⁸⁰ But the fear of sudden enemy escapades remained troubling for the soldiers at the posts, particularly at night. It required incessant, onerous, and tense patrol service. A non-commissioned officer of the Upper Silesian 22nd Infantry Regiment describes such a patrol in the forefield in September 1915 in the following way:

Just before dusk. We learn by heart the characteristics of the area. We warn those who are on guard in the trenches not to use any lighting shells. I found two men for the patrol. A reserve soldier Kusch, who was on such patrol last night, and a volunteer. At 9:00 pm, we head out with our rifles in hands and a couple of sets of cartridges in the pockets of our uniforms. The night is starry but moonless. First, we easily go through our barbed wire barrage to the broad bean field. However, the situation gets worse from here. Dry sticks, lying here since the very beginning of the war, crack with each step like caps in a child rifle. We are only one hundred meters ahead of the enemy trenches, so we must be careful! We lay on the ground! – Now everything goes slower. One soldier crawls after another with rifles on our backs. Like Indians on a war footing. I crawl forward and mark a groove in the ground, incessantly breaking the herbs that is more flexible in this place and does not crack due to the dampness. Finally, we reach the end of the field and crawl forward, this time next to each other. Suddenly, we hear a dull explosion near us and later, the vicinity is lighted by the bright light of a lighting shell. We hastily put our faces to the ground, our arms under our bodies, and we lie like earth blocks on the ground. Now, we also hear shots fired by our colleagues on guard. – Damn, did the soldiers who were on guard at the evening not hand over the information while withdrawing from the watch about the patrol in front of their trenches? I hope they will not do any more mistakes. – Once again, we go forward while peeking back whether we will not get lighted up by our comrades. But there is silence. We slowly move on close to the ground. Now, we reach a big, deep crater after a grenade. First, we enter it to discuss further actions. Quiet whispers: “We reached this place yesterday.” “Shall we go further?” “Yes!” – We carefully leave the crater and turn on our bellies again. – At that time, we see posts before us – a French barrier made of barbed wire! My fellow soldiers crawl close to me. “Lie quietly, I want to determine the location of the wire.” Carefully, I move along the barrier – a bit on the left – and then on the right to the place that we reached. We are by the overhanging tip of the barrier, because the wires on our left and right fall back. A quiet whisper again: “Are we moving forward?” “Yes!” – However, the barbed wire is so thick that we cannot slip underneath. “Wire shears?” “Darn it, they are hanging on a string in the dugout for the common use.” “What should we do?” – Then, we heard a clatter of an entrenching tool at the other side of the wire. We tightly clung to the ground. – We tried to filter the shapes in the darkness. We noticed some dark figures. – The French! – We held our breaths. What will happen in the next few seconds? – Rapid digging, shoving of the entrenching tool in the ground started. – A sigh of relief. – What if we had been there now? We would not have found a quick

280 Ibid., p. 37.

way back through the barbed wire barrier. What a nice view would we make. We must be lucky! We met the target of our patrol, the French themselves showed us what they do: they move the barbed wire barrier forward and prepare a mine. We quickly marked the place we reached with a post with a small banner. And now we go back. . . carefully. We hope that the French did not send any patrol to secure the construction of the barrier. We crawl backward one after another, each of our figures disappear in the darkness. Destination – the grenade crater. Silence. Then I crawl back too. I find my comrades in the crater. Now, we move further to our trenches. We do not have to be as careful as before. The French are so good to us, they make so much sound with their digging that no one can hear us. – What is it? – We were supposed to already cross our barbed wired barrier?! A few more steps – Nothing! – Did we lose our way while coming back to the trenches? – The night is quiet and peaceful, there are no lighting shells, no fire coming from the guards that could lead us back. We need them so much right now! Fortunately, we find another way. – Once again, we see the barbed wired barrier. – Is it our barrier or did we come full circle and reached another part of the French barrier? – Then, we hear someone talk. Is it German or French? – We listen impatiently but we cannot assess it due to the distance. So I call up. If we hear a response in French or a gunshot, we will go back and start running in the other direction. “Who is there?” “We are the checkpoint 5/22.” – Well, we managed to do it. We soon reach the trench walking over the barbed wire. In the dugout, by the flickering light of a candle, I hastily sketch the situation on the forefield and submit a report to the platoon commander. Afterwards, I cover myself with a blanket and want to go back to my interrupted sleep. – In the morning, I look for our sign with binoculars. My comrades and commanders come. We look for it together. – Nothing. – Did the French notice our pennant and remove it in the morning? The question nags me. I am even more irritated because of the dubious looks of my comrades. I will achieve nothing this way. I crawl out and carefully look, hiding behind a heap of earth. And then – our small banner joyfully flaps on the wind. A broad bean field is separated from the trench line. With one slide, I am back in the trench, bristling with joy, I submit a report to the platoon commander. He approaches me and confirms. – Now I can smoke my cigarette at peace.²⁸¹

Trenches in Champagne and Lorraine were usually earthen, later additionally reinforced, while in Flanders, due to natural reasons, they had to be of different nature during the entire war, and the soldiers detested them. Mostly, it was difficult to build them there due to the excessive amount of water that appeared during the excavation and soft ground that did not allow to protect the walls from subsiding. Therefore, trench level had to be raised by putting sacks of sands on top of one other.²⁸² The works within this ill-fated area of France and Belgium never ceased, as did the struggle with the water on both sides of the front. The

281 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 71–74.

282 *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

memories of soldiers of the 157th Infantry Regiment that quartered near Comines in October 1915 includes a description of such a Sisyphean task:

The enemy was eighty meters away from us, on other segments 200–600 meters away. The position was poorly entrenched. Primarily, the number of dugouts was insufficient, because the soldiers could not dig them due to the amount of water. The entire position was based on smaller positions constructed from sacks of sands. At the bottom of the excavation, the water was constantly fifteen to twenty centimeters high, and its level raised after rain. Sappers and draining units had to help us improve the situation. Yet, the walkways to the trenches were separated during the rain by large deep puddles. The trenches did not have heating and the straw for sleeping rapidly decayed. In November, the rain never stopped, so the water level in the trenches incessantly raised. We could not lay down. The sacks of sand constantly fell down and we had to build the trench from scratch.²⁸³

Rebuilding of the fortifications was particularly burdensome because – while in Champagne and Lorraine one could usually limit the problem moving the heaps of earth – it was an unmanageable problem in Flanders. The experience of the 157th Infantry Regiment that quartered in 1916 near Ypres was particularly vexing. In June, when the soldiers tried to rebuild the ruined trenches after a shelling, water appeared after just one hit of the entrenching tool. The ground on the sides was completely unstable and they had to bring thousands of sacks of sand for the trenches to be high enough to at least partly protect them. When it started to rain, no one could reinforce some segments despite enormous efforts. For instance, when a 150-meter-long segment became a water channel after another shelling, the soldiers just placed barriers on both of its ends so that the water did not pour out, while new trenches surrounded it on both sides and it allowed the preservation of the defense line.²⁸⁴

The soldiers of Greater Poland dismally recall the trenches in Flanders:

We had to loiter in one place, often with water up to our ankles, among water rats, in the bland stench of decaying bodies of the soldiers who fell on the forefield. We could not bury the soldiers hanging on the barbed wire because we remained under constant fire. The trenches were close to each other, usually 100–150 meters away, but there were segments where they would get closer, for a distance of thirty or even twenty meters, and that was a desirable situation for the infantrymen of both sides of the conflict, because the artillery did not participated in the actions in such a short distance in order to not injure its own soldiers. Snipers incessantly guarded by the riflescope in Belgian-English, French, and German trenches, should anyone stick out his neck above trench

283 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

284 *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.

level, a precise shot would quickly pick off his curious head. . . . The most vexatious part of the fights in Flanders was wet swampland. Underground water would appear after digging a hole half a meter deep. The trenches were superstructures, filled with sacks of soil and sand, reinforced and propped by wooden stakes. Obviously, such elaborate constructions provided no protection from artillery fire. A single more precise volley devastated them and killed the crew of the sector, so that they had to start from scratch. Second line of set-off was built several meters away from the first line, followed by the reserve battalion's line, and behind them the reserve line of regiments and divisions, farther were the positions of the field artillery, and eventually the howitzers and the field artillery. Divisions, regiments, and, later, battalions headquarters were located in concrete trenches. These were all connected with connecting ditches about two meters deep. The entire broad fields were filled with thorny abattis; there were tiger pits, barbed wire drums, and various clever obstacles. . . . Along with connecting ditches and irrigating ditches, they all formed a true labyrinth that tailed back for about two kilometers deep into an each territory.²⁸⁵

However, the positions in Flanders also had their upsides, despite the fact that the entire area in the vicinity of Armentières, with the hill visible from afar and the famous fortress Kemmel on its top, was very damp. It rendered digging in the ground nearly impossible, while circumvallations and dugouts could not efficiently protect from artillery shelling, even from field cannons, and sometimes also that of machine guns (the French positions were located higher and well prepared, so they responded to every move in the German trenches). The forefield in the no man's land was constantly swampy so it quite efficiently protected from an unexpected assault, while the soldiers in this segment were not afraid of a night patrol from behind the enemy line.²⁸⁶

Even in summer, the view of the forefield in Flanders was gloomy and caused the soldiers to suffer from depression. Both sides gradually developed barbed-wire barriers – invented in the USA for farmers – that saw only occasional use in the armies since the nineteenth century. Later, the factories began producing complete coils of barbed wire that weighed about fifty kilograms each.²⁸⁷ Instead of seven, each of them had fourteen pairs of barbs or sometimes even more. There also appeared an idea to connect the wires to electricity, but technical issues prevented its implementation.²⁸⁸ Ingeniously designed anchors and dense loops known as the Spanish riders (*Spanische Reiter*) strengthened the wire. These

285 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, pp. 47–48.

286 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 121–122.

287 *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918. Ereignis und Erinnerung*, ed. R. Rother, Berlin 2004, p. 111.

288 Englund, *Piękno i smutek wojny*, p. 74.

bizarre constructions hanged over wooden and, later, iron posts. They crossed each other, in some places their width amounted even up to twenty-five meters, and they formed a bizarre maze in the forefield. Along with the “moon landscape” that resulted from artillery shelling, it all set a gloomy scenery. Therefore, it is no surprise that an Upper Silesian soldier of the 21st Infantry Regiment describes his impressions of the Battle of Ypres in 1917 in the following way:

All around, the ground is flat almost everywhere. With equal spaces between them, slender poplars, pitched by the blowing wind, lean in a single direction, as if they were war veterans. Here and there, we see groves and houses marked on maps as small villages. You rarely see a church tower or a mill. There are numerous streams, ditches, and mud. Closer to the front line, there are only devastated houses and ruins. Shallow basins in the grounds serve as “positions.” An immensely sad scenery. Cut by gunshots, trees stand broken in two, roads carved by bullets gather mud, trenches only partly with parapets are usually filled with mud and water. Everything else is just a slough with huge pools in craters formed by bombs. Every grenade strike or push of a spade makes the water appear above ground. Concrete bunkers are the only protection from it, but they themselves started to waver, when a bullet hit a soft ground nearby.²⁸⁹

Despite common opinion, the trenches were not a terrible place because one had to assault and go under fire in the open field. The wait in extended positions was what was the worst aspect for the soldiers and caused their ambiguous feelings: would this segment of the frontline be under enemy fire or not? A soldier of the 22nd Regiment describes the hopelessness of his positions in the following way:

Our position was in the ruins of a household devastated several times, surrounded by countless craters formed by the bombs. Radiotelegraphers, telephonists, signal lights' posts, liaison officers, and everything that belonged to the staff, they all sit in the rooms without windows and partly without roof. Probably everyone thought the same thing. To find a place that would provide any kind of protection against grenade splinters or, at least, against the bad weather. The staff received a special room, hard to design even according to the standards of this war. It consisted of a place under the road that was not small but – at the same time – easily allowed water from many places. In fact, it was a twenty-meters long, one-meter high, one-and-a-half-meter wide pipe that efficiently protected against light or even medium-caliber grenades because of the two-meters of earth cover located above their heads. – What a poor man does not do to save his poor life? – So we moved everywhere on our knees, like dogs in a kennel. Wooden pallets lay over the water that flew in the lower part of the pipe even covered – what an incredible luxury – with straw taken from devastated roofs. There was even a telephone in the middle of the pipe, with an adjutant's post right next to it. Both outfalls of the pipe

289 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 146–147.

were covered with tent canvas to protect against draughts. Around 11:00. . . the English artillery began their usual harassing fire. Grenades fell on the slippery surface with a bang, while they sounded like thunders in the pipe, reverberating over the ceiling, or when they fell on the stones of the road, under which we quartered. At that moment, the ceiling would start to dangerously crack. However, we gradually got used to these conditions. We even realized that we are partly safe here and we slowly started to fall asleep, despite the whole situation. Sometimes, we unexpectedly jumped after a sound recoiled. . . What is it? Is it our imagination or reality? We hear some cracks in the straw! No, it is indeed the reality. The creaking did not stop after all and something flashed under the platform, but suddenly we hear a plop – water spouts – but it is only a rat fleeing back to its damp world. We fell asleep once again because we could not hear anything else. We shivered to the thought that this bloody animal could run over our face or, to use our imagination even more, danced on us “like on a dance floor.” And no matter how disgusting was this picture, our eyes started to close once again. Little wonder, we were up all day. The Tenth Company dug out something like fox dens as shelters along the road, behind the bank with the water intake. They only covered them using tent canvas, so that they have at least some kind of protection against the night rain. The night started to become grey and dawn was coming, artillery drumfire started at 6:45 am. It firstly headed toward the rear area, then toward us with all guns blazing, as if someone rushed and diabolically yammered with repeating artillery volleys to destroy all life on earth. Company soldiers pressed to each other just like a frightened hive, because they did not feel secure in their shelters. Some of them jumped from one crater to another in darkness, only to often fall in water and mud up to their chests, never certain if this next crater would not become their soggy grave. Others tightly kept to their dugouts. Pressed to the innermost corner, they let the rain of grenades fall over them. To cap it all off, it started to drizzle and, later, increasingly heavy rain started to fall on the fields of Flanders. Pools turned into small lakes, small streams into turbulent brooks. It got worse and worse in our pipe with every hour, because the water was constantly rising and quickly flew under the platform with a humming. Around 11:00 am, the situation was already critical. Here and there, it raised the platforms at the bottom of the conduit. We had to rescue the telephone boxes, coats, blankets, and other stuff. We left the overflowing pipe one after another and went outside to stand in the pouring rain, under the sky filled with grenade fragments. The only place around untouched by bad weather was the basement located fifty meters away, inhabited by the garrison doctor. He had to take us in at the moment. Just like many other soaking soldiers, we could have also remained outside, but we needed a dry shelter to make calls, write, issue orders, and – in brief – to command. This is why we fled to this narrow room, in which four people stayed in the very jam while more injured soldiers showed up around them. In the basement . . . we stayed for the rest of the day. Tommy [a popular name for the British soldiers] often fortified the drumfire and their repeating waves with a terrifying sound of alarm sirens. We had to get used to this sound at first, because it wrecked our nerves and filled us with gloomy thoughts. However, this upsetting situation gradually changed, as a kind of torpor started and one would say: “Easy, this is God’s will!” . . . Then, the darkness of the evening slowly engulfed the swampy land that was plowed by

the bullets. Only dark figures were sometimes visible in grenade flares constantly falling in regular intervals and in the brightness of lighting shells; the rain mercilessly fell on those poor men obliged to remain at unprotected guard posts, despite the bad weather and drumfire. When that awful day was coming to an end, the fire weakened and, eventually, it completely stopped. At that time, approximately 1500–2000 artillery bullets fell on the territory of about 2000 square meters.²⁹⁰

Paradoxically, while the trench warfare started and the soldiers moved to the trenches, the supply improved, at least in terms of food quantity and energy value. This was the end of troubles with field kitchens too heavy and too inanimate to keep up with the quickly moving troops. However, new problems appeared: the main one was the poor quality of the food, at that time rarely supplemented with products found in devastated French and Belgian houses. Over time, it was also increasingly difficult to move these meals from the support area to the first line.

The Poles had their culinary habits that may not have been too subtle – they mostly came from villages with plebeian and simple cuisine – but they often missed those very typical meals: soups, groats, or even bread and potatoes. The available bread was known as “soldier bread” (*Soldatenbrot*). Already in 1914, potato flour was used to produce it instead of wheat flour that was in low supply. From November, it had to be at 5 percent, while in 1915, it was already 20 percent, with the high amount of bran.²⁹¹ Over time, there was a shortage of white bread both among the front and the rear troops. The soldiers usually received a portion of bread to last for one week but – already in autumn 1914 – bread quickly spoiled due to high humidity. They tried to make it taste better by toasting dark slices over a stove in a dugout. However, it did not prevent the rapid spread of diseases – due to the consumption of bad food – mostly the regular intestinal catarrh, but there were also first cases of typhus. In September and October 1914, the regimental doctor of the 157th Infantry Regiment was afraid of the imminent outbreak of an epidemic. Only after the introduction of mass typhoid and cholera vaccinations did the army managed to prevent the threat and, later, the cases of typhoid, cholera, and dysentery were rare in the German Army, despite terrible condition in the trenches.²⁹²

The food delivered from the field kitchens was generally in sufficient quantity and calorific, but very unvaried. They served in rotation: meat (most often the famous goulash) and cooked vegetables (carrot, cabbage, and rutabaga) then

290 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 185–188.

291 *Sohrauer Stadtblatt* 93, 21.11.1914.

292 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 33.

peas and bean soups. Dried vegetables (*Dörrgemüse*) added to soups and meat were particularly detested. Even if the amount of vitamins was sufficient, the meals with this ingredient were not very popular and dried vegetables appeared as more suitable for feeding cattle than hungry soldiers.²⁹³ Even in 1917, when food lacked on the entire front line, the Mazurian Karol Małłek wrote with explicit disgust about meals enriched with dried vegetables that came from precipitous German stores, in which they waited for many years:

[The cook] poured into my canteen one dipper of a thick soup. We went to the dining room and started eating. They gave us the famous *dörrgemüse*; dried vegetables that consisted of pieces of rutabaga, carrot, kohlrabi, beetroot, and some other plants, and some potatoes. The smell and taste were good, but some pieces of vegetables were as hard as a tree. We could not chew them in any way. We poured almost half of it into the pot by the exit.²⁹⁴

Canned food, usually with meat or with meat and vegetables, also made up a large part of the nourishment. However, its taste and quality was quite poor, especially when compared to the much better French and English canned rations, as confirm the memoirs of Stanisław Drygas, taken captive by the Somme River:

The offensive by the Somme River continued. We were safe [in captivity]. We sat in a canteen and ate warm canned food with vegetables. I have not seen any canned food like this until this very day. Those were large cans with the size of a normal plate, and each held a ready dish that consisted of potatoes and vegetables with a bit of meat. An Australian brought us such a can, he warmed it up over the fire, and they divided it into six equal parts.²⁹⁵

At that time, field kitchens did not prepare fried dishes at all. Sometimes, the soldiers roasted meat in their dugouts on their own, if only they managed to get meat. For example, in the 21st Field Artillery Regiment, the artillerymen – always with a bit more time than the infantrymen – regularly tried to enrich their diet. In 1914, there was still diversity of venison, especially rabbits and pheasants. It incited the hunting passion of artillerymen and, as we read in postwar documents, one could often see six skinned rabbits hanging by one cannon. Roasted and fried dishes, including those made from breeding rabbits, are part of the traditional Upper Silesian cuisine. Thus, the soldiers willingly prepared them, mostly in a frying pan over a stove in a dugout.

293 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi 1914–1967*, p. 73.

294 Małłek, *Z Mazur do Verdun. Wspomnienia 1890–1919*, p. 206.

295 Drygas, *Czas zaprzeszyły. Wspomnienia 1890–1944*, p. 269.

Wallis similarly diversified his monotonous menu. Before Easter 1917, he writes about the poor food that came from the field kitchen, which he tried to enrich:

At 12:00 am, there was lunch, pearl barley [a species of pearl barley groats] with chunks of meat. . . . We have also more Easter flavors. A white tablecloth is stretched on the table, a second tablecloth covers it, made of real Brussels laces, that we sometimes use to rub mud off our shoes as we lack other things but we have plenty of laces. Yesterday, we received about two pounds of goat meat from the artillerymen. This morning, we cooked them and made a delicious goulash. We will season it with rosemary that grows in the garden, and with onion and salt, it will serve us today as a tasty *swaczyna* with bread [in Silesian, the second meal of the day; however, it was most often a sweet snack and not, as here, an additional festive dish]. Oh, fortune made some effort and gave us some Easter food for Easter. . . . Oh, how mixed are people's hopes. A man who laughs today, will cry tomorrow. These words could be applied to us. We sat by the *swaczyna*. Fresh bread, we also received some cheese and butter for Easter. Besides, our perfectly roasted goat meat was delicious, but suddenly a few grenades fell into the village and exploded with a bang. After that, there was second and third volley. A grenade exploded on the sidewalk in front of our house killing the horse and the rider. The grenade that caused this hole could be of a twelve-centimeter caliber. Then we receive an order to leave the village and take all our stuff. It is total chaos. Everyone grabs the most important things and run to the nearby quarry. Nobody thinks about food anymore. We leave our roast in the lodgings.²⁹⁶

In 1917, the first signs of malnutrition of the German soldiers appeared on the front, and that was particularly dangerous for the condition of young boys, sometimes still adolescent. The Annex on pages 305 shows the size of daily rations for soldiers on the front line.

Detached from his Masurian household, where high-quality food products were still available despite the war, Karol Małłek felt that these rations were insufficient and sometimes he simply suffered from severe hunger:

The letter, and especially the package from home, were a great blessing because they expect us to produce great effort but give little food, which is bad. Bread rations are one kilogram for two days. Eventually, we young people begin to quickly lose strength. We had to go to the doctors. Diagnosis for me and Guth: starvation. We both received 750 grams of bread a day since then. It got a little better, but what it meant for the hungry men! I ate the whole bread right away and then I had nothing left. We helped each other in different ways. We went to the kitchen to peel potatoes and the cook gave us some. We fried them for dinner, watering them with coffee, because there was no grease. In the summer, we picked different kinds of weeds to make salad. The others did it in a different way. They caught dogs, cats, birds, and frogs, secretly killed them and ate. We

296 The letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 8–9.04.1917.

had such a knack for it that there was no dog or cat in the whole area, and birds and frogs started to become a rarity. Frogs, by the way, were a gourmet food. It turned out that hunger is the best cook. Every horse that died on the field of glory belonged to us, we quickly brought it to the kitchen and ate it. Lemann, a butcher by profession, was a master in the matter of animal meat. The last dog he hunted in the area was the big dog of a *futtermeister* [a forager] of the First Battery.²⁹⁷

In the beginning of 1915, there was no living creature in Verdun except for a sparrow and a crow, after the deprivation of the local area of country animals.²⁹⁸

In the subunits, there were often home-grown masters of frying pans, responsible for preparing such extraordinary meals.²⁹⁹ Of course, regular packages sent from home diversified the menu. Particularly since 1917, due to huge shortages in the food supply, these were not very abundant supplements. The supply breakdown in German interior at that time was also visible on the frontlines. Since then, meals based mainly on bad groats and bread of decreasing quality gained in popularity. The opinions of the Upper Silesians from the 38th Infantry Reserve Regiment come from this period, as they write in their letters home: “We do not get anything to eat here, and the supply is as poor as if it was for dogs.”³⁰⁰

Nevertheless, until the very end of the war, there was no lack of daily minimum calories on the front, which – unfortunately – was no longer the rule in the interior. In January 1917, Wallis wrote from the front to his relatives that they should not send him food from home, because he manages to eat better food than they do:

You struggle to get a sausage there, but I can do without it easily. We have a canteen here even in the third line where you can often get marmalade or honey etc. We have humane conditions. Every two days, we get something to eat with bread, though it may not be much, it also means something. Today, for example, each of us received an egg, a piece of sausage, butter, and cheese. It will be enough for some time, at least for a dozen slices of bread, because here we have warm lunch once a day and, for the rest of the day and night, at the position, we have only bread.³⁰¹

Assault and Defense

The classic rules of conducting military operations and tactics of the battlefield often did not make sense in trench warfare. Visible already in the nineteenth

297 Małtek, *Z Mazur do Verdun. Wspomnienia 1890–1919*, p. 237.

298 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 84.

299 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 41–42.

300 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 58.

301 The letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 26.01.1917.

century, the growing autonomy of the individual soldier on the battlefield developed even more in 1914–1918, not within the area of offensive operations but in the domain of subtle defense measures, appropriate to the situation, area, and weather conditions. Line assaults of infantry – even if supported by the artillery – quickly broke. Larger cavalry formations were useless on the battlefields of the Western Front, so they became history.³⁰² Despite occasional local successes, the attempts to break enemy trench lines always failed. After the great battles of 1916 at Verdun and Somme, most soldiers viewed participation in the next offensive only as a death sentence. It became increasingly difficult for commanders to find motivational arguments for the soldiers to continue the fight, because the previous ones – military superiority, coercion, patriotic identification – ceased to be effective.³⁰³

Despite their ongoing application by staffs and line officers, the rules of offense and defense taught in military academies lost their efficiency from the viewpoint of an individual soldier. The offensive meant a defeat and a death sentence, so soldiers sought to avoid getting out of the trench at all costs. The defense was a chance to survive and a perspective of the collapse of the opponent's forces – not due to the military superiority but the fact that his capabilities of supplementing human and material reserves should finally end. It was the tragic strategy of attrition warfare. But it was considered effective. In fact, most German soldiers believed until 1918 that – in the spring of the last year of the war, after the closing of the Eastern Front – this tactic finally offered an advantage over the Allied forces, despite terrible German losses. In 1915, especially the Champagne fights proved that adherence to the doctrine of mass infantry attacks in a compact line was futile. The Napoleonic rule of gaining advantage at a specific time and place was no longer viable after the autumn of 1914. Now, both sides entrenched for good. One could not even hope for the classic prolonged advantage of threefold higher numbers of attackers over defenders. The enemy always had enough time and strength to bring reinforcements to defend the threatened segment, and there was no chance of isolating such an operation; consequently, there was no chance to break the flanks, let alone conducting a frontal attack.

A Pomeranian soldier describes such an unsuccessful French flanking attack in 1915:

302 R. Jarymowicz, *Historia kawalerii od jazdy klasycznej do panczernej*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 220–221.

303 D. Stevenson, *1914–1918. Der Erste Weltkrieg*, Mannheim 2010, pp. 264–266.

The French walk in three lines. Wherever and in whatever way, we take our positions. The people come out like mice. Without a command, without looking back, everyone is hitting the ranks of the French who walk in order, as if on a parade. They are about eighty meters away. They walk like this for maybe ten or more seconds. But now, they are staggering and falling to their knees, then they fall to the ground with their whole body. Their ranks are breaking, they disperse to the right and left, to places where they feel the fire is weaker. They move toward our wings in sections and disappear from our sight. Only the dead and injured soldiers lie in front of us. Suddenly, we notice fire coming from the rear area. Everyone begins firing against everyone. Hand grenades often fall into our ditch. Some of them disappear. The rattle of hand arms and machine guns and the cracking of hand grenades cause an indescribable chaos. It seems that people went crazy. There is no orientation, there is no officer. Someone cries, "The French are attacking from a ditch on the side!" The moment of the biggest tension: captivity or death. We shoot and throw hand grenades in vain, just to defend ourselves, just not to get killed. Then the French start to hesitate, their fire weakens and – it stops completely. They are fleeing. We hear sudden cries, "Hooray! Hooray!" We are liberated. The 133rd Saxon Regiment captured the French in a counterattack.³⁰⁴

Nevertheless, 1915 saw constant attempts of assault, not only in big offensives of entire corps and armies but also at the explorative, regimental level. They had rather the nature of reconnaissance by assault – but still led to huge losses. In February 1915, the 157th Silesian Infantry Regiment defended against such an assault of the Allied forces. Two units, each consisting of one and half battalion, attacked the first German line to conduct after artillery firestorm. The assault zone covered a segment protected by just one German battalion of the 157th Regiment, so the classic threefold advantage prevailed; it was presented in every book on the art of war as sufficient to break the defense. The French troops reached the German trenches despite losses and – still in the no man's land – they managed to push out the German soldiers from the trenches, though after bringing reserves forward and a night-long battle. Until then, everything went according to the tactics of the battlefield presented in the manuals on the art of war, used by officers at military schools.

On the following day, the French tried to prevent the support of the first German line by concentrating their artillery fire in the area between the two trench lines. They also conducted same fire on the connecting trenches between the first and the second trench lines, preventing the munitions supply. It paved way for the local success of the French and their entrenching in the previously German first line.

304 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, pp. 19–20.

Despite the exhaustion after the prolonged battle – the soldiers fought for two days without warm food and water – the Germans decided to counterattack with a very limited amount of ammunition. The assault occurred at night, despite lasting fire of the French artillery, already aiming well in the connecting ditches. This time, melee combat ensued. The Germans managed to capture both flanks of the lost trench line, but that was all the soldiers could afford. They received an order to retreat and the offensive resumed on the next day but by different troops. This maneuver under constant French fire was no less bloody. Trenches and ditches filled with corpses and injured people, so it was difficult to break through them, both for the retreating units and those who performed the relief operation for the 157th Regiment. When the soldiers reached the given concentration point at the rear, many of them lacked shoes, which they left in the mud. As usually during such fights, there also happened tragicomic situations. And so, musketeer Kurzatzki fell during the night fights into a full latrine up to his neck and almost drowned. He survived only because he managed to free himself from his heavy uniform, then he rejoined his company in nothing more but shirt and underpants. Already after the departure of the Upper Silesian regiment, the Germans regained their lost positions, and the front line returned to the starting point.³⁰⁵

The result of these two-day fights was dramatic for the regiment. The battalion that participated in the defense suffered huge losses. Seven officers and 216 soldiers died, while nine officers and 397 soldiers were injured. Moreover, 205 soldiers were reported missing; most of them probably buried alive in the trenches after French shelling.³⁰⁶ It meant that – in this very battalion – the amount of losses reached 42 percent after a two-day battle and, including the injured, it meant an almost unbelievable level of 82 percent. The unit practically ceased to exist, so the army had to completely reconstruct it in the rear from the reserve recruits.

Kazimierz Wallis, who remembered the event as no less dramatic, took part in a similar struggle with his regiment in Flanders in 1917:

The day before yesterday we witnessed the English *Kampftag* [day of battle]. Real hell on earth. Somme, Karel, and Laon were nothing. The English had so much artillery here that there was one cannon for every ten square meters. We had to dig up each other every once in a while. The English stormed every now and then. Almost no one came back from the front line. I was at the battalion. A few officers and batmen were injured.

305 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 42–43.

306 *Ibid.*, pp. 43–44.

An entire staff was captured. I managed to save myself with a few comrades. I am now in Cachtem, outside of the front line. I thanked God when I got out there tonight. I recited the rosary several times in the day, when sitting in a dark blue crater under a diabolical fire. I did not lose hope that I would be saved. It was not until nightfall darkness that I returned to the back.³⁰⁷

Both sides of the conflict quickly started to believe that the key to returning to maneuver warfare was to increase and maintain artillery fire as long as possible and to implement the ability to carry the fire barrage in front of the moving troops. However, it was still practically impossible at the beginning of the war, not only due to technical reasons but also the lack of coordination between the actions of the infantry and artillery in such an operation. The means of communication were defective, precision in conducting fire from covered fire positions was lacking, and there were no cannons suitable for such tactics. Modifications of this state of affairs required both a technological and a mindset revolution among officers of all grades of command, then eventually persuading ordinary soldiers in the system of training that the new tactics will be effective. As it turned out, the change did not take months but years.

Since artillery was to play the key role in these transformations, it had to receive much of the focus. And unlike in the nineteenth century, this time the German Army made mistakes already before the outbreak of the war. Already in 1914, the German artillery regiments complained about the lack of proper ammunition; and this situation was to last until the end of the war. The only countermeasure applied was that of saving bullets. Therefore, the activity of German artillery batteries was sometimes limited to large preplanned operations, for which the army accumulated adequate supplies – at the expense of other segments of the front. Sometimes, the soldiers did not shoot at all, if they did not notice any moves of enemy troops, contrary to the Allies whose artillery almost incessantly conducted harassing fire.

This is why the Silesian artillery regiments did not use suppressive fire until 1914 – though it was often utilized by the French and the English – and they still only targeted points designated by the infantry.³⁰⁸ The artillery regiments used for this purpose the 77 mm caliber cannon (model 96) produced by the Krupp Factory. The cannon had a recoil mechanism and a falling-block action, weighed 925 kilograms, and its maximum range reached 7800 meters; however,

307 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, France 6.10.1917.

308 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 50.

effective shooting applied to a distance of up to 5300 meters. A single fragmentation bomb weighed 6.85 kilograms. In fact, it was used to shoot straight ahead, while its elevation was relatively small as it ranged from -13 to $+15$ degrees.³⁰⁹

Artillery service was safer than infantry service, but it was physically exhausting:

I found out that our battery is divided into fire position and horse position. The fire position is eight kilometers away from us. There are four 7.5 cm cannons built in concrete. There are forty-one people at the position: twenty-eight cannoneers, three tinklers, one cook, one cook assistant, four corporals, one platoon officer, one vice guard, one warrant officer, and one lieutenant. . . . The captain, a typical Junker with a monocle in his eye, was its actual commander, but he never showed up, constantly residing in his warm quarters in St. Jean and hunting in the French forests at the back of the front. . . . A lieutenant commanded the fire position, but the commander of the crew was actually a warrant officer Groth: a Swabian by origin, a professional soldier, a tall and stout loudmouth aged forty-five, with a goatee. . . . The task of the first center, that is, the fire position, was to defend the designated segment of the front line, while the task of the second center, the horse one that quartered in St. Jean, was to supply the fire position with ammunition, food, and other necessary supplies. Almost every day, the wagons went to the front, most often during nighttime. They avoided daylight because the enemy balloons that hovered all day long reported every visible movement to the artillery.³¹⁰

The equipment of artillery regiments also included standard howitzers 149 mm caliber that weighed 2200 kilograms. With little rotation capability, the elevation of the cannon amounted to $+43$ degrees without moving the batten (only about one degree in both directions), which allowed the crew to fire from remote covered positions. A bullet of the 149 mm howitzer weighed forty-two kilograms, with a maximum range of 8500 meters.³¹¹

The cannon service consisted of five cannoneers; squad commander, bombardier and gun loader by the cannon, one cannoneer to carry bombs and one responsible for the ammunition warehouse outside of the cannon. Preplanned supervisions usually determined the shooting order, which also allowed opening fire during night offensives. The accuracy of shelling conducted with the use of howitzers was very low, especially when conducted from covered fire positions, without prior attempts. Many factors influenced their inefficiency. First, poor quality of delivered bombs. There were many unexploded bombs that not only held back or weakened the firing force, but also led to dangerous accidents

309 Hogg, *Artyleria XX wieku*, Warszawa 2010, p. 31.

310 Małek, *Z Mazur do Verdun. Wspomnienia 1890–1919*, pp. 232–234.

311 Hogg, *Artyleria XX wieku*, p. 52.

during the removing of jammed bombs from the barrel. Moreover, the losses among cannoners could not be replenished as quickly as among infantrymen due to the longer and more complicated training process.³¹²

The poor efficiency of these actions also had another cause, which lasted until the end of the war. In the classic shooting from covered fire positions, the key role belonged to the observers and liaison officers. Wherever possible, the observation in the forest involved hills or hunting boxes. However, such points were quite quickly detected and eliminated by enemy artillery fire. Tethered observer balloons often helped here, which sent information via special vessels on woven fabric belt. However, they were an easy target, particularly for the airplanes. The Upper Silesians called the balloons *leberwurst*³¹³ because, after shooting them down, they rolled up into a sausage-like shape. If they made it, observers jumped out of the balloons with parachutes.³¹⁴ This happened less frequently among enemy balloons, partly because of the increasingly visible weakness of the German aviation. However, the wind sometimes carried Allied balloons to German positions, which is when they could shoot them down with firearms. Wallis mentioned it in his letter from France: "Yesterday, [I sent] a package with a French parachute (*Fallschirm*) with bullet holes. This device holds a ball with bullet holes for almost half a minute aloft. At the beginning of the war, they were half-silk, now they are only linen."³¹⁵

Sending home such ornamental items as this piece of material had to be very popular, because Wallis did so not only with things that could be useful for his relatives or himself after the war, but with everything, including little things that kept his interest: "I attach an old stamp, which I have already described. In the package, I send trousers that I don't need here, along with a few teeth of an animal that I got from my companion. He received them from a black African captive from Cerny (Chemin des Dames)."³¹⁶

Since methods of aerial observation failed, only reports coming from the first line could prove useful. Initially, the infantry officers in advanced positions prepared them, which usually effected in unprecise demands for artillery support. From October 1914, artillery officers from individual batteries were permanently moved to the front to prepare data for accurate shelling. Thereby, apart

312 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 39.

313 *Leberwurst* in Upper Silesian vernacular means liver sausage.

314 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 150–151.

315 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, France 28.01.1917.

316 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 4.07.1917.

from the officer who conducted the shelling, there appeared the position of artillery liaison officer to infantry battalions (*Artillerieverbindungsoffizier*), who was actually responsible for conducting the shelling.³¹⁷

However, precise observation itself did not solve the problems. It was even more difficult during trench warfare to provide information from an advanced observation point, usually remote and invisible, to the battery placed in the rear area, in a covered fire position, or to the headquarters that conducted the artillery shelling. The phone started to play the key role here. The army used a special set with a telephone in a wooden box (*Fernsprechgerät M1905*).³¹⁸ The army used it to connect observation points with batteries and, later, with the staffs that formed a network. Unfortunately, at the beginning of the war, training in the use of such communications was still in its infancy. The prevailing opinion among officers viewed direct transfer of information by liaison officers and adjutants as superior, as they claimed during staff training. Another thing is that in 1914–1918, direct communication was often indeed the only efficient way. Before the outbreak of the war, the soldiers at the regimental level did not undergo any training in telephone communication between subunits. This knowledge was only available to the few who learned how to use a telephone.³¹⁹ These shortcomings were not remediated until trench warfare began, while training usually included only theory. There was no time for a thorough training and implementation of modern communication technologies.

The Upper Silesians, often former industrial workers, showed great interest in technical innovations, so they willingly applied for and participated in these trainings:

The instruction before noon was very interesting. It was about modern warfare technics, communication, which means communicating over long distances, with airports, etc. Every now and then, new inventions and improvements. The machine g[un] plays an increasingly important role alongside artillery, along with hand grenades, mines, and so on. They also turn out to be practical right away. But the enemies also work to improve their warfare system. The best thing would be if it was all over.³²⁰

Moreover, the equipment of German liaison officers was poor. The wire used by the German regiments proved inefficient. It was only after more than a year of negative experiences that they started to use a better wire, which until now

317 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 41.

318 Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre. Armes, uniformes, matériels*, p. 23.

319 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 39.

320 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, Saarburg 20.03.1917.

was only available to heavy siege artillery, that operated over long distances.³²¹ Over time, these methods were applied to field artillery. Initially, liaison officers stretched the wires on high poles, both along the trench line and toward their own positions. They had to quickly stop using this simplest method in the first two lines of trenches, because the cables broke off almost immediately under artillery shelling. Then, they started to put them in special ditches, bury them at least half a meter underground.³²² Of course, this way was not fully effective, given the length of the line and the depth of bombardment craters. In 1915, when they organized the positions of artillery observers of the 21st Field Artillery Regiment in an advanced position near Arras, the batteries of this regiment had as many as six observers connected by separate telephone lines with individual batteries. The infantry positions were three kilometers away from these batteries and – taking into account the necessity to coordinate the fire (also at the level of battalions and regimental staff) – each of them needed to maintain a network of five to six kilometers. Due to artillery fire – usually the very beginning of shelling caused the breaking of the line – and wiretaps, they soldiers had to constantly roll and unroll the cables.³²³

The unreliability of the still rather primitive telephonic communication forced a return to the archaic method of light signaling and liaison officers. They still used dogs to carry reports – especially German shepherds – and pigeons, transported to advanced positions in special longitudinal tubes.³²⁴

Even if the communication worked, the instructions based on the traditional method of shooting on command were still imprecise enough to enable the shelling in the form of firestorm moving in front of the infantry in a relatively narrow field of its assault. It was not until autumn of 1914 that the army introduced a new method of shelling from covered positions in regiments of the light artillery. First tables (*Planquadraten*) replaced the former method of determining the distance of explosion by means of direct observation. A square grid was set on the map, on which individual fields were marked by letters and numbers. The precision of shelling increased in result of increasing the number of grids on the board and accounting for the necessary accuracy of targeting devices. Only then one could think of conducting a firestorm and suppressive fire in front of advancing infantry forces, while transferring accurate information on

321 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 39.

322 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 55.

323 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 61.

324 Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre. Armes, uniformes, matériels*, p. 23.

the current location of own troops by telephone.³²⁵ In fact, it took many months of training to make the system efficient, and even afterward there were cases of infantrymen bombed by their own artillery.

The scale artillery shelling in later prepared offensive operations, with the use of these new methods, gradually increased. In the Battle of Arras in July 1915, the number of shells fired with the use of suppressive fire in one day per one unit (three batteries, four cannons each, that is, twelve cannons in total) ranged from 500 to 2000 bombs, which makes about 50–170 bombs per cannon. Howitzers always fired more rarely than cannons.³²⁶ In August of 1915, when no intensive combat operations occurred, the use of bombs dropped to about 300 for the whole regiment, which means only several shots a day per each cannon.³²⁷ Two years later, near Ypres, during the so-called Flanders Battle in July–August 1917, the artillery battalion of the Silesian 21st Field Artillery Regiment fired an average of 16,000–20,000 shots (First Division – 16,700; Second Division – 20,000; Third Division – 23,000).³²⁸ At that time, the tactics of conducting firestorms in front of assaulting infantry was already in use. But here, too, the Germans gave way to the Allies.

In the Battle of Lens, the soldiers of the 22nd Infantry Regiment that stood in front of the Canadians noticed that their cooperation with other weapons was still worse when compared to the enemy's capabilities. The enemy could not only rely on the efficient protection of his own artillery, but also had better observation facilities. Airplane fire became increasingly troubling. Only thanks to a desperate infantry offensive in the old way did the Germans manage to push out the Canadians from the occupied trenches. The melee combat with bayonets, grenades, and entrenching tools lasted almost an hour.³²⁹

The artillerymen of the 21st Field Artillery Regiment knew that they began to visibly lose technical advantage over the opponent on the battlefield. We find proof in a letter sent by a soldier in the summer of 1917 from the front in Flanders, in which he describes a regular day of the Upper Silesian cannoneer:

I am sitting at the moment between two cannons and writing on two empty ammunition boxes. There are bullets everywhere and you can hear explosions all around. It means that the English started their offensive from the sea as far as here, they even went forward in some places, but nobody knows it exactly. They also occupied some of the area

325 Ibid., p. 39.

326 Ibid., p. 59.

327 Ibid., p. 62.

328 Ibid., p. 162.

329 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 158–159.

ahead of us, but we generally pushed them back. This morning, violent artillery drum-fire woke us up. We soon received the “alert state” order and at 7:45 am another one, “alarm.” Then it started. We had to bustle in a place where English gunshots fell. We were incredibly fortunate when it came to our position. All the gunshots fell about 300 meters ahead or 200 meters behind us. Initially, we started suppressive fire. But then, two tanks appeared, which we hit by shooting straight ahead. Unfortunately, it was too foggy for us to notice if our shots fell too close or too far, anyway, the two beasts fell immediately. Besides, there were planes everywhere. An Englishman flew no higher than a hundred meters above us and one kilometer away from us, so that we could see both passengers. The plane was hit and exploded immediately. Then, we conducted suppressive fire again, also shelling at the incoming English reserves and generally at everything that was moving on the hill [where the English positions were located]. Since morning, we have not stopped shooting and have already fired several hundred bombs. At 3:00 pm, the field kitchens arrived, the only optimistic moment. So we all stood together tightly next to each other, a lot of people, when suddenly the shrapnel fell about ten meters from us. That shit buried everything, but it was not so bad after all. Fortunately, this gift fell on our steel helmets.³³⁰

Let us reiterate, artillery fire was the most terrible memory from the war. The beginning of a regular shelling, particularly from heavy cannons, always meant an incoming offensive. On a usual day, one could expect only weak harassing fire. Sometimes, both sides were connected by a kind of silent agreement that they would not fire at the villages in the support areas with the reserve battalions. The aircrafts that performed bombing behaved in a similar way: they observed the villages from a distance behind the front, but they treated those located in the immediate vicinity as reserve and resting places which they spared.³³¹ But when the drumfire (*Trommelfeuer*) fell on the first line and the connecting ditches with the second line of trenches, it was clear that – sooner or later – the infantry offensive would begin. As the participants recall it, the sounds of explosions were so frequent that it was impossible to distinguish between them: they created a unique terrible monotonous cacophony.³³²

Apart from shelling of the heavy artillery, the return to the old method of blowing up fragments of fortifications by mines was another means that could cause the destruction of enemy trenches without attackers’ casualties. Such actions on the Western Front occurred since the beginning of the war. It required long preparations and the construction of several hundred-meter-long underground walkways. After detonating the load, there ensued an assault

330 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 154–155.

331 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 57.

332 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 41.

on the destroyed fragment of the trenches.³³³ Both sides simultaneously monitored the enemy to thwart each other's intentions. The soldiers then tunneled under hidden enemy walkways from the other side to bury enemy sappers alive. The Upper Silesian miners were particularly suitable for this work due to their good preparation for underground work; this experience was widely used in the German "pioneer" units.³³⁴

Both soldiers and line officers criticized the German commanders for clinging to outdated war tactics during the first two years of the war, which means that they wanted to return to maneuver warfare at all costs. The soldiers negatively evaluated orders to not leave positions under any circumstances, which prevented them from taking a more convenient line for permanent defense. Already in 1915, the majority of observers viewed attacks in waves and extended compact lines as pointless. Soldiers marching shoulder to shoulder, with full equipment, and a long and unwieldy rifle that limited mobility not only did not fulfill its purpose but even helped the deadly fire from machine guns.³³⁵ It caused huge losses in the regiments at the front line, sometimes even before they entered melee combat on no man's land. In turn, the number of soldiers that fell or were injured in defense due to artillery shelling was sometimes as high as after an assault, which completely undermined previous military theories. The German High Command became gradually convicted that changes are necessary.

The turning point was 1916, after the great Battles of Verdun and Somme. The German High Command noticed the failure of its plans for attrition warfare and changed the tactics. Individual regiments received a directive to use the quickly dwindling troops more thoughtfully in battle. Most importantly, the High Command allowed soldiers to leave the first line with the beginning of large-scale shelling. The instruction to the commanders of German troops included a guideline: "Do not fight in the first line, but rather around it; in case of a violent attack, first leave the forefield of the enemy's offensive and move back to the main line of defense [the second line of trenches]. Avoid firestorms, though the point is not to leave the defended zone but to return to it."³³⁶ Thus, the High Command switched from line to battlefield defense tactics by employing an arrangement deep into the defense line. Finally, the decisions were transferred to subordinates.

333 Ibid., p. 87.

334 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 37–40, 68.

335 Keegan, *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Eine europäische Tragödie*, p. 233.

336 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 145.

Until then, they clung to an inflexible command while limiting the independence of company and platoon commanders, which had a particularly negative impact on the tactical capabilities when attacking or defending, because the means of communication with battalion commanders were often defective. The transfer of powers to the lower levels of command primarily applied to the choice of positions and fields of fire of machine gun companies along with the possibility of autonomous decisions about counterattacks even by company commanders. Thereby, battles became a series of separate duels:

Since then, soldiers did not attack in rows and columns, as there was no need to feel another uniform by his side, directly follow the predecessor in a column, or keep distances between rows. It was all gone. The soldier was no longer in a deadly rush, frightened between the commands, "Jump forward!" and "Down!" There were no more trumpet signals.³³⁷

The war changed toward taking advantage of the independent thinking of a soldier, non-commissioned officer, and officer on the battlefield, for whom the new technical means played an increasingly important role at war, in cooperation, and as support. At the end of the war, the capstone of this tactic was the use of assault troops (*Sturm Bataillone*, *Sturm Kompagnen*) and infantry general Oskar von Hutier's tactic of a combined surprise offensive of designated troops, only later supported by mass infantry offensive.

New Armaments

The First World War gave many ideas of new weapons. However, a simple shooter was still of key importance during the infantry battles. The Poles who fought in the German Army had good firearms (Mauser M 98). They often also used confiscated weapons, most often Russian rifles (Mosin Nagant model 1891, with a box magazine for five bullets) found in the arsenals of the Kingdom of Poland after the offensive in 1915.³³⁸ The novelty was the appearance of snipers in every battalion, which later received telescopic sights for their rifles.³³⁹

The mass use of machine guns – from the very first days of the war – was a great achievement. They gradually appeared in infantry regiments since the beginning of the twentieth century, but separate machine gun companies were created only immediately before the outbreak of the First World War, in 1909–1912. In the

337 Ibid.

338 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 48.

339 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 56.

63rd Infantry Regiment, the training of officers, non-commissioned officers, and shooters began in 1909 and lasted three months in the military training area near the village of Bardo in Greater Poland. At that time, there were rooms prepared in the barracks for the MG company and stables for horses in teams. In 1911, machine gun companies had a permanent place in the normal structure of the regiment as a support sub-unit.³⁴⁰ Later, the use of machine guns became an independent of training in the regiment.³⁴¹ Memories of Kazimierz Wallis – initially of the 63rd Infantry Regiment – show us the details of such training:

We now have daily instructions on the mechanism and working of the machine gun. As well as pistol training and many other things needed in warfare. It is a lot to learn, remember, and think about. I only note that each machine gun consists of several hundred elements that you must know. We also have French rifles [probably the captured Hotchkiss Mle 1914 machine guns]. We must know the entire mechanism of four types of gun and how to shoot them accurately. Especially the Mauser is finely constructed.³⁴²

The machine gun mentioned by Wallis is a new version of the Maxim machine gun (*Maschinengewehr 08*) used since the beginning of the war. The caliber of bullets was in accordance with the German standard – 7.92 mm. Its rate of fire was 450 shots per minute: “Yesterday was the first time I have ever fired a machine gun on my own, the one we have here at our disposal. A rifle like this can fire 500 bullets in a minute. There is a non-commissioned officer from the machine gun unit here, who taught us how to use a machine gun, how to make it useless in case of a retreat, etc.”³⁴³ The weight of its base was a shortcoming of Maxim, as with it the whole gun weighed fifty-six kilograms. Simplified version, without the base, weighed only eighteen kilograms. Hence, the need to train machine gun companies when the new model 08/15 was introduced. In this model, a bipod and a stock replaced the base, which reduced the total weight. There was an ammunition belt with 250 bullets. It was cooled with water. Its fire range amounted to 2000 meters.

During the First World War, the Germans also produced the Bergmann light machine gun (model MG15; earlier version MG10), which too had a 7.92 mm caliber bullets. Bergmann had a short recoil mechanism and was air-cooled (MG10 with water). It was placed on a tripod base with a drum magazine (ammunition

340 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 18.

341 Ciupek, *Aus der Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments*, pp. 7–8.

342 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, Saarburg 15.02.1917.

343 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Jabłonna 18.04.1916.

belt with 200 bullets). Its advantage compared to Maxim was its weight: only thirteen kilograms with the same firing range as the MG 08/1588.³⁴⁴

Over time, there was a gradual specialization in machine gun service regiments. Apart from the separate machine gun companies, individual units prepared for the assault of fortresses appeared, with a special rifle Festungs MGK 4, and in the infantry regiments at each battalions soldiers participated in training on how to operate machine guns subordinated to the commanders of the company.³⁴⁵

It increased the number of machine guns, so the soldiers used not only the German but also confiscated weapons. In the 63rd Infantry Regiment during the Battle of Somme, there were eleven German machine guns, two French (probably Hotchkiss Mle 1914), and one Russian (probably Maxim MG 1910).³⁴⁶

Secure at permanent positions, the machine guns could fire at the forefield in case of an assault without the need of precise targeting, only directing the bullets to the designated area and conducting crossfire. It was a huge advantage for the defenders. With the range of efficient fire of up to 2000 meters, in the forefield even up to 500–600 meters, the attacking infantrymen was defenseless; and there were segments where the distance was even smaller.³⁴⁷

As in artillery, the firepower of firearms – except during own offensive – was limited by the ammunition economy in the German troops, especially in 1914–1915. In the autumn of 1914, when the fate of the German offensive was decided at Reims, routine French shelling systematically woke the soldiers of the Infantry Regiment No. 157 every morning and repeated in the evening. They could only respond with fire when they clearly saw the long coats and kepis of the French, precisely due to the insufficient amount of ammunition. Each company had to report daily how much ammunition it has used.³⁴⁸

Hand grenades (*Handgranaten*) and rifle-thrown grenades (*Gewehrgranaten*) in direct equipment of the German soldiers were very effective. In the infantry regiments, hand grenades were standard elements of infantry armament since the very beginning of the war.³⁴⁹ Since 1915, when mass production began, they gained their final shape with a characteristic wooden shaft (*Stielhandgranaten*).

344 C. McNab, *Broń strzelecka XX stulecia*, pp. 158–159.

345 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 66–67.

346 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 121.

347 Leick, *Das große Sterben*, p. 66.

348 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 35.

349 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

The explosive was placed in a metal box at the end of the shaft.³⁵⁰ The grenades suitable for throwing out of the Mauser rifles model 98 had a special device: a sidestand on the barrel. They became particularly useful when the French started to protect the breastworks with special protective steel shields equipped with embrasures. The only methods against these fortifications was an attack from a close distance either by mortars – due to the curved projectile motion of the bullet and the short distance between the two lines – or with rifle grenades. Compared to hand grenades, the rifle grenades had poor accuracy.³⁵¹ During the war, hand grenades of various shapes and applications were in use; among others, disk hand grenades (*Diskushandgranaten*), oval grenades called egg grenades (*Eierhandgranaten*), as well as many other models, usually cylindrical in shape. The novelty during the war was the use of safe and efficient – due to their blast radius – defensive “ball grenades” (*Kugelhandgranaten*), later also used during the Second World War, whose fuses were carried separately, usually in special boxes, so they were armed only before an assault.³⁵²

Much of the training of infantrymen was devoted to the use of this extremely efficient fighting means in trench warfare. However, the use of grenades was not entirely safe. Wallis mentions it when he reports on the training for non-commissioned officers at his company:

A non-commissioned officer Scholz and private first class Strahl from our company participated in the course of throwing hand grenades in Nysa. . . . Gefreiter told us what it was like. They spent the first days only on learning about the construction of various types of hand grenades and how to handle them. On the last day, they threw sharp grenades. They could not do without one accident. Each time they threw a grenade from the trench, there was a group of non-commissioned officers and gefreiters who participated in the course. A sapper lieutenant from Nysa was the supervisor. One of the non-commissioned officers just threw a round grenade “Diskus.” The grenade had the form of a [disk], there was a “*Sicherung* [pin] with a wired ring” that is the slot for a finger. When the grenade is thrown, the ring remains with the *Sicherung* [protection] on the finger and the grenade without the *Sicherung* will explode when it only slightly hits the protruding ends. A non-commissioned officer was about to throw a grenade when it fell out of his right hand during the swing and when the protective ring remained on his finger. The grenade hit the ground and exploded. A non-commissioned officer was seriously injured in the back. The lieutenant was lightly injured from shrapnel in his legs and a few nearby were lightly wounded. The wounded were taken to the field hospital, the exercises immediately stopped. . . . In recent days, we also received sharp grenades for

350 Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre. Armes, uniformes, mat rieles*, p. 17.

351 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 56.

352 Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre. Armes, uniformes, mat rieles*, p. 17.

the training's sake and wooden *Platzhand* grenades [wooden hand grenades dummies for training].³⁵³

The Germans also looked for ways to at least partially secure the shooters, both in the positions and during an offensive. Introduced already in autumn 1914, special protective steel shields for a single shooter (*Stahlschutzschilde*) proved too expensive and not very efficient. They could serve as a passive protection at the post. But they proved useless during the change of location. Their weight and unwieldiness made it practically impossible to move them around in the forefield. Therefore, they were only used in the trenches, sometimes built in the concrete fortifications.³⁵⁴ However, they were in use until the end of the war, as the Kashubian who served at Verdun writes in his memoirs: "Recently, we received steel breast armors. They were supposed to be so strong that the rifle bullet would not break through them. We have not tried them yet, we did not use them at all, because they were heavy. Now, however, my colleague Hepner decided to try an armor, so they gave him two for safety: one for his back and one for his chest. Thus, he stood with confidence in those steel plates."³⁵⁵

At the beginning of the war, helmets were also a problem for the German Army. Used since the nineteenth century, the characteristic Pickelhaube was a completely outdated solution on the battlefields of the First World War. This leather helmet worn at the beginning of the war had decorations and a metal attachment in accordance with the pattern from 1895. The helmet had clear region and regiment symbols. Since both metal parts and the protruding spike were visible from afar, it was covered with dark green fabric, while the metal spike was covered with a special dust jacket in field conditions.³⁵⁶ However, the helmet did not provide proper protection.

The new solution introduced in the German regiments was the excellent steel helmet (*Stahlhelm*). The German High Command approved the new helmet for use in November 1915 and regiments started to use it from February 1916. It was the work of professor Friedrich Schwarz and August Bier, a surgeon, who used the experience of the first months of the war to develop it, when it turned out that 80 percent of head injuries were caused by shrapnel injuries rather than direct shots. Its material was steel that was one-millimeter thick, with the addition of nickel and chrome. The new helmet had an additional four-millimeter bracing

353 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Steinau 2.04.1916.

354 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 45.

355 Ibid.

356 Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre. Armes, uniformes, matériels*, p. 45.

at the front to protect the forehead. It was heavy as it weighed about a kilogram, which initially caused numerous complaints from soldiers. "The helmet on the head makes it difficult to move around," wrote Kazimierz Wallis, among others, when he received the new headgear. In 1918, its shape was partly changed. The designers especially enlarged cut-outs for ears to improve the acoustics. Soldiers complained that they felt like they were under a bell, which was particularly troublesome during artillery shelling and in communication with others on the front. Despite its considerable weight and initial complaints about the discomfort, *Stahlhelm* turned out one of the best and most secure helmets of the first half of the twentieth century. The soldiers quickly accepted the helmet, when it turned out to effectively protect them against shrapnel and head shots.³⁵⁷

However, changes in armaments during the First World War mostly meant new weapons, often used for the first time in this war. From the beginning of the war, the Germans employed chemical warfare, first on the Eastern Front and, then, on the Western Front. Although, the Hague Convention on the methods of conducting land wars – which they ratified – prohibited the use of chemical warfare, the ban did not apply to irritant gases, which the Germans interpreted as the possibility of using chlorine compounds. In January 1915, the Germans introduced teargas (xylyl bromide) near Bolimów. In May of the same year, the Germans also used there the lethal chlorine: 6000 steel cylinders containing 180 cubic meters of gas.³⁵⁸ However, the first gas attack in the West historically occurred on April 22, 1915, in Langemarck near Ypres, when it was used against the French colonial troops. The army repeated the attack through several days. Combat gases were invented by IG Farben conglomerate that produced them under the direction of the Silesian 1919 Nobel Prize winner Fritz Haber, who at that time worked at the Emperor Wilhelm Institute of Berlin.³⁵⁹ In 1917, chlorine was replaced by mustard gas, first used against the Canadians, at Ypres, hence its other name, yperite.³⁶⁰

The artillery had specially marked gas missiles. They were not in the stocks of artillery regiments, were only delivered after the decision to use them on a given segment of the front. The Upper Silesian 21st Field Artillery Regiment participated in such an operation for the first time on July 15, 1915, when it received

357 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 124.

358 Englund, *Piękno i smutek wojny*, p. 74.

359 P. Greiner, *Nobliści ze Śląska*, Gliwice–Opole 2005, pp. 47–48.

360 Leick, *Das große Sterben*, pp. 66–67.

one thousand gas bombs. Later, individual batteries repeated this operation after receiving the specific signal from the division. These signals are also an interesting example of war propaganda, even in such a situation: “Colourful Shot” (*Bunter Schofß*), “Death of the Brits” (*Britentod*), “Silesia” (*Schlesien*), “Dance of Death” (*Totentanz*). The greatest intensity of gas shelling from the Upper Silesian regiment happened four days later, on July 19. On that day, each field cannon received 900 gas missiles marked with a green cross and each howitzer received 350 missiles with a green and 350 missiles with a blue cross.³⁶¹ However, German enemies also used chemical warfare.

Despite the popular presumption, soldiers in the first line quickly adapted to the new situation and, if informed quickly enough about a gas attack with special alarm signals, units often avoided large losses. However, the fear of gas was enormous, because the poisoning caused, depending on the substance, enormous torment that the medical service could rarely cure. The terrifying aspect of chemical assaults was also that they started in silence when there was no sense of immediate danger. First, there was usually a specific sound of the escaping gas (described as hissing or sizzling). Then, the information was as soon as possible transferred with light signals to soldiers in trenches and, then, to the rear area. Special bells above trenches were also activated, their sound was a sign to put on the gas masks.³⁶² Usually after the gas attack, the enemy started his infantry assault.

The description of such a coordinated attack at Loos on the 157th Infantry Regiment on September 25, 1915, well illustrates the successive stages of the gas attack on the Western Front:

There was a sudden silence, but an observer on the ruins of a brewery reported a gas attack on the entire line. Since all the previous artillery fire destroyed all the loudspeakers, the command sent double liaison officers on bicycles to all segments with information about the danger. Luckily, the battalions also noticed the danger. Grey, thick clouds of fog with light western wind raised toward the hill with our position. The trenches were almost entirely covered with this “fog.” Since then, the staff did not receive any message, complete uncertainty! Finally, one of the officers brought in a report. All covered in vomit, he reported the use of chlorine gas, which none of us knew back then. Somewhere in front of us rattled machine guns, but the streets already started to fill with milky fog that made it difficult to breathe. The wind still brought the sounds of fierce infantry combat, so we knew that struggle continued ahead. Many quarters passed! Then, the artillerymen appeared, panting: “The English took our batteries.” In the dense

361 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 152–154.

362 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 125.

fog, the English suddenly appeared between the batteries. In a wild fury, the blinded Fifth and Sixth Companies desperately shot in the direction of the falling gas cloud, until 8:15 am, ammunition started to run out, even though every soldier had 230 cartridges at his disposal at the beginning. The English soldiers walking hand to hand appeared immediately in front of our trenches behind the gas cloud. They forcibly entered the segment manned by the 22nd Infantry Regiment and turned against the Fifth Company of the 157th Infantry Regiment at the wing. This offensive was stopped by hand grenades. However, the larger enemy forces soon appeared and attacked the company so that it could no longer hold. Captain Sabaß withdrew with the remaining thirty soldiers to the positions of the battalion. When he got there, it turned out that the enemy had already entered Loos. Therefore, the rest of the company sought contact with the battalion to no avail. . . . While retreating, they came across a strong English unit, which suddenly emerged from the fog. So bloody and heavy fights also started on the streets of Loos.³⁶³

The bells that called for wearing masks often caused a panic in the trenches. Bernard Potrykus recalls the dramatic scene with two German soldiers at Verdun in 1917:

There was a draught in the shelter, and a thick pungent smoke soon filled all the corners. We put on gas masks, but we used them so much recently that they turned out to be poorly resistant. The gas would pass through masks, squeeze into the throat and cause a violent cough. "We are suffocating!" – there were screams in the last despair. There was no mask for one soldier. Right away, two of them grabbed one that was hanging on the wall. Neither wanted to part with the mask so they began a terrible life-and-death fight. First, they snatched the mask from each other, then they started to fight with fists, kicks, drag their hair, and bite; half suffocated, they made inhuman roars, and at the end rolled on the ground, still fighting. Each of them saw his salvation in the death of the other. The scene was so terrible that even us, experienced soldiers not easily terrified, felt a chill down our spines.³⁶⁴

Initially, means of protection against a gas attack were limited. Until 1915, only primitive means of protection were available in the form of small gas sets that consisted of a layer of a bandage soaked in a special liquid that deactivated the gas.³⁶⁵ Only in 1915 did rubber gas masks (*Gummimaske*) appear as part of standard soldier equipment. Since 1917, these were replaced by leather masks (*Lederschutzmaste*) carried in a metal box.³⁶⁶ There also were special masks for horses: "We put on masks on our horses but they struggle against it. They want to flee, and they are right. . . . Suddenly, barrage fire started. Gas bombs frequently

363 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 70–71.

364 Potrykus, *Wspomnienia Kaszuba spod Verdun*, pp. 81–82.

365 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 65.

366 Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre. Armes, uniformes, matériels*, p. 88.

exploded among us. It was bad because the horses started to cough and splutter louder and louder. We squatted around the trees, holding a tree trunk with the one hand and a horseback with the other.”³⁶⁷ Wearing gas masks was tiring, especially when the gas attack lasted for hours. Kazimierz Wallis recalls:

This night is one of the worst nights here in the field. For the first time, we had *Gasangriff* [gas attack] conducted by the Russians. It lasted from 1:30 am to 2:30 am and from 4:30 am to 6 am. We had gas masks on our heads all the time. Such a long time could only make it difficult to breathe. The air saturated with gas was filled with the smell of chlorine and phosphorus, so harsh that we could not keep our eyes open. This is when we learned what a gas mask is worth. It is the only thing that can save a man's life.³⁶⁸

The losses resulting from the use of gas were relatively small and rarely resulted in a breakthrough in military operations. Severe poisoning was the result of either a lack of information about an attack or carelessness of soldiers. Symptoms of panic, especially among newcomers to the front, mostly originated from the lack of experience with gas, as we see in the episode from the Battle of Lys on August 31, 1916, in which the Upper Silesians from the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment participated:

Around 3:30 am, when the darkness was still there, they called an alarm. In the light of lighting shells, the stations observed an approaching yellow-green gas cloud and heard a characteristic hiss of escaping gas. . . . Soldiers started to blindly shoot at the gas cloud, because they were recruits and only the officers calmed down the situation after a moment. This attack proved the efficiency of anti-gas measures. There were only a few cases of gassing of soldiers who went for coffee and did not manage to put on a mask on time. The attack repeated two days later, but it proved completely unsuccessful this time, since the wind blew away the approaching cloud and lifted it up.³⁶⁹

The battle gas used by the Germans did not bring a breakthrough in the course of operations, nor did it give them victory. During the war, both sides used 113,000 tons of combat gases on the Western Front, that resulted in the death, sometimes in terrible torments, of 91,000 soldiers but this could not affect the course of the war. However, there were many more poisonings of soldiers, approximately about 1.4 million, which sometimes led to chronic diseases for the rest of their lives.³⁷⁰

367 Małek, *Z Mazur do Verdun. Wspomnienia 1890–1919*, pp. 242–243.

368 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, Russia 11.09.1916.

369 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 144–145.

370 B. Schrep, *Gebrochen an Leib und Seele*, in: *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Die Ur-Katastrophe*, p. 182.

While the use of chemical warfare did not cause a radical change on the battlefield, aviation caused enormous problems for the Polish infantrymen from the very beginning. In the German regiments, ordinary soldiers were aware that their army started to clearly give way to the Allied forces in air superiority. Initially, the soldiers mainly complained about the French reconnaissance aircraft, which increasingly better cooperated with artillery to direct its fire. Since 1916, the English and French aviators had cameras, while later – after the USA joined the war – they sometimes were able to report on German positions on the radio. The Germans did not have such reconnaissance techniques at their disposal, and the German industry would need years to catch up with the Allies in this respect.³⁷¹ In 1916, in the Battles of Ypres with the involvement of the 157th Infantry Regiment, the English reconnaissance aircrafts were so active that several enemy machines appeared every evening. The German trenches treated their appearance as an inevitable announcement of an attack.³⁷² At that time, there also happened night attacks. Kazimierz Wallis writes to his brother about this:

It was 3:00 am in the morning when a sudden bang of anti-air guns machine guns woke us up. After a while, we heard the rumbles of the first, cracking bombs. There must have been more pilots. The bombs flew toward the station. The guns fired whatever could have come out of the barrels. A few spotlights illuminated the sky and the pilot so that their artillery could target better. A couple of rifles helped them. A few dozen bombs fell later, the pilots withdrew, but returned again and threw some bombs that fell in another part of the city, near the old artillery barracks. We came to see the damage in the morning. Not very considerable. In a few houses, all the windows fell out, one had a damaged roof, and several horses were killed. Bombs do not make big holes, but they do have a lot of impact to the sides.³⁷³

The Allies quickly moved from solely explorative tasks to actions that used the air force to directly combat infantry with compact squadrons rather than individual machines. They did not limit themselves to passive observation but dropped bombs while trying to precisely hit the dugouts, and not only the vicinity of the trench lines.³⁷⁴ Already near Verdun, the French aircrafts attacked marching German columns, causing severe losses at the support area of the front.

Initially, the capabilities to fight enemy aircrafts were limited to the use of firearms. Soon, it turned out worthwhile to build separate machine gun positions

371 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg, Wahrheit und Lüge*, p. 172.

372 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 88.

373 The letters from K. Wallis do brother Stanisław Wallis, France 13.04.1917.

374 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 95.

on platforms only against air attacks. Before the war, field artillery regiments admittedly experimented with guns to be used as anti-aircraft, but only the growing threat from the sky made the German staff aware of the need to reinforce such protection.

On the basis of the popular 77 mm caliber light field gun, Germany began the production of the integrated double anti-aircraft guns. They weighed 2500 pounds. Their elevation angle was seventy degrees. They were placed on a movable platform with the possibility of rotation in a full angle. A shrapnel shell for this gun weighed 7.85 kilograms. The shells have reached the height of 3000 meters. However, at the end of the war, the equipment was already obsolete and ineffective in terms of targeting due to the relatively long time of setting cannons before shelling which, given the increasing speed of aircrafts, caused problems for the gunners.³⁷⁵ Two joint anti-aircraft cannons in the Upper Silesian 21st Field Artillery Regiment were introduced in the First Division of the Regiment in the spring of 1915. Any change in the location of their settings each time required the construction of a separate platform.³⁷⁶

However, the German foot soldiers most often had to passively observe what happens in the sky. In 1917, when the advantage of the Allies was already very clear, even the most patriotic opinions about the domination of German fighters over heavy Allied aircrafts did not help. The German fighters were beautiful in the air, but the Upper Silesian infantryman in trenches lacked the protection of their positions. This is how we should interpret the description of the Menin air battle in July 1917, with the participation of the famous squadron of the Silesian Baron Albrecht von Richthofen:

The advantage of the Allied aviation was very large. Their planes flew even in bad weather, when you could not see the aircrafts, but [only hear] their buzzing. We even learned to recognize by the buzzing whether it is our own or enemy air force. The Allied aircrafts had more murmuring piston engines, while the German planes had more melodious drone of rotary engines. On the other hand, the types of aircraft and, thus, the nationality of pilots were differentiated in good weather by the shape of the hull. The enemy always had a hull on a grid frame, while the Germans had a slenderer hull. The enemy usually conducted mass attacks with entire squadrons. At the moment of approach, anti-aircraft cannons shot shrapnel at them that created characteristic clouds. When small-caliber guns [*Revolverkanone*] shot, we could observe something that looked like a string of pearls in the sky, especially impressive at night, in the spotlights. Several or more German fighters attacked the flying Allied squadrons. Once, anti-aircraft guns fell

375 Hogg, *Artyleria XX wieku*, p. 118.

376 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 53.

silent, and the commander of a squadron turned to the side, so thirty English aircrafts followed him. At that instant, we saw 10–15 German fighters strike like angry hawks. Their hulls shone red in the evening light and this color caused fear in the enemy. This was our great unforgettable squadron of Richthofen's fighters! Enemies and foes encircled each other – “ratatata!” – and then a few more times, “ratatata!” Then one of the Englishmen caught fire. He fell down smoking, as fast as an arrow. In a blink of an eye – “ratatata!” – another pair wings collapsed, like in a closed book, then they broke off, and flew down separately, while the hull, like an arrow, fell to the ground. The third one fell suddenly and started burning only when it hit the ground. While we shouted “Hooray!”, the enemy's squadron flew away, chased by the red Richthofen's squadron.³⁷⁷

The helplessness of the infantry made every case of downing of the Allied machine a great success:

Yesterday before noon, our airman shot down a French flyer. This afternoon, I was at the place where the aircraft fell. It was a strong machine with two big motors. There were two officers and one commanding pilot inside. The aircraft fell into the woods and smashed into splinters. The motors crashed about a half a meter into the ground. A piece of one wing remained hanging from a tree. During the air fight, one of the officers received a shot in the eye and probably died soon. The motor also received several shots and stopped working. So the commander wanted to land his aircraft. But the area was full of forests and thickets. The aircraft no longer had the power to fly and fell down into a field with its nose to the front, between the trees. As a result of the sudden fall, the aircraft broke into pieces. The pilot's head was crushed, the second officer's arms and legs were broken, and he was taken to the lazaret. I saw both of them dead. They lay next to the aircraft in felt shoes. The officer had red pants, blue sweatshirt with silver markings on his sleeve. They were both young. Maybe they shot down more than one pilot before they shared the same fate. In the afternoon, both our artillery and the French artillery were very active. I attach a piece of canvas from the wing of the French airman.³⁷⁸

Until 1917, there is no mention of a threat from tanks in the history of Upper Silesian regiments, which is understandable, given the initial inefficiency of the first tanks. It was not until summer of 1917 that the breakthrough occurred, and the Germans eventually noticed the threat of this type of weapon during the fights with the English Army on the during the fights with the English Army on the Flanders's front in Flanders. Until then, no special means of anti-tank defense against tanks were in use. In August, at Saint Quentin, the soldiers of the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment destroyed two English tanks that slowly followed the infantry. They approached the first line of German trenches relatively easily and, thanks to machine guns inside, wreaked havoc in the enemy's ranks, which

377 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 150–151.

378 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 12.04.1917.

allowed them to capture some of the German soldiers, who surrendered under the force of fire and left their firing positions. Eventually, the 38th Regiment eliminated both tanks using the tactics effective so far: you allowed the tanks to enter the front line to attack them from both flanks from the fortifications occupied by the enemy. When later seven tanks attacked, they were no longer allowed to enter the trenches. They were fought with hand grenades and machine guns. The best results were achieved by hitting the external fuel container. This is how the soldiers managed to immediately destroy two tanks, which burst into flames. The five remaining tanks simply stuck in bullet craters in the forefield. Some of them were bombed with grenades, while the crew of others escaped.³⁷⁹

Bogdan Hulewicz's memories show that a disrespectful approach to the use of tanks on the battlefield was common among German officers until 1918, not to mention the instructions of the High Command that confirmed the sufficiency of former anti-tank defense measures:

First, the Germans introduced a special anti-tank rifle, a colossal single-shot culverin, from which one could shoot only from a solid base. Such a bullet broke through the armor of a light tank, but it did not mean that one or even several hits immobilized the tank. Besides, the recoil mechanism in that rifle was so strong that it could break the shooter's collarbone. This anti-tank weapon has proved impractical and inefficient. Later, Ludendorff issued a special order to combat tanks: during an assault, the entire artillery – regardless the caliber – was to only concentrate fire on tanks. All other goals were irrelevant at that point. Special missile signals were even prepared to let the artillery know about the assault of enemy tanks.³⁸⁰

However, these individual offensives announced what was to happen a year later, when Allied assaults in the summer and autumn of 1918 showed the cooperation of all types of weapons, including tanks, which led to the collapse of the German defenses, much weakened after the unsuccessful spring offensive and beleaguered by material shortages. The attempts undertaken at that time turned out to be belated and inefficient, although the losses of the English Army that conducted the assault were huge, and the German soldiers perceived tank crews as desperados similar to Japanese kamikaze during the Second World War:

The English armored wagons, the so-called tanks, are a very interesting thing. These are huge steel giants armed with machine guns and cannons. They roll through mountains and holes, through trenches and entanglements, against the enemy, while shooting at all directions. But in the face of modern means of defense, they could not resist; even

379 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 185–186.

380 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, pp. 177–178.

infantry can sometimes cope with tanks with their machine guns and hand grenades. Apart from that, the Germans set up their guns everywhere to target tanks. Once such a tank is hit by a grenade, it is immediately destroyed. But until destruction, it greatly supports the assaulting infantry. The English owe a large part of their successes to these tanks. The tank crew is exposed to an almost certain death. The artillery destroyed most of the tanks I have seen, and I have seen many. Usually, when a grenade hits the hull of a tank, gasoline explodes along with the ammunition supply so the tank was ruined in a split second. . . . When such a monster approaches it with diabolical rumble of a motor and machine guns, the morale influence on the defenders is enormously destructive.³⁸¹

Only in May 1918 did the Germans gradually introduce an anti-tank rifle to the equipment of infantry regiments (*Tankgewehr 1918* or *Panzerbüchse 18*) mentioned by Hulewicz and based on the machine gun MG 08/15. However, there were only a few copies of this weapon (only 13,500 until the end of the war). It weighed 17.6 kilograms. It fired only 4–6 missiles of 13.3 mm caliber per minute. The bullet could penetrate armor up to 30-mm thick from a distance of 200 meters, which made it an extremely efficient weapon compared to Allied tanks of that time; the armor of English Mark V was 16 mm thick, while the armor of the French Renault F17 22 mm.³⁸²

Losses

We have approximate data on the number of Polish soldiers conscripted into the armies of the partitioning powers who died on the battlefield. The number of fallen soldiers amounted to over half a million, of which 110,000 served in the German Army, another 220,000 in the Austrian Army, and 200,000 in the Russian Army.³⁸³

Needless to say, the individual fronts along with different types of weapons greatly varied, although one does notice some regularities. First, the chances of survival were much lower in the infantry regiments than in the artillery and cavalry units, obviously due to the fact that the latter did not participate in the fights on the first line of trenches. For instance, the 21st Field Artillery Regiment – in July–August 1915 – lost only one officer and three cannoneers in the very bloody fights at Arras, during which Upper Silesian infantrymen bled out, particularly

381 J. Iwicki, *Z myślą o Niepodległej. . . Listy Polaka, żołnierza armii niemieckiej z okopów I wojny światowej (1914–1918)*, ed. A. Józwenko, Wrocław 1978, pp. 269–270.

382 Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre. Armes, uniformes, matériels*, p. 109.

383 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 39.

at Lorette, whereas Bernard Potrykus' infantry company sent to Verdun ended with only thirty soldiers of initial 160 "after a few days!"³⁸⁴

We can also see a regularity when we take into consideration losses in the individual years of the war. The greatest losses occurred in 1914 and 1916, although it also mostly depended on the specific segment of the front. For instance, in 1914, the 63rd Infantry Regiment had in total "only" seventy-one killed, 244 wounded, and eighteen missing soldiers. On Christmas Eve in 1914, after the complementation of the regiment, its composition did not differ from the initial state.³⁸⁵ On the other hand, already in September 1914, the 157th Infantry Regiment consisted of only fifty officers and 2011 soldiers, which means almost a thousand people less than in August, despite receiving 400 soldiers from Silesia; this situation resulted from its involvement in first-line combat.³⁸⁶ The reserve 38th Infantry Regiment, which only constructed second- and third-line trenches in the rear area, lost at Verdun two officers and 196 soldiers within the period of sixteen months – from November 1, 1914, to March 5, 1916 – while ten officers and 588 soldiers were wounded, even though the unit did not participate in direct fights at all.³⁸⁷ In 1917, when the 38th Infantry Regiment was sent to the front line near Saint-Quentin, it suffered the greatest losses in its history: eighteen officers and 886 soldiers died, which makes 35 percent of the regiment's initial state.³⁸⁸

In 1916, the losses were even greater, both at Verdun and at the Somme in Flanders. The 38th Infantry Regiment initially lost below 200 soldiers within the period of almost one and a half year, but already missed thirty fallen and 163 wounded soldiers after just one day of the Battle of the Lys.³⁸⁹ The 22nd Infantry Regiment suffered similar losses at Lens in one day: fifty-one soldiers died, 156 were wounded, and eleven soldiers were missing.³⁹⁰

The decimation of companies, battalions, and regiments on the Western Front became a routine, which arouse little emotion even among the soldiers. Kazimierz Wallis almost unconcerned recalls in a letter to his brother how his unit was virtually destroyed: "Our battalion is still in its position; they will probably relieve it tomorrow. There is not much left of it. During those few days, our company had three commanders, one after another was wounded. One of our

384 Potrykus, *Wspomnienia Kaszuba spod Verdun*, p. 90.

385 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 66.

386 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 34.

387 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 52.

388 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

389 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

390 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith. . .*, p. 162.

best companions, Stieler, with whom I always bought butter and eggs in Galicia and Courland, also died.”³⁹¹

After the initial shock in 1914, even the gruesome descriptions of the removal of corpses that waited months in no man’s land would over time become devoid of emotions, as if being deprived of emotions was a way to “cope with” this inhuman environment. Karol Małłek writes in the final phase of the war, during the Second Battle of the Marne in 1918, that,

All we could smell was a terrible putrid odor. . . . It was only at dawn when I noticed that my head rested all night on a decayed face of a French soldier’s corpse. I was so scared of the corpse of the giant soldier, swollen like a barrel, with a black swollen face that my vision became dark. Friends spent the night in a similar way. The orchard and fields were full of decaying corpses.³⁹²

The large number of missing soldiers in the reports on the losses during the First World War is always striking. In fact, the first reports usually overstated the numbers. Later, some of the “missing” soldiers turned up injured or killed, identified by official metal dog tags on their necks. In many cases, the rise of “missing” soldiers resulted from the fact that bodies were not removed from battlefields for months. It was not until after the front moved forward, when the specially designated troops cleaned the forefield, that such information was verified. New conscripts often did this job so that they could get used to the atrocities of the war. Wroński recalls such a “baptism,” of war rather than of fire, in Lorraine:

First, we have to bury corpses. It was very difficult to remove about one and a half thousand bodies from the territory of over two square kilometers, especially since the rain poured all the time. We waded in the soil that is wet and seamed with grenades. Some corpses sink in mud, so we cover them with soil. Anywhere a larger group of people lies, we dig a shallow four-cornered hole next to it and push the bodies down with rods, covering them with squelchy soil. Those who lie in craters make it easier for us, because we just need to cover them. A ditch is the hardest thing to do. Piles of bodies lie on top of each other, almost to the top. We cannot pull them out, because they are all soggy and slimy. Swollen, black, and distended bodies. . . . Some of us recognize their close friend or favorite companion. We collect them and drag them to a place that is out of grenades’ reach in order to bury them separately. . . . We lay down the bodies as nice as we can, without taking off the uniforms and shoes; we cover with soil so that the rain does not pour it away. On top, we place a cross made of sticks and tied with a green string or switch. Take off your hats! . . . To the prayer. . . . We shortly recite *Hail Mary* and *Eternal Rest*, and sleep, my companion, in a cold grave, dream about Poland. We already

391 The letters of K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, France 2.12.1917.

392 Małłek, *Z Mazur do Verdun. Wspomnienia 1890–1919*, pp. 250–251.

removed the corpses, but the rain rinses a thin layer of soil. Here, a shoe pokes out of the ground, so does a hand there, and a head over here. We still have to add a little more soil and collect the rest of the leather from the battlefield, because there is a shortage of leather in our country, so we have to collect it.³⁹³

Increasing human losses and the necessity of complementation resulted in a transformation of the existing recruitment system. The attitude toward military service of the new recruits also changed. Already in 1915, prewar signs of enthusiasm disappeared. Everyone was aware of the hecatomb that occurred on the fronts. These moods resulted in increasing attempts to avoid military service. This phenomenon intensified in Polish lands with the subsequent years of war and conscriptions, although cases of substantiated conscious action could lead to severe punishments, including capital punishment. Yet, it clearly occurred on a massive scale, as we read in many very detailed independent memoirs.

As exemption of military service applied to the only family breadwinner, which had a legal basis in the case of homesteads, this method of avoiding conscription was most frequent, although it was not so simple. In Upper Silesia, the exemption also applied to those who worked for the war economy, particularly in this region of the mining industry. The growing shortage of raw materials in the German Reich limited conscription among miners, although there were still more of them than in the Ruhr.³⁹⁴ Representatives of the upper social classes tried to intercede for their relatives at a high administration level – sometimes successfully – or sent their sons abroad.³⁹⁵

The most common way to obtain a doctor's excuse was by self-mutilation. Ingenuity in this matter had almost no boundaries, no matter how detrimental was it to health. Rational calculations projected that the prospect of severe long-term disability was still a better solution than the highly probable – or even certain, as it was believed to be – death in the trenches. For that purpose, soldiers used both pharmacological and chemical measures (poisons, atropine, iodine, high doses of other drugs, kerosene and turpentine injections) and more primitive methods (breaking limbs, infecting open wounds). A true black market of such services flourished in Greater Poland. Arkady Fiedler estimates (although these estimates are exaggerated) that even several dozen thousand Poles managed

393 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 64–65.

394 T. Kulak, *Postawy społeczeństwa polskiego na Górnym Śląsku*, p. 13.

395 Borzyszkowski, Obracht-Prondzyński, *Doświadczenia wojny w świetle wspomnień Pomorzan*,” in: *Spółeczeństwo polskie*, p. 79.

to avoid military service in this way.³⁹⁶ Wawrzyniec Skorupka, who personally underwent such a “treatment,” describes the efficiency of the method:

[A companion in a field hospital in Głogów] showed an affliction to his calf. I was struck dumb: the wound was quite deep, large, the leg showed inflammation up to his knee. When I asked him, what was the cause of the wound, he said that he did it himself so that he would not have to serve the Germans. He used moth powder for this purpose, which he hid in the timber framing, from which our pavilion was built. It is high time I used this powder, or they will discharge me from the hospital. I agreed. Late at night, he manipulated the wall under cover and later gave me a pinch of the powder on a piece of paper, told me to moisten it, and put it on the wound. I did so. After a while, I felt severe pain in this place, which lasted until morning. I was astonished during the doctor’s appointment to see how the wound worsened overnight. Medical assistance had the same impression. This was not an isolated incident but a collective matter, such a deterioration of wounds, ungraspable for the hospital administration. It turned out that *Sanitätsfeldfebel*, a Jew by origin, loudly shouted in the hall: *Ihr verfluchteten Selbstverstümmeler*, you damn malingerers! They could not make any formal accusations without any tangible evidence, no one was caught red-handed, while our ward doctor, a Jew as well, was humane.³⁹⁷

Of course, it was definitely safer to do such a “treatment” under the supervision of a trusted doctor, which was also not a rarity. In Poznań, many respected Polish doctors and pharmacists handled it: Celestyn Rydzewski, Bolesław Krysiwicz, Ireneusz Wierzejewski, Krzyżankiewicz, Leon Lakner, Kazimierz Kłaczyński, Jan Szadkowski, and Edmund Mende.³⁹⁸ Noteworthy is doctor Andrzej Mielęcki from Katowice, who was a popular figure right after the war, when he was active during the uprisings and the plebiscite. In the memoirs of Bogdan Hulewicz, Mielęcki appears in this new unofficial role as the one who helps Poles avoid military service, regardless of possible consequences:

In 1918 [at the turn of January and February], I received a written order [in Katowice] to appear before a military and medical commission for a “checkup.” My wife and I decided to defend myself from being sent to the front. We asked doctor Mielęcki for help. Mielęcki considers it, observes the knee (he was a gynecologist). Everything is already sealed here, the knee is not stiff, and the fact that the circumference of the leg over the knee is five centimeters smaller is no obstacle. . . . “Go home at once; you have to complain to the hostess that your leg hurts, make an ice compress, lie down, and later the hostess should call me. In the meantime, I will make preparations.” After an hour

396 Borzyszkowski, Obracht-Prondzyński, *Doświadczenia wojny w świetle wspomnień Pomorzań,* in: *Spoleczeństwo polskie*, p. 79.

397 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi 1914–1967*, pp. 103–104.

398 Fiedler, *Mój ojciec i dęby*, p. 148.

Miełęcki was already with us and gave me an iodipin injection. Although I am usually resilient, this time it hurt so much that I lost consciousness for a moment. The doctor sat for a while, ordered me to take something and left. The leg hurt very much, the knee swelled, so that I could not sleep. After a few hours, the nervous doctor Miełęcki appears again and admits he realized in his doctor's calendar that he injected the wrong substance: instead of aseptic iodine for injections, he injected a preparation for digestion. He goodheartedly sat with me until morning. In the morning, he and my wife escorted me to the station so that I could show up in the military hospital in Sosnowiec. There was no sign of a puncture on the skin, and the checkup was supposed to occur on the next day. The swelling was serious and the pain was moderate, while the result was not excellent but "satisfactory." Due to "repeated exudates" they qualified me for garrison duty and said: "incapable of service on the front."³⁹⁹

However, when all the methods of avoiding service failed, showing up before a military commission was inevitable. The inspections consisted of a routine medical examination of young boys, which they sometimes perceived as a kind of initiation:

On the appointed day, at seven, we set off toward Dziąldowo, the boys from Brody born in 1898. Sixteen of us. We went straight to the assembly point. Village mayors from nearby villages awaited there. There was also our vogt Bülow from Kisin. We entered. A few soldiers gathered us and aligned according to villages and communities. They led us inside the room, on the stage, behind the curtain. We take off our clothes in a flash there. Everyone was ashamed to show his skinny bones, and the little Zebedee [sic!]. I guess that is why we all covered them with our hands. Finally, we stepped to the dance hall one by one, where two doctors examined us dressed in white smocks. Measuring, weighing, reading letters and numbers, hearing examination, and a piece of paper goes to someone's hand, which I follow to the table, to another doctor. He tells me to march back and forth in front of him. Next, I come to attention and the doctor says that I am a bit too short, good for light cavalry. I receive a small piece of paper with the words "capable to serve in light cavalry."⁴⁰⁰

While the young boys from subsequent cohorts were still fascinated by the new that awaited in distant countries and expected to experience a great war adventure, their parents and close relatives received with terror their conscription orders:

A call from the Kaiser had us appear in Bezirkskommando Osterode on March 1, 1917, at 9 am, to perform military duty. . . . I saw my poor mother walk around crying, while preparing something for my long journey. I remember she prepared two pairs of warm woolen underdrawers, three pairs of white woolen socks that she made herself, a dozen

399 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, pp. 105–106.

400 Małek, *Z Mazur do Verdun. Wspomnienia 1890–1919*, p. 200.

of new handkerchiefs, gloves, three warm, woolen shirts, two pairs of leather footwraps for high leather. You seek no doctor when your feet are warm goes the old proverb, which my mother knew well. She also prepared for me a perfectly fried chicken, smoked meat, butter, sugar, and many other things. She packed the goods in two big boxes and put it aside on the day of departure. . . . Finally, “the military day” came, the day that started a new era in my life. We got up on time – father was on guard. After preparations, we ate an early breakfast together to warm ourselves, and then my father began in the old-fashioned way: we sang a hymnal song, the itinerant song, and then we all fell to our knees, and my father loudly began to ask God to guard me from evil, be my guardian, spread his father’s wings over me, and bring me back home safely.⁴⁰¹

Afterward, all recruits met at the station where, escorted by soldiers, they were divided into groups according to their assignment to weapon type and training unit.⁴⁰²

If the conscripts kept their cool, they could still escape from the transport to the training unit, which was a mass phenomenon in the last phase of the war:

We march [through Leszno] without music, without singing, all depressed, like a company of desperados. On both sides of the column, the convoy of guards closely watches us so that nobody escapes from the line. The train does not stand in the green like it used to. Located far behind the station, surrounded by sentinels. At the station, they inspect and count everybody again. Some people still wear bandages. They did not have enough time to properly heal. We hear curses, and threats. A few young mothers with small children came to say goodbye to the departing fathers. Wives say goodbye to husbands. There are a few fathers who say goodbye to their sons. The civilians cannot enter the platform. They all stand behind a fence. Departure signal. We hear cries and screams from behind the fence. Arms raise for the last goodbye. Tears shine in the eyes of some of the soldiers, but these are tears of rage. Intimidating fists threaten those responsible for the war. Some people sit quietly, indifferent to everything that happens around them. Some of them read prescriptions and hold bottles of mysterious liquids in their hands. And they hold it as tightly as if it was a last resort. The eyes throw around stinging glances. There are ominous screams coming from the corners of the wagons. Turn out the lights. . . . Get the knives. . . . Beat them!!! There are already some people missing in Leszno. Where and how they escaped? We do not know. A soldier has convulsions, throws himself on the floor – shakes. . . . eyes closed, foam comes from his mouth. The other one throws up terribly, he is horribly pale – the stench of excrement comes from his trousers. Someone jumped out of the wagon at a bend and summersaulted on the embankment. Somebody fell off the train again and lies next to the tracks. The train stops, they bring him to the wagon. We stop at a small station. . . . The sentinels are densely located, making sure that no one escapes the transport. There is a considerable

401 Ibid., pp. 201–203.

402 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi 1914–1967*, p. 56.

number of sick people gathered along the way. Doctor and paramedics have a lot of work to do. Some of them are assigned to the hospital – they laugh at everyone. There are some among them who reportedly go to the front for the fourth and fifth time already, and they can never reach their destination.⁴⁰³

However, when none of the methods to avoid military service worked, the only option left was to escape and hide in the vicinity; in a forest, dugout, or even curtilage, a meticulously camouflaged hiding place. In those “bunkers” or “shelters,” as they were called, one had to somehow wait until the very end of the war. They were sometimes in close proximity of garrisons. Wroński hid in the vicinity of Śrem with a few companions and describes it as follows:

They made a dugout according to front rules. They chose a hill in the forest, densely overgrown with young pines. They dug an entrance which expands to the size of a small room underground. The walls and ceilings have been reinforced with stanchions. A place to sleep, strewn with moss and leaves, is covered with blankets. The entrance to the dugout looks like a larger fox hole. One soldier is on guard, hidden behind trees, and observes the nearby training area [of the garrison in Śrem] and the road. Meanwhile, others lie and do nothing.⁴⁰⁴

At the turn of 1915 and 1916, supplementing regiments with reservists from the vicinity of their quartering was already history. After the losses at Verdun and Somme in 1916, it was no longer possible to reconstruct the numbers of the Upper Silesian 22nd Infantry Regiment only with ersatz battalions (*Ersatz-Bataillone*) from Silesia. Soldiers from other countries of the German Reich, especially from Hesse, appeared in the garrisons and the regiment.⁴⁰⁵

Anyway, the reserve recruitment system – that based on conscription to reserve battalions, trained in the support area – did not fully work out during the war. There was a constant shortage of supplies in the rear area. In the reserve battalion of the 63rd Infantry Regiment from Opole, the quartermaster had to order, but also make himself, parts of uniforms and equipment: schoolbags, canteens, suspenders, and so on, because the military warehouses in Wrocław were empty. The training itself also left a lot to be desired, as useless drill and officers’ funerals were still more common than military exercises. The battalion from Opole once even served as an execution unit for the execution of a sentence on a convicted civilian murderer.⁴⁰⁶ Participation in similar executions later became an everyday

403 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 182–183.

404 *Ibid.*, p. 241.

405 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 122.

406 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 239–240.

occurrence.⁴⁰⁷ Most of the new recruits were badly trained, which resulted in large losses in their first months of service, often imputed to the lack of good officers in the rear area.⁴⁰⁸ New recruits underwent a training within the framework of companies that consisted of both experienced and newly conscripted soldiers. Then, under the direct command of officers experienced in front combat, the recruits learned tactics, assaults, principles of trench warfare, and shooting. As a rule, the training in the support area lasted two weeks, after which they were usually immediately deployed at the front line.

In fact, both officers and ordinary soldiers knew about the lack of proper training of new companies. Ironically, the conscripts from those units were called the last hope of Germany, “Deutschlands letzte Hoffnung.” Old soldiers looked down on the new ones and treated them as cannon fodder.⁴⁰⁹ At the same time, they were surprised to notice the lack of training and habits necessary to survive on the Western Front. The conscripts noticed own naivety and the lack of training only after a few weeks: “We have acted inappropriately. For example, when the first grenade hit nearby, I was astonished to see that everyone was throwing themselves to the ground. Only when I thought I could be punished, I fell when the others were already about to get up. Until then, I thought that cannons were only used as a scare or to destroy fortifications.”⁴¹⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising, that – out of forty-five newcomers who arrived to this company – only nine remained after two days of combat in Flanders, out of which five lost their weapon on the battlefield.⁴¹¹

The problem of high losses among conscripts also resulted from their young age – and sometimes even their physical immaturity – to meet the murderous demands of the trench warfare. In terms of quantity, companies were constantly replenished, but the number of new rifles did not mean that the units were comparable to the 1914 draft, because many of the new soldiers “could not hold a rifle in their hand, while the kitchen had to transport their backpacks for them.” As Wroński recalls, “you can kill a parade army effortlessly, with a glove.”⁴¹²

Medical services did not improve the inauspicious statistics. The abovementioned diseases of the digestive system – caused by the trench conditions – remained an unresolved problem until the end of the war.

407 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 217–219.

408 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 79.

409 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, p. 4.

410 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

411 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

412 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 80.

Moreover, there was a constant lack of clean water, which supported the regular proliferation of parasitic diseases. Basic hygiene was virtually impossible in such conditions. Soldiers virtually never washed themselves on the first line of the front. Even performing elementary physiological needs caused considerable difficulties. The soldiers tried to do them early in the morning, when there was no regular artillery shelling, due to the poor visibility; unless there was a previously prepared attack. Yet, it was always dangerous: "A few of us go further into the field to do what we need. With our faces turned toward our people, so that we do not lose sight of the company, we receive fire from behind – and. . . everyone lies flat on the ground. We hurriedly crawl on our stomachs to escape the unpleasant situation."⁴¹³

Ubiquitous lice were particularly troublesome in small dugouts – usually packed with soldiers – along with rats; both were a real plague in the trenches and threatened with typhus.⁴¹⁴ Over time, however, the soldiers in the first line got used to parasites and limited their struggles with them to shaking out their clothes:

[Lice] attacked us so much that any fight against them became completely useless. It is unimaginable to kill these masses. Standing, sitting, or lying in calm, even for a moment, is impossible. Whoever wants to sleep has to take off his shirt, turn it over, shake it off properly and only then can he lie down. He can rest only until new hordes of lice do not bother him, which usually lasts no longer than half an hour. Afterward, he must repeat the same action. Woe betide anyone who gets warm, because he will get mobbed by the lice as numerous as seeds on a poppy.⁴¹⁵

Only thanks to regular injections every two to three days – painful, thus disliked by the soldiers⁴¹⁶ – did the Germans manage to avoid during the war a typhus epidemic, which was still a real threat in 1914.

Dampness, physical, and mental tension, particularly during artillery shelling and combat in the forefield, conduced to diseases that could not always be diagnosed.⁴¹⁷ Mass neurosis was a completely new phenomenon for military physicians (in Germany over 200,000 cases), usually as a result of prolonged exposure to artillery shelling. Soldiers transported for rehabilitation, without traces of physical injuries, screamed day and night, shivered, convulse, often

413 Ibid., p. 17.

414 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 43.

415 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 113.

416 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, p. 15.

417 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 58.

with no control over the trembling limbs. They were treated traditionally with isolation, longer holidays, or water treatments; even their families could not visit them for some time.⁴¹⁸ If symptoms persisted, patients were most often suspected of simulation. In that case, more invasive methods were used: electroshocks, starvation, full isolation, deprivation of external stimuli, and forced restraint for many hours.⁴¹⁹ Wroński also suffered from such a nervous breakdown, and he describes his stay in the ward located in the support area of the front line that specialized in treating war neurosis in the following manner:

Exhausted from terrible experience, nerves denied obedience, while my organism, exhausted from hunger and inconveniences, negatively affected the entire mental state. The head involuntarily moves on a thin neck, the hands tremble, a strong shock penetrates the whole body time and again. After fourteen days, the doctor transfers me to a mental ward and places in a separate barrack. The food is better here. There is no guards. Constantly under discreet watch, we can move freely around the large garden, fenced with barbed wire, and do whatever we want. We are just not allowed to go outside. We always go for walks in the company of paramedics, wherever they lead us. In the garden, you can observe unusual symptoms of the disease. Someone sits under a tree and contemplates for hours, while looking at one place, he counts on his fingers, nods his head, and murmurs something to himself. Another guy crawls around a tree on his belly and bites the grass with his mouth. Another one tells everyone about love: that he has a pretty fiancée, that he is about to get married, and that he will have children, one of whom will be a general. Another one avoids everyone else; when someone gets too close he hides behind a tree. While other soldiers argue and fight with each other until paramedics separate them. They curse on everything, pray, cry, and sing. The paramedics intangibly observe and note every detail. The observation lasts for about two weeks. Afterwards, they send a patient to the appropriate ward. At the end of May, they transport us to the Psychiatric Ward in Malonne near Namur. . . . One after another, we come to the doctor's office. The exam is detailed and lengthy. The doctor lightly hits the knee with a hammer below kneecap, first in one leg, then in the other, in a sitting position, with legs on top of each other. Then he seats each of us on the ottoman. He punctures the breast, abdomen, and muscles with a sharp, then blunt instrument, a kind of awl, after which the patient has to answer whether the puncture was sharp or blunt. They perform the same pricks on the back, buttocks, and legs. Then the patient has to stand in one place with his eyes closed, walk a few steps, then the doctor measures the body, weigh, etc. . . . Finally, the doctor gives the diagnosis. We receive fresh underwear and a duster,

418 W. Kołodziej, *Wpływ działań pierwszej wojny światowej na powstawanie i przebieg nerwic wojennych u żołnierzy w świetle polskiego piśmiennictwa lekarskiego w końcowym okresie I wojny światowej*, in: *Historia medycyny wojskowej na przestrzeni dziejów*, Vol. 1, ed. A. Felchner, Wrocław 1997, pp. 39–40.

419 Schrep, *Gebrochen an Leib und Seele*, p. 181.

and they transport us into a cell. A giant hall stretches along a long corridor. Small cells for one person on both sides. Narrow entrance to the cell, covered with a canvas curtain in place of door. There is an iron bed by the wall, next to it there is a bedside table and a chair. This is it. Each cell has a number, and they all look the same. The sidewalk in corridors dulls footsteps. Complete silence everywhere – peace and quiet.⁴²⁰

Wroński also describes the methods of therapy used at that time, when the simplest means failed, that is removal from the front line and ensuring peace and quiet. In such cases, doctors did not hesitate to use methods that significantly differed from humanitarian standards:

The unpleasant person of Dr. Schliechting [chief physician] is revolting; he always walks in the company of a huge dog and a guard. For the slightest passion of a patient, he orders to wrap him in wet sheets and let him lie down for two hours under supervision, and he adds a glass of some pink liquid to calm the nerves. However, the most hated is doctor Jacob, who personally torments patients. He ordered to put an exhausted madman into a closed box, prepared for this purpose in a way that the whole torso is closed, with only the head above the box. The box is heated by hot electric current, which causes strong sweats and weakens the entire body of the patient. After letting out of the box, the doctor ordered to release this sick man into the courtyard and – when he could not walk on his own – only lean against the wall, the doctor pushed him away from the wall and ordered him to go straight. He repeated it several times, until the patient finally fell flat to the ground detached from the wall. Then, doctor Jacob said that the patient was not sick but simulates. But, actually, everyone here is seriously sick, only during the wartime it is not acknowledged. Here, disease is subject to orders.⁴²¹

The latter scene strongly resembles the one described by Hašek in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, usually considered as a grotesque detached from reality, in which the military physician Grünstein considers all the sick to be malingerers and prescribes them alternately quinine and enema with the words: “I know that you’re all malingerers and you want to desert from the war. And I’ll treat you as such. . . . In twenty years time you’ll be screaming in your sleep, when you dream of how you tried it on with me.”⁴²²

Soldiers, who every day saw the torments experienced by the wounded in the forefield – later cured in the support area – frantically feared serious injuries. Sometimes, especially at the beginning of the war, they managed to communicate with the enemy to take the wounded away from the battlefield, sometimes by

420 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 204–206.

421 *Ibid.*, p. 208–209.

422 J. Hašek, 1883–1923, 2002, *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*, Oxford Text Archive, <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12024/3010>.

tearing them from the barbed wire, on which they hanged for hours in delirium. The ban on any contact with the enemy – issued after Christmas Eve in 1914 – made this simple way of helping the seriously wounded impossible. Usually, they could not bandage themselves, even though every German soldier had a special kit of bandages to immediately help a friend or himself. The propaganda posters even showed how this kit saves the lives of wounded enemies.⁴²³ In fact, even the corpsmen were not always able to reach their wounded companions from their own units in the forefield under fire. It was usually only possible at night, still at the risk of death. Also, the large-scale use of dogs that searched for the wounded proved only a half measure. The problem was not so much how to find them, as how to transport them from the forefield to the field hospital.⁴²⁴ Left in the rain and cold in the no man's land without any help, the wounded died in terrible conditions “and, before the death, they screamed terribly; an ineffable nightmare,” as one of the witnesses to the events of the 38th Regiment recalls.⁴²⁵ The other descriptions of Poles serving in the German Army confirm it. After being wounded, Wroński recalls:

Long rows of the wounded. . . set up outside on stretchers. Pale bloodless faces shiver because of the pain – silently groaning. This one got his entire jaw torn out. Another had his whole head bandaged, one can barely see his only eye. This one lies with no hands, another without a hand. There lies a torso with no limbs at all. This one lost both his legs, another has only one leg. They are all candidates for the other world. . . . Someone unintelligibly mumbles about something impossible to understand, because his whole chin was torn off. Another one screams out loud: “Kill me!”⁴²⁶

The most depressing impact on the morale of an ordinary soldier had the awareness of loneliness on the battlefield at the moment of severe injury and mutilation. With this amount of victims, there was a constant lack of bandages on the front line, and they only relied on the help of their companions who used dirty handkerchiefs and shirts.⁴²⁷ In contrast to previous wars, where most of the wounds was caused by firearms, about 85 percent of injuries in the First World War was caused by artillery shelling. As a result, wounds were dirty and infected much more often than after a bullet. And while it was not possible to save every fourth wounded in the nineteenth century, despite the advancement in the

423 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 151.

424 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 88.

425 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 58.

426 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 202.

427 Potrykus, *Wspomnienia Kaszuba spod Verdun*, p. 71.

organization of medical services, now every third person died. Substances used turned out insufficient for most wound infections, because physicians only applied a drug containing antibodies to stop tetanus infection (*Tetanus-Antitoxin*), while people started to take hygiene more seriously during treatment. The possibility of using narcosis in field hospitals enabled them to perform more precise and complicated amputation surgeries,⁴²⁸ although it was not always completely safe, as in the case of Wroński:

In the morning, they put me in a wheelchair and take me to the operating room. In a flash, they spread me out on the table, tie my arms and legs with thongs, one puts a mask on my face and spills a liquid. Chloroform suffocates me, I count to forty, and I fall into the abyss. I wake up around evening and unconsciously look around. I begin to realize that I was on the operating table. Now I am in bed and there is a doctor and a sister next to me; but I am in another room. What happened? Their eyes look at me, they narrowly observe me. Thank God – you are alive – I hear as the doctor I know already says to someone. The jaws terribly hurt, and the tongue is swollen and kind of ripped apart. Do not say anything. . . a nurse asks. I really cannot talk either. I am nauseous – I start to throw up. Well, that is good, says the doctor and leaves. But stay with him, sister. I am still intoxicated, and I look around. Vomiting again. Now, I am released from the pain and I regain consciousness. I mumble to ask them what happened. Why do my jaws and the tongue hurt so much. . . The sister was dismissed, and there came a paramedic, from whom I learned that my tongue fell into my larynx during narcosis and I was suffocating. They had to stop operating, open the jaws with pliers, and pull the tongue out with claws, not to mention apply artificial respiration. Now it is six, so I was anaesthetized for eight hours. I cannot take food, so they just pour a spoonful of broth into my mouth.⁴²⁹

The field hospital next to the front, despite its experience from nineteenth-century wars, still looked terrible in the First World War. Wroński also described one of them, not far from Carignan in Champagne:

The carts bring [the wounded]. There is a room in the barracks for 2,000 wounded people. But there is no room for us. Only the slightly wounded remain and they will soon return to the front. . . . Soon, they transport us to Carignan, to the Belgian border. . . . In each of these hospitals, there are different doctors, specialists who decide how long the disease would last, whether the patient can survive a longer transport or they must perform surgery on the spot. When a new bandage suffices, the sick person does not even go to bed, but taken farther and farther to make room for others. Some soldiers receive injection to prevent fever, others get anaesthetized and have their foot, arm, finger or other part of the body amputated. Bandage, injection, onto the stretcher, and go ahead. Doctors

428 Schrep, *Gebrochen an Leib und Seele*, p. 180.

429 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 160–161.

in white smocks, bloody like butchers, with cigars in mouths, bustle around a primitive operating table. They throw aside the cut limbs. There is no time to think about or maintain hygiene here. All the toilets are stuffed with wounded people whose legs are healthy. In the corridors, there are entire rows of those who require to be transported on stretchers. Ambulances constantly take them to the railroad station and leave the stretchers on the platform.⁴³⁰

It is only in hospitals in the interior of Germany that the doctors perform more complicated surgeries. Many of them even succeed but, because plastic surgery was still in its infancy, the aesthetic effects were usually miserable, especially in facial injuries. Attempts were made to reproduce the losses and form artificial jaws, noses, or skull fragments with other bones, but also metal lamellas, ivory, rubber, plastic, gelatin, or wax. These operations were very often unsuccessfully repeated despite the rejection of transplants which, in the absence of antibiotics and immunosuppressive drugs, were pointless and exposed the wounded to additional suffering.

Limbs prostheses were usually made of metal and wood, but sometimes these old methods were “modernized” to add strange blades, hooks, and even knives at the end of artificial arms and legs. The harbinger of a breakthrough within this area were the surgeries of the famous surgeon Ferdinand Sauerbruch, who tried to reconstruct the parts of hands with the remains of amputated limbs so that they could at least grasp objects. Of course, in this, case we talk about first experiments rather than any proper method of treatment.⁴³¹

However, amputations, especially limb amputations, caused terrible mutilations. They created severe neurosis of the injured and, as a consequence, their exclusion from society. Hospital stay and observation of such hopeless cases along with the limitations of contemporary medicine usually caused a deep reflection on the meaning of the war and constituted the basis for the later rejection of its propagandistic heroic image. This is how a peasant from Greater Poland described his impressions from the hospital in Głogów, where he saw a heavily mutilated cavalryman:

I was so weak that I had no interest in the badly wounded soldier at first. After a few days of weakness, I came to myself and looked around the room. The picture I saw on my neighbor's bed was the opposite of the eulogized heroism. A young man at the age of twenty-two, a jaunty, a cavalryman, a hussar, without both legs, amputated, one at the thigh's height and the other above the knee, with a crushed hand. The amputated spot

430 Ibid., pp. 150–151.

431 Schrep, *Gebrochen an Leib und Seele*, p. 183.

was treated dry, without bandages, under cloches of thick net, without blankets but powdered with something. Horror.⁴³²

Beyond the Front

Soldiers spent a large part of their service outside of the first line. It necessary due the amount of human losses and the mental exhaustion of units, which significantly reduced their ability to fight. A long stay in the trenches of the first line was a task beyond the strength of all soldiers who fought in this war.

As a rule, German infantry regiment sent to the front was organized in such a way that one battalion served in the extended positions of the first line, most exposed to shelling and filled with burdensome guard duties, another battalion remained on the reserve positions in the second line, ready to support the first echelon at the moment of the enemy's attack, while the third one was in the rear area, in provisional lodgings, where it rested. The exchanges of battalions occurred every few days. After some time, the entire regiment moved to the deep back, to let the soldiers rest, often also to transform and replenish the headcount or conduct necessary training. The length of stay at each of these three positions varied, usually from one to two weeks.⁴³³ However, Bogdan Hulewicz mentions that – in the sections where the battle continued – these periods did not exceed four days.⁴³⁴

Lodgings played a huge role in the everyday life of a soldier, both in the immediate support area and in the deep back. They allowed the soldier to forget, at least for a short time, about the nightmare of service in the trenches as much as possible. The battalions in reserve had quarters that were not much different from the dugouts, although they were much more spacious and provided greater security. For their construction, the army often used existing remains of buildings and natural caves or – in places less exposed to artillery shelling – wooden barracks.⁴³⁵

Apart from primitive beds and tables, the reserve lodgings had no furniture. The rats and parasites also swarmed these sites. The difference in equipment compared to those on the first line consisted only in the constant access to running water, which meant not only the possibility of maintaining basic hygiene, but also the provision of daily warm meals from the field kitchen.⁴³⁶ A little

432 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi 1914–1967*, p. 105.

433 Drygas, *Czas zaprzeszy*, p. 234.

434 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, pp. 50–51.

435 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 321–323.

436 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

more free time allowed for some respite and simple pleasures, usually drinking. We read Wallis's remarks from one of such dugouts in December 1916: "A few days ago, we had a little fun here. On a high mountain, we arranged tables and benches, we received several dozen liters of beer from the battalion and some of the companions dressed as civilians, Jews, etc., and recited monologues, etc. A few officers also appeared. But about half an hour after the beginning, I had to go to the guard post."⁴³⁷

Since the stay in the reserve lodgings in the rear area was very short, nobody cared too much about keeping them clean and tidy. Sometimes they were completely destroyed by their previous users. When the 157th Infantry Regiment occupied the lodgings in Flanders near Comines in autumn 1915, the troops quartered in deserted factory buildings. The Bavarians who had previously stayed there, equipped the place carefully, expecting a longer stay, so they got angry when they had to leave the comfortable, meticulously prepared rooms and they completely devastated them before the departure. Therefore, newcomers had to sleep on wet straw, which "literally moved because of the vermin of various kinds."⁴³⁸

The situation was different in the rear area of the front, where whole regiments usually remained for one or two-week rest. The lodgings were solid in this case. Sometimes there were barrack, not only wooden. If there was a lack of wood in the vicinity, even primitive buildings were erected with the expert half-timbered construction, well-known in Upper Silesia and Greater Poland, which consisted in filling the frame structures with clay, straw, or lime. The Poles in the German Army assessed the conditions as not the worst:

We live in wooden barracks outside the village [near Bellancourt, in the rear area of the Somme front,] on quite a steep slope of a small mountain. There are still a couple of kilometers to the position. The interior of the barracks is quite decently furnished. Each of us has its own bed and bookcase by the wall to put things together. Wooden floors. A few tables and plenty of benches. Four electric lamps illuminate each room while three iron stoves heat it. In these days, we are to set out to the position.⁴³⁹

Those initial few barracks sometimes with time could become true military towns. Inside the provisionally built buildings, there were often surprising objects brought from the surrounding destroyed villages: pianos, wardrobes, tables, chairs; even paintings, bric-a-brac, and carpets.⁴⁴⁰ Such institutions had

437 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 7.12.1916.

438 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 41, 77.

439 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 11.01.1917.

440 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 321–323.

their own delousing stations and baths in separate barracks. There were also permanent hairdressing points, canteens, reading rooms, and musical corners.⁴⁴¹ Similar settlements were also established in some towns in the rear area of the front, from which civilians were evacuated because they were situated in a restricted front zone. For instance, Picard Saint-Quentin in the department of Aisne – not far from the later Siegfried Line – performed such a role during the war, while it had more than fifty thousand inhabitants before its outbreak. The city was heavily destroyed by bombs. The cathedral and many houses were heavily damaged, the streets were full of debris. However, the German soldiers quartered throughout the war in the less devastated buildings, despite the fact that Saint-Quentin remained within the reach of French artillery. Almost every day, there were fires caused by missile strikes and special military units had to extinguish them. Since the displacement of the French was conducted in a great hurry, practically immediately, there was furniture and equipment left in the apartments, as if people had just left for a moment. As a result, every German soldier had a bed at his disposal, and could easily find books, instruments, or social games for leisure. According to the opinion of the Upper Silesians of the 38th Infantry Reserve Regiment, there was a specific atmosphere of a return to everyday life in Saint-Quentin, despite the fact of residing in the proximity of enemy positions.⁴⁴²

It is rarely mentioned, but those few days spent in the support area were also an opportunity for soldiers to exchange experiences and front gossip, which occurred in a rather extraordinary place. Latrines performed the function of a soldier's agora:

The most important place in the support area are latrines. . . It is a long and deep transversal trench. On the side, there is a long perch supported by trestles, fixed in the ground. This is where everyone gathers to learn about the news. This is where all the so-called *latrinenparole* come from. All who have something new to say and those who want to learn something come here. The perch is always manned with crouched figures as rows of angular buttocks mercilessly soak in the rain. But you have to listen to the news, unless the French artillery hinders the exchange of information. And you have to come here very often, because one has a gastritis and another has bloody diarrhea; although you eat a few tablets of aspirin, pyramidon, or other medicines every day, everyone has diarrhea.⁴⁴³

441 Ibid., p. 37.

442 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 173.

443 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 81–82.

For the first three days of their stay, exhausted troops had the right to undisturbed rest. They did not even perform guard duty. It was a time for soldiers to wash, delouse, clean their uniforms, and maintain weapons. It started with a general ablution in specially prepared rooms. Wroński's memoirs include a detailed description of such a procedure. He writes that it was one of the favorite activities of soldiers, which allowed them to free themselves from omnipresent parasites, at least for a short time. For this purpose, they stripped naked, packed their clothes and underwear into bags, sprinkled them with an antiseptic agent, attached a card with their name, and sent to a special chamber with very high temperature. Although the material lost its color and clothes deformed, soldiers saw it much more important to kill the lice. At that time, the owners of the clothes went to the shower, in which they used the German "ersatz soap" (the Poles called it "clay soap" as it had little fat) and washed away the several-day dirt for about half an hour.⁴⁴⁴ After also refurbishing weapons, they were ready to use the local "attractions." Most often, they went sightseeing in the vicinity, but sometimes even participated in hunting and therefore enriched the already abundant meals in the support area with wild game: "Yesterday, I participated in a hunt with battue. Our Major organized it with several officers. We shot about fifty hares, some of which were split between the two beaters. My companion and I also received a hare that we cooked today; it tasted delicious."⁴⁴⁵

Most often, there was only simple entertainment available. In military barrack towns, in abandoned villages, but also in larger staging towns – usually with railroad stations used by soldiers to go on vacation or return from it – they created so-called soldier houses (*Soldatenheime*). The soldiers of the 22nd Infantry Regiment quartered near Verdun for a long time, so they later recalled that the whole area around the fortress was strewn with barracks and abandoned by civilians. Poor reading rooms, sometimes travelling cinemas, but mostly casinos provided the soldiers with the entertainment.⁴⁴⁶ Hygienic conditions in such soldier houses were sometimes not much better than in the lodgings: "We went to sleep in a *Soldatenheim*. Overnight, I noticed that a great number of rats live with us in the barracks, and they do not feel intimidated by our presence but run freely on the floor. There is no remedy for them."⁴⁴⁷

444 Ibid., pp. 115–116.

445 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 5.01.1917.

446 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 69–70.

447 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 17.06.1917.

The time spent in the support area of the front allowed men and women to form closer relationships, for some it was also the moment of sexual initiation. Unexpectedly for many Poles, especially from rural areas, the First World War became the cause of profound moral changes and general liberalization in forming sexual relationships. Separation from the family and the weakening of existing norms made it easier to form relationships between young people without the control of elders. It was already visible before heading to the front. Awareness of the very probable imminent death caused the rejection of current norms, while the soldiers who came from the front brought new customs, unknown in the conservative villages of Greater Poland, Upper Silesia, or Pomerania.

An account of the peasant son from Greater Poland is a tragicomic example of these transformations:

A week before the end of October, we, the three boys remaining in the village, received an order to appear in Rawicz on October 28 at the Replenishment Council [year group of 1896]. . . . We strolled together like heroes, as if we had already won a few battles. . . . During this week, we became an object of general interest for the villagers, especially girls. Every night until late belonged to us and our lovers. Relationships became more intimate between us and our ladies.

In turn, Wawrzyniec Skorupka writes that it was difficult to behave in such a way because of the strict upbringing and superstitions concerning sex life that young boys believed in:

There was a conviction among the young people at that time – I do not know where we heard it from – that if the woman holds her breath during copulation, the genital organ of a lover will burn. . . . The news about the burning of genitals, as I later found out, concerned venereal diseases, as some brat overheard from an excerpt of the conversation on this topic from the older boys from Westphalia.

The prospect of imminent death resulted in the overcoming of such fears, although sexual intercourse still did not happen due to parental vigilance:

I did not expect my life-giver [father] to make a joke from me last evening. He caught me by surprise. I was in the most affectionate tête-à-tête with my lady, already after 10 pm that evening, in the hallway of her parents' house, when I noticed a passerby with a lantern in a hand, who walked along the country road as if he looked for something. After he had passed through, I turned my entire attention toward my young friend, intensively studying the mysteries of her charming body. Out of nowhere, my parent appeared right in front of us with the lantern and called me to return home immediately. He did not hesitate to make a speech, appropriate to the circumstances, in which my girlfriend heard unpleasant epithets, as a result of which she disappeared from the apartment. Sad,

I was forced to go home after this scandal, troubled by my defeat. Fortunately, our departure was on the next day; my prestige was severely damaged, which would give me very doubtful applause in the village. Such a stain on my honor of a bachelor!⁴⁴⁸

There were no such restrictions in the front support area. Correspondence usually overlooks issues related to sexuality and needs of this kind; despite many years of separation from their husbands, German women were exhorted to be faithful, basically using double morality. However, it was one of the most frequent topics mentioned in brochures and leaflets of the German Ministry of Propaganda. Cases of sexual relations between German women and war captives were punished and publicized, although it was impossible to prevent such contacts with thirteen million young men on the front and more than one million captives in the support area.⁴⁴⁹ Already in 1914, the alleged betrayal of the wife, fiancée, or friend became a big psychological problem for soldiers in trenches. No one expected such a long war and – already in the autumn of 1914 – the rumor of mass betrayals in the depths of the German Reich spread widely. A trace of these front dilemmas appears in the conversation between companions at Verdun, reconstructed after many years by Wroński:

Morality [in the support area] collapsed completely. The long separation and the possibility of easy earning loosened marriage bonds. The willingness to live and play embraced everyone. Some more resilient wives write to their husbands and encourage them to apply for leave and come home as soon as possible. Others directly send letters to the company or battalion: send me my husband on vacation or I will betray him! Letters from wives are growing chilly and indifferent. Some of them do not write letters anymore. They found themselves another job, another income, and they got an “ersatz” for everything. And husbands on the front? . . . Some are indifferent to everything. Others curse like a shoemaker and demand a leave, sinisterly threatening: let me go home, kill his woman, burn the rest, and then come back, and let whatever happens happen! Some people silently suffer ignominy, and there are also those who do not want to believe and stubbornly claim: “No! My wife will not do it, I know her – I know she will not do it! But – who knows. . .” . . . Some women are under police control and, as a sign, they wear red armbands on their sleeves. No one talks about anything else.⁴⁵⁰

In turn, Jan Mazurkiewicz mentions a bizarre situation when one of his colleagues receives another leave after three months, because the military authorities recognized the legitimacy of his request, in which he quoted words from his wife’s

448 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katongi 1914–1967*, pp. 54–55.

449 Kogelfranz, *Schlange vorm Bordell*, in: *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 150.

450 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 97–98.

letter that “she must have a husband, otherwise her virtue and morals will be endangered.”⁴⁵¹

While it is difficult to come across a detailed description of sex during the war in epistolography, there is no shortage of such accounts in the journals and memoirs, both in the immediate support area of the front and in the depths of the German Reich. The mentions refer to casual acquaintances, but also to prostitution. Vacation in the depths of Germany becomes an opportunity for short-term sexual adventures.

While travelling home, Jan Mazurkiewicz stayed with his relatives in Berlin. He did not have to search long, because the adventure found him: “At my sister-in-law’s. . . a woman from a neighboring tenement house yells that “her Franz also loves other women in Russian captivity, so she can love other husbands too.”⁴⁵² In turn, Wroński’s recuperation in the Bavarian field hospital allows him to form relationships with local maids, married women, and widows without any problems, regardless of their reputation. He writes straightforwardly and quite coarsely, but honestly, about his views on such behavior at that time, which bourgeois society would condemn as indecent in peacetime: “A soldier does not pick and choose. Our virtue is to conquer, and the less fortified the fortress, the easier to get inside. We do not keep any post for ourselves; we leave it to others.”⁴⁵³

The military authorities did not see the need to impose or encourage abstinence on men on the front line. Their only concern was to prevent the spread of venereal diseases, which was to protect against the loss of soldiers capable of military service, worth their weight in gold. That is why condoms and disinfectants were distributed in the units before each departure to the city.⁴⁵⁴

Casual sexual contacts were very common, both with Germans and foreigners on the occupied territories, especially during longer stays in one place in the rear area. It is difficult to say why this was the case; whether it resulted from a momentary fascination, as it was described at the time, which implicates the frivolity and willingness of young French women, or as a result of coercion that resulted, for instance, from the poverty and lack of food.

Käthe Kollwitz, who had lost her sons in the war, heard from a soldier that, in Flanders, it was enough to take a loaf of military bread to make desperate girls have sexual intercourse. On the Eastern Front, postcards for soldiers even

451 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, p. 73.

452 Ibid., p. 66.

453 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 166–167.

454 Kogelfranz, *Schlange vorm Bordell*, in: *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 151.

praised war as a time of carefree sexual adventure. One of them shows lyrics of a Ukrainian song in German translation: “War is war. Where I go, I comfort widows, grass widows, orphans, and girls – because war is war!”⁴⁵⁵

The memoirs of the Poles who fought in Kaiser’s army also show many similar stories, in which women are treated only instrumentally. As far as we can believe these descriptions – as they may also simply manifest machismo – it often happened that German soldiers perceived neutral behavior⁴⁵⁶ as provocative. One of them writes: “Long unseen women lean out of homesteads or windows as if they are real angels.”⁴⁵⁷

However, sometimes even these extremely difficult conditions allowed a real feeling to be born that broke the barriers between deadly enemies, despite the ongoing war. In this matter, the situation of Poles in the German Army gave them a natural advantage, because many French women favored them over Germans, as the Poles were only forced to serve in kaiser’s army. If staying longer, Polish soldiers tried to explain some complex aspects of the Polish history.

This is how Arkady Fiedler fell in love with beautiful Odette, although their feelings did not last long because of the ruffian derisions from his German companions:

You Polonaise . . . , I would like to thank you that you will write about me! – [Odette] said blushing. May I? I was a bit amused because of this ceremonialism. Of course, you can. . . . Then thank you! – she whispered barely audibly and began to approach me step by step. She walked slowly, as if sneaking up on me, and though she smiled, she never stopped looking into my eyes. I stood by the table and looked at her with a certain astonishment and an impulse of anxiety. Oh, naïve, good beau! A lovely creature approached me, romantically excited by a young foreigner, and because it was about to happen for the first time in my life, I was overcome with fear. An unknown abyss opened in front of me, about which I only dreamed for years in my boyish dreams, an abyss purportedly deterrent, but so blissful. I was also afraid whether I would be able to behave properly, in a manly manner, or whether I would commit anything ridiculous. That naive scruple devilishly baffled and overpowered me. When Odette came up, she tightly grabbed my arms. I was struck again by her strong smell of milk. It was a pleasant smell of freshness. Arc[ady] – she pleadingly whispered. “Fais l’amour avec moi!” [Make love to me] And she was confused. I should have then violently taken her into my arms and kiss, but I did not make it in time. . . . Suddenly, one of the soldiers energetically knocked on the door and boldly entered the room without waiting for an answer. It was Kruschke, one

455 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 205–206: “Der Krieg ist Krieg. Wohin ich geh, dort tröste ich Witwen, Strohwitwen, Waisen und Mädchen – denn Krieg ist Krieg!”

456 Drygas, *Czas zaprzeszy*, p. 236.

457 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, p. 15.

of the most vulgar companions, a thirty-year-old ribald with a big mouth. My meeting with Odette was his deepest stab in the eyes. . . . With his finger pointing at Odette and at me and throwing questioning eyes at us, he lewdly gasped and kept asking: "So, also was ist fate? On, me. Wird schön gevögelt? Wird trictrac gemacht? Mademoiselle: trictrac, nicht wahr? . . ." "Rrraus, du verfluchter Schweinehund!"⁴⁵⁸ I screamed and pointed the door to him. Kruschke considered all this to be a joke and left, not too repulsed by the fact that I just called him a dog-pig. The word *trictrac* had a very crude meaning. Odette turned white as a wall and went numb with dismay. An adult and resolute girl now felt broken like a child. Tears poured down her terrified face. "How could you!" she cried with a stifled voice, without looking at me. "How could you tell them?" . . . In the face of such brutality, she and I were too young and immature: we were defenseless and powerless.⁴⁵⁹

Apart from casual acquaintances, the habit of using the services of prostitutes was common during the war also in the German Army. If someone did not want to go to the brothels organized by the army, he could travel a several kilometers behind the front, where such services were offered without any restrictions in many towns in the vicinity. Wroński describes his impressions after his visit to Liège as follows:

Prostitutes accost us constantly on all the streets. There are so many of them here that we have the impression that all women are engaged in this evil practice. . . . In a café, we are surrounded by a few waitresses. Without embarrassment, they sit on our laps, drink our beer and vodka, and without asking, bring some for themselves. The fun is good. . . . laughter, jokes, offers, and negotiations. . . . A hideous orgy of perverse shamelessness happens here in all its glory.⁴⁶⁰

With time, all women who appeared in the company of a serviceman in public places started to be considered ladies of the demimonde. Arkady Fiedler recalls a case when his friend, invited by him to a renowned café in Poznań, received a card from the owner ordering her to leave the premises immediately, because many considered that only a prostitute could sit alone at a table with a soldier.⁴⁶¹

The widespread popularity of prostitutes is proved by numerous accounts from the occupied areas. For instance, a drawing by the Belgian artist Eugene Van Mieghem entitled *German Soldier in a Brothel* shows soldiers from Flanders

458 "What is that? Have you fucked already? Have you played *trictrac*? Lady, there was *trictrac*, wasn't there?" "Get out. . . you bloody stinker!"

459 Fiedler, *Mój ojciec i dęby*, pp. 146–147.

460 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 222–223.

461 Fiedler, *Mój ojciec i dęby*, p. 164.

in a private brothel. The transfer point in Budapest was particularly notorious for its many syphilis infections.⁴⁶²

The German army also organized a network of military brothels in the entire support area of the front, regardless of the prosperous private brothels. For the officers, these were luxurious tabernacles with champagne awaiting, not so difficult to find in the West, at least in the first years of the war.⁴⁶³ When it comes to privates, we cannot talk about any comfort. These premises were usually located in cabin close to soldier houses. Men formed a line in front of the door to the building. Before entering, they were briefly examined by a paramedic who checked for external symptoms of infection on the genital organs. Then, each soldier received condoms, moisturizer, and antiseptic ointment. Each could usually enter the room with the girl for ten minutes. After leaving, he had to put ointment on the genitals again in the presence of a paramedic. Every visit, name, and date were recorded so that any outbreak of an infection could be easily eradicated, should a venereal disease was to occur. The girls serviced about thirty men a day.

There usually was a police station in front of this cabin, because drunken soldiers often started quarrels if they waited in line for too long. On the Eastern Front, military brothels had an additional, racist dimension. They had inscriptions: "Only for German soldiers" (*Nur für deutsche Soldaten*).⁴⁶⁴ Preventive hygiene measures in the German Army proved effective. The number of people suffering from venereal diseases was relatively low, ranging from one and a half percent to a maximum of 3 percent of all soldiers. In most cases, infections occurred at transfer points, where there were more opportunities to use private brothels, not so meticulously controlled.⁴⁶⁵

The location near a large city made it much more possible to spend free time attractively, which occurred after leaving the first line. Such a stay was one of the few opportunities to observe the everyday life in the support area and get in touch with civilians, the French or Belgians. Accommodated in such a way near La Capelle in department of Aisne, Wallis writes with appreciation about the living standards of Flanders' peasants:

[We are] not far from La Kapellen, a few dozen kilometers from the front. . . . The town is beautiful, surrounded by mountains, valleys, fields, and meadows. . . . The owner of

462 *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918*, p. 180.

463 Kogelfranz, *Schlange vorm Bordell*, in: *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 151.

464 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 208–209.

465 Kogelfranz, *Schlange vorm Bordell*, in: *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 151.

our house, a Frenchman, has several cows, rabbits, chickens, and a donkey. . . . We live here in a group of ten, in one room with two non-commissioned officers. A stove, table, and stools in the room, very beautiful. It feels like at home. How big is the difference between my apartment in Volhynia [Wallis refers here to an earlier stay on the Eastern Front]. There was a pit in the ground, a shed from planks, rarely a barn with half a roof, where rain leaked, wind blew, with horses. Here, there is a warm, clean room where you can wash yourself every now and then. There was winter, snow, frost, all people dressed in winter clothes. Here, there is a little bit cool, but the sun shines and the weather is beautiful. The fields and gardens are full of cabbage, lettuce, and so on. How well do we live here!⁴⁶⁶

This sudden transition from the war to relative normality was shocking for most soldiers, because everyday life during the First World War – just a few dozen kilometers from the front line – appeared not to differ much from the life during peacetime, except perhaps for the restrictions concerning goods rationing and the presence of many uniformed men in the streets. The arrival from the front, where death was a daily occurrence, to the cities where it was difficult to notice the hecatomb of thousands young people that took place in the vicinity, caused no less of a shock than the service itself.

Many soldiers sought comfort in faith. Especially the Poles, whenever possible, willingly attended masses and regularly received the Holy Communion. In each of his letters, Kazimierz Wallis referred to the care of Our Lady of Częstochowa, believing that he did not die only thanks to his complete dedication to her. However, apart from praying and reciting the Rosary, which Wallis also often mentions, it was difficult to fulfill other Catholic duties on the front. Participation in Sunday masses was a rarity. It was available and possible only in the support area, unless there was a non-commissioned officer, for whom the matter of worship had no meaning, as Wallis experienced: “Yesterday was Candlemas. Here, the Catholics celebrated it in the city, and there was a solemn service at the church. But we, the soldiers, had to fulfill our duty as usual, because Feldwebel-Leutenant is an evangelical. But what can we do? We must surrender to power, and it will answer for us before God.”⁴⁶⁷ However, it was the front conditions that most often made it difficult to receive the sacraments: “Yesterday, in the village of Mesnil, we had a service on the garner of a house that was decorated for that occasion. There was a provisional altar affixed. After the church

466 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 24.11.1916.

467 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 3.02.1916.

service, we attended confession and took the Holy Communion. The last time we had a Mass at Lapion was about two weeks ago.⁴⁶⁸

Services were usually held by German priests. The appearance of a Polish priest was a rare occurrence. Wroński recalls two visits of a Polish priest Poprawski in the support area of the front as a big event. Although, he conducted church service in Latin and preached the sermon in German, he particularly addressed the soldiers from Greater Poland at the end, from the steps of the field altar, absolved them of their sins in Polish and blessed them.⁴⁶⁹

All Upper Silesian regiments of the 12th Infantry Division recalled with nostalgia their stay in Lille, France, in the Pas-de-Calais department. Before the outbreak of the war, this city of more than 200,000 inhabitants still offered numerous possibilities of spending free time. Soldiers quartered in the surrounding small towns near Lille, from where they could easily get to the center of the unofficial Flanders capital. Life in the lodgings looked like the one in the garrison. There was a lot of time for walks around the city center, which German soldiers did in small groups. Theaters were very popular. Even a new stage was opened especially for the Germans. Noteworthy, the history of the building where these shows took place was quite interesting. Since the new theatre building in Lille was completed right before the outbreak of the war but was not yet prepared for the production of plays, it was necessary to conduct finishing works in its interior. The Germans completed the investment in 1915 at the request of the then commander of the Sixth Army, Rupprecht Wittelsbach, Duke of Bavaria. The first performance occurred under special circumstances, on Christmas Day of 1915. Actors brought from Hanover performed Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris*, while only men filled the room, most of them in uniforms. Already after the war, the Germans tried to include the costs of finishing the theatre as part of war reparations.⁴⁷⁰ Later on, this theatre was mainly used for operas and operettas. German acting troupes also visited with their performances.

In the cafés and taverns open all night, the Germans and the French initially spent time together. However, the good terms quickly ended, when one day a large column of French war captives passed through Lille. The German authorities forbade the inhabitants to leave their homes on that day, which was meticulously controlled by armed patrols on horses. Fugitives were searched for in

468 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 17.01.1917.

469 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 110.

470 *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918*. p. 116.

every place and brutally dragged out of there. From this moment onward, the joint feasting was out of the question.⁴⁷¹

However, contacts with civilians were usually good. Apart from the 1914 campaign, during which hostages were shot in Belgium and France, relationships with ordinary soldiers were usually conflict-free. The Germans even assessed their stay in Flanders as excellent because of the friendly attitude of the civilians. In this area, they were not afraid to place soldiers one by one in the lodgings where they lived together with Belgians. In Wallonia and France, these contacts were simply neutral.

The lack of visible conflicts resulted from the material situation of the civilian population in the occupied areas. The impoverished population of the Belgian provinces and northeastern French departments had to look for a way to survive in the front zone. Especially in cities, detached from their jobs and deprived of their sources of income, most people suffered from poverty. In small towns and villages, many French and Belgians were directly dependent on the salary received from the Germans that quartered in their homes. Initially, they also engaged in washing of their underwear, cooking, and cleaning. However, already at the end of 1914, the German military authorities decided that such coexistence could be a reason for fraternization with the enemy and, above all, it could be used for spying purposes. The civilians were displaced from forefront villages on December 23, 1914. After the exodus during the 1914, the expulsion of weeping and broken people in winter, most often women, children, and the elderly, who begged for mercy on their knees at the doorstep of their homes, was an example of extreme barbarity, in which the Poles also participated.⁴⁷²

Occasionally, there were also dramatic attempts of resistance by civilians. During the stay in Loos, in September 1915, the soldiers of the 157th Infantry Regiment became friends with a local Frenchwoman, then seventeen-year-old Émilienne Mareau-Évrard who, with the consent of the occupants, obtained the right to care for a group of children and young people deprived of their livelihoods. While collecting coal on the nearby spoil heaps, she realized that she could observe the situation on the front line from there. After the approach of the British troops, she contacted them, and informed them about the dislocation of some of the German troops. On September 25, she took part in the fight during fierce battles for the city, helping the Scottish troops and shooting at the Germans on guard posts, which is when she killed two soldiers of the

471 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 66–67.

472 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

157th Regiment.⁴⁷³ For many of them, it was a shock, after which they realized that they were treated as ruthless occupants. Until then, everyone liked this nice young Frenchwoman for her cheerful disposition. That is why in the regiment journal, the French girl who fought for her own country is described as a ruthless saboteur:

She turned out to be a harpy who showed the Englishmen the way to our shelters and who shot at five soldiers of the regiment with a revolver in her own hand, while those men, unconscious after a gas attack, lied in the street. For this act, she later received the Cross of the French Legion of Honor [in fact, not the Legion of Honor, but Croix de Guerre 1914–1918, and later the British Royal Red Cross] during a parade in Paris.⁴⁷⁴

As I have already mentioned, the Polish nationality was often the reason for their better treatment by the French, who had a certain fondness for Poles dressed in German uniforms. In Chauny, a small town in Picardy, when patrolling the streets, Wroński not only enjoyed the trust of the locals but was even invited to their homes, the fact which he welcomed with joy; at the tailor's house he could meet his beautiful daughter. During these visits, the hosts did not conceal their opinions, which proves their good relationship with the young Pole:

[Miss Crauet] is young and pretty, and she dogs her father who must constantly protect her. Miss Crauet is a patriot. She has two brothers who are officers in the French Army. We naturally talk about war and we are all convinced that the German must lose it! Miss Crauet threateningly raises her small fist against the invader and repeats that, when the right moment comes, she too will attack the Germans. She talks about it boldly, because she is certain that we will not betray her.⁴⁷⁵

The author of these memoirs may have been swept away by a bit of a patriotic spirit, but this certainly is not the only report of such character, which confirms that the French quite clearly distinguished Polish soldiers in the German Army from the Germans themselves.

After a few days of rest in the back, there was a period of non-intensive training before the next departure to the front. Even then, it sometimes turned out that soldiers encountered pleasant surprises, such as, for instance, leisure trips organized by regiments. One of the soldiers of the 157th Infantry Regiment mentions them with nostalgia:

473 É. Labayle, *Femmes sous l'uniforme. Les biographies. Émilienne Mareau-Évrard 4 juin 1898–7 janvier 1971*, <http://web.archive.org>, 12.03.2013.

474 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 71.

475 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 221.

We spend the first days on hygiene and cleaning. But then we train, especially with gas masks and the new hand grenades “Friedrich” and “Wilhelm.” At the end of the day, we were particularly pleased with one-day baths, combined with a trip to the North Sea near Blankenberge [in West Flanders, Belgium, several kilometers north of Bruges]. Many of us have never seen the sea before. Field kitchens drove up to the beaches and offered tasty food. This is how it has been for seven days, between July 7 and 14, 1917. Then, we went back to the front, this time to the Somme.⁴⁷⁶

Similarly, Antoni Przybyła from the Reserve Company of the 8th Sapper Battalion describes his stay at the North Sea in a letter: “Flanders, 26.09.1918. Yesterday, we were by the North Sea. There was a lot to see. There were three shelled English warships next to the shore. I would never have thought I will walk by the North Sea.”⁴⁷⁷

Training in the support area was conducted according to the needs, although it was not very intensive when it occurred in the quarters: “Before noon, instructions on defense against poisonous gases. Then, shooting with rifles and French machine guns at shields. In the afternoon, a bath. The service was not the worst,” writes Kazimierz Wallis in January 1917.⁴⁷⁸ Officers usually practiced horse riding, still an essential element of professional military training, even though cavalry played not even the slightest role on the Western Front. In turn, soldiers trained marching under different conditions, listened to lectures, and learned how to use or fight against new types of weapons. Particular emphasis was put on the general knowledge of lighting signals, the use of gas masks, and the use of machine guns. Tactical exercises in the field were conducted separately. The most frequently taught subjects were assault and counterattack from trenches, but also grenade throwing, patrol service at advanced first-line positions, mine placing, shooting with and without gas masks, observation of firing points, and night combat.⁴⁷⁹ Kazimierz Wallis describes the course of exercises in which he participated before going to the front:

On Thursday, we had great exercises at night, in which I also participated, because the entire battalion trained. We set off at 4 pm. In the surrounding forests, a few companies were pretending to be the enemy, separated from us, and headed in different directions. It was already dark when we reached a glade where the fight was to take place. This glade

476 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 96.

477 Quote: *Pocztówki z Wielkiej Wojny. Korespondencja wysłana pocztą polową (1915–1918) ze zbiorów Antoniego Przybyły z Janowa*, eds. J. Tofilska, S. Rosenbaum, Katowice 2013, p. 39.

478 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 17.01.1917.

479 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 82

was manned by the enemy. In the darkness, we moved forward in shooting line. In the rifles, we had loaded blank cartridges with wooden bullets. Suddenly, at the edge of the forest, a fireball burst into the air, in our direction. We immediately fell to the ground and stopped moving. The bullet remains in the air for a few seconds and slowly lowers to the ground. The projectile spreads such light that the whole space is visible as if in daylight, it has the strength of a few street lamps. We cannot hide from such light. These bullets (*Leuchtkugel*) were fired with a large gun (*Leuchtpistole*). At the moment, when the enemy illuminated us, the bullets started to fall on us. There were hundreds of them. The bang was almighty. In the dark, we could only see the flashing of fireworks that fell out of the barrels. We rushed a dozen or so steps forward, then gathered again, and then shot. The fight lasted in this manner for quite a long time; we hit the enemy from the side. At 10.30 pm, there was a trumpet signal that the exercise is over. The companies gathered and marched home. We got back at 12 pm. A few got lost.⁴⁸⁰

Those who already experienced the front line did not like tactical exercises. They stole the little free time available for them in the support area:

A few days ago, we had battalion exercises here. The rain was pouring. We were to retake our broken line. We had to walk through a thick forest, full of mud and pools. As a result of the rain, we had wet shoes full of water and we had to carry rifles with ammunition in our hands for a few hours. On the road full of mud, we fixed our positions with rifles and expected the enemy. As soon as he showed up, we attacked him with fierce fire from several rifles. He had to retreat. We moved forward. Naturally, we did not shoot with bullets. At noon, we came back and continued to dry clothes on an oven (they were still wet on the next day).⁴⁸¹

Gymnastics supplemented the exercises. Organized in the form of sports games, gymnastics happened during almost every stay in the support area, most often as a part of regiment games, but sometimes as divisional or even army games. Officials always participated in the latter. In May 1915, such great sports games were organized in Montefaucon near Verdun with the participation of the commander of the Fifth Army, the German heir to the throne.⁴⁸² Wallis describes them:

In the afternoon, we had games on a large meadow behind the barracks. There were all the battalion officers. Different exercises on the horizontal bar, handrails, jumping over vaulting horses and holes, running to the finish line, jumping back, etc. Then, single and choral singing, monologues, etc. Each of the companies received four barrels of beer, emptied in the evening. Regimental music played all the time. At 9 pm, the party was over.⁴⁸³

480 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Jabłonna 8.05.1916.

481 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallisa, France 28.03.1917.

482 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 69–70

483 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallisa, France 24.06.1917.

There were also theoretical classes, that is, lectures about the opponent and his weapons. The instructors did not forget about the propaganda. The birthday of the Emperor and anniversaries of great battles were still celebrated in a festive manner, as before the war. Therefore, a significant event for the Upper Silesian Division during its stay in Champagne was the visit of the Emperor on April 13, 1915, during harmonization exercises. As soon as the announcement of the monarch's arrival reached the division's headquarters, the soldiers received orders to clean the uniforms and instructions on how to behave. The emperor appeared surrounded by his staff members along with his brother, Grand Admiral of the German Fleet, Prince Henry of Prussia, and general adjutants: General Colonel Friedrich von Scholl and General Colonel Hans von Plessen.

He greeted the officers and welcomed the marching column of the 157th Infantry Regiment, while greeting each company with the words, "Guten Morgen, Kameraden." The officers of the regiment were proud of the contents of the telegram that the adjutant sent from his quarters on behalf of the Emperor after this short meeting: "His Majesty the Emperor and King instructed me to send his greetings to all the troops and give special recognition to the 157th Infantry Regiment for its exemplary order during the march and the attitude of all the soldiers. The Division can be proud that His Majesty has agreed to participate in these exercises. Signed by Kunze."⁴⁸⁴

In fact, this type of visit was usually commented by soldiers quite ironically. It did not have any practical consequences for them, apart from additional duties during the parade. At most, they hoped for additional food and some free time. In 1914, when the German heir to the throne and commander of the army arrived, a Pole who served in one of the regiments commented the fact with dislike: "The arrival of Kronprinz has been announced. . . How lucky we are! How much grace that His Highness wished and deigned most graciously – besides His Utmost Highest Imperial Highness – to leave the beautiful palace in Stanay and come twenty kilometers from the front to his army, in a beautiful, comfortable limousine, with the entire staff of court lapdogs. The most ceremonial day and the biggest holiday for the Fifth Army. What a pity that it does not take place in Paris or Versailles, because for sure there would be beer, or maybe even. . . girls."⁴⁸⁵

An even more ridiculous idea of the German propaganda, already in the penultimate year of the war, when there was a growing lack of military arguments, was to send university professors to the front. During his stay in the forefield

484 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 48–49.

485 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 33.

in 1917, the Supreme Command ordered the beginning of regular political trainings. These were to inform about the military and political situation, about the war goals of the Triple Entente, to remind the history of Germany and German war triumphs, and to convince about the necessity of survival until the final victory. Initially, training was conducted only by the commanders of battalions, but then special forces were included in the training, “educational officers” (*Aufklärungsoffiziere*). Among others, university professors were entrusted with these tasks, formally as reserve officers.

For instance, lecturers from the University of Wrocław were sent to the Silesian regiments. Even the commanders of these regiments considered it a ridiculous idea, and the soldiers who knew the front reality did not intend to listen to the representatives of intelligentsia agitating them with empty trivialities and talking about their duty to the German homeland.⁴⁸⁶ It should not surprise anyone, because these were lectures completely detached from reality – as Stanisław Drygas recalls his experiences from Greater Poland – as if the representatives of German science who delivered them believed in the ideological message of their studies:

We were transported to the monument of the conqueror of the Roman legions, Hermann [Arminius] of the Cherusci tribe. Knowing the strategy and tactics of the Roman commanders, he lured the legions into the forest. The heavy rains that lasted two weeks were favorable to him. The exhausted Roman Army was defeated as a result of a surprise attack of the wild Germanic people. Commander Quintinus Varus fell [Publius Quintilins Varus]. The Northern Legion was vanquished. An officer reminded us about it in his obdurate pompous speech against France and Italy. He called upon us to follow the example of the fortitude and bravery of the Germanic people and not to allow the subjugation of the German nation by the Roman race. Hermann’s descendants erected the mighty monument to Hermann. It was carved by Ernst von Brendel of Werther. The colossus faces south with a nine-meter sword vertically raised in the sky... After the speech, a group chanted a song often shouted by hooligans in front of our barracks because we wore the Roman number VII on our shoulder pads, which meant we belonged to the Seventh Corps and we were called Romans: “Als die Römer frech geworden. . .” I knew this humorous song, now sung at the monument in its entirety to the glory of the German victory and the disgrace of the vanquished Romans. But, soon, everything fell silent and then we heard a powerful battle song, *De Wacht am Rhein*. It was taught in all schools and sung at great national celebrations. Here in the Teutoburg Forest, it resounded with the roar of all throats.⁴⁸⁷

486 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 192–193.

487 Drygas, *Czas zaprzeszy*, pp. 225–226.

In letters home, the Poles warned against this propagandist image of the war. In his letter to his brother, Wallis also laughs at the image of a battle with the use of tanks.

Such a *Gefechtspanza* [battle with tanks] differs in reality from the picture on the postcard. There a ditch does not look so fine, just debris everywhere, if a man shows up somewhere, he quickly disappears again, and only paramedics and wounded people can be seen on their way to the back. Then individual grenades break the air. There is a huge difference between these images and reality.⁴⁸⁸

Christmas was an exceptional period, when soldiers could forget about the war for a brief moment. These days were especially hard for the Poles. Soldiers hid in a separate place, if possible, and most often wrote letters, such as that of Kazimierz Wallis from 1916: "Above all, I wish you all the best, the blessing of Heaven in all your activities. I received a package with wafer, loaf, and caramels yesterday. God bless you!"⁴⁸⁹

All that was left for those, who did not receive a leave, was to recall their home. The first Christmas Eve in 1914, was the most memorable for the soldiers, regardless of the their allocation. After all, in August everyone hoped that they would certainly go back home for Christmas. After the first experiences of trench warfare, this hope quickly vanished. Many segments of the front line saw an unofficial ceasefire on December 24, 1914. Throughout the field, soldiers wished each other all the best, placed candles on trenches, and sang carols. There even occurred direct meetings. However, the officers immediately prohibited them.⁴⁹⁰

The course of the Christmas Eve was similar in all regiments. The soldiers brought Christmas trees from nearby forests. They lit candles on the trees, in dugouts and trenches. On that day, the soldiers also exchanged gifts, and not only those sent from home. Although, almost every family tried to regularly send packs, which was abused by various grifters; they offered civilians in the country to buy for their loved ones on the front a special metal chest protection (*Herzschutz-Panzerplatte*), which hidden under the uniform and was to protect from a deadly shot in the heart; such advertisements appeared also in the press.⁴⁹¹ Chiefly distributed during holidays by the commanders, the gifts came from the collection of gifts (*Liebesgaben*) for the soldiers on the front, conducted during the entire war. *Liebesgaben* happened at schools, charity societies, and

488 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, France 23.03.1917.

489 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 24.12.1916.

490 Berghahn, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 67.

491 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 94.

workplaces; it called on women to knit and send socks, scarves, hats, earmuffs, and nose protectors.⁴⁹² Gathered in large boxes in companies and battalions, they also usually included sweets, cigarettes, wine, and underwear. In this first year, there were many gifts. In the 157th Infantry Regiment, one of the officers received as many as seventeen pairs of hand-made gloves and eight knitted vests, so he became the object of mockery of his colleagues. However, the soldiers particularly appreciated the thousand boxes of smoking tobacco sent by the crew of the torpedo boat 157 and the line ship SMS *Helgoland*. In turn, the soldiers of the 157th Infantry Regiment thanked the sailors by sending them a small barrel of Silesian vodka. Masses were celebrated in churches at the lodgings in the rear area, also decorated with Christmas trees on that day.⁴⁹³

Similarly, the artillerymen of the 21st Field Artillery Regiment spent Christmas Eve in Champagne. They placed Christmas trees in dugouts by the batteries. Among the gifts, the most valuable was the alcohol sent by the editorial staff of the Wrocław Catholic newspaper *Schlesische Zeitung* [Silesian Daily], which sufficed to make punch for all the gunners. The German artillery abstained from harassing fire because the French did not shoot. A field mass was held at the site of the Third Battery and a Christmas concert for some soldiers and officers happened in the nearby Époye near Reims in the local church.⁴⁹⁴

Generally, this first Christmas Eve saw something of an informal ceasefire on the front. There were candles and *Stille Nacht* sung by choirs. In the trenches of the 157th Infantry Regiment, soldiers first heard a Frenchman beautifully sing carols, and afterward saw single French soldiers appear in the forefield of their own trenches briefly, clearly in demonstration of an openness for direct contact. But by the order of the officers, the German soldiers started shooting and the attempt to meet, known in other segments of the Western Front, did not succeed.⁴⁹⁵

Sometimes even this first Christmas Eve night on the front had a completely different course; not so calm. The soldiers of the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment who quartered at Verdun had to stay on the front line. They did not have time to prepare for Christmas, so they sent one of the soldiers for a tree and decorated it with what they found in their pockets and bags. In the evening, they suddenly

492 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 94.

493 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 37–38.

494 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 45.

495 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 38.

received an order to change their positions, so they walked through a forest in mud and sludge during the entire festive night.⁴⁹⁶

In 1915–1917, gifts given on Christmas Eve started to become more modest. Slowly, the limitations began to become apparent, and they were especially severe in Germany. But Christmas trees appeared in dugouts each year, and the fights usually ceased. In 1915, the French at Verdun hung white flags on their trenches in front of the positions of the 38th Regiment as a sign of an hour-long ceasefire.⁴⁹⁷ On the other hand, in Flanders, the English called out to the soldiers of the 157th Regiment from the nearby trenches “Merry Christmas!”⁴⁹⁸

Nostalgia and homesickness, but also the memories of killed colleagues, did not allow the soldiers to fall into a Christmas mood. Jan Mazurkiewicz describes the absurdity of war for Poles on this special day with touching simplicity:

The evening passes calmly and in perfect harmony. But some of the married guys fell silent. They probably think about home and family. They left a vacant seat at the Christmas table. . . . The wife shed bitter tears because she lacks a guardian and a friend while children ask: “Mommy, why did Daddy leave us? Does Daddy not love us? We love Daddy so much. Mommy, let us come to Daddy’s. We will ask Daddy to come to Mommy and us.” And, with a sore heart, Mommy says there is a war and Daddy cannot come. “What is war?” The children ask. “My children, during the war people kill themselves because there are many bad people in the world.” “Daddy went to kill those who are bad and do not love the Lord Jesus?” “Oh, no, dear children, those who do not love Lord Jesus are not on the front!” “Mommy, why is that?” “My dear children, because the evil in the world is greater than the good.”⁴⁹⁹

Everyone hoped for a leave during the holiday season, but few could receive it. The fourteen-day vacation, which every soldier was entitled to after a year’s service in the German Army was usually a dream. From four to eight people could go on leave from the company, if – after the relief – the regiment was not assigned to action and quartered in the support area; farmers and husbands had priority.⁵⁰⁰ For many combatants, it sometimes meant even two years of waiting for a short stay at home.⁵⁰¹ For the few lucky ones, the dream of going on a leave came true after a year of service. But in the 22nd Infantry Regiment, for instance, the first departure of thirty people from each company occurred as late as in May

496 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 66.

497 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

498 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 80.

499 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, pp. 24–25.

500 Wronski, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 99.

501 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 61–62.

1916, when the regiment was withdrawn from Verdun for a longer time; which means after almost two years on the front.⁵⁰² More lucky were the soldiers of the Upper Silesian 157th Infantry Regiment, from which 5 percent of officers and soldiers were sent on vacation in 1915.

Most soldiers spent most part of the holiday in transport. For this reason, they added four days to get there and back home. A letter from Wallis to his father includes such a timetable; he returned from the vacation in the following manner:

Having left Bytom on February 22 at 9:27 am, I arrived by express train to Cologne in the evening around 8:00 am, on February 23. At 8:03 am, I took the holiday train to Brussels, where I arrived at 4 am of the following day. In the west of Germany, there is spring weather and warmth. After Berlin, the snow has already disappeared. On my way from Berlin to Cologne, I learned that our division was to quarter between Brussels and another city for the rest. So, I did not go to Valenciennes, but to Brussels to gather proper information. But the information office did not open until 8 am. I waited so long in the waiting room of the railway station, drank coffee, ate bread rolls, and bread from home. Not for four hours, of course. I was in the office at 8 am sharp, but I would have to wait for information until 10 am, which was too much. I went out into town and took the train to Soldatenheim. A line for the military was free of charge. There, I drank another cup of coffee, ate some bread, and got myself down to writing. The city here is really wonderful and ancient. Many museums and other things worth seeing, but no time at all.⁵⁰³

However, such a short stay at home often brought disappointment after many months spent at the front. The Poles who served in the German Army were also affected by this rather incomprehensible affliction, which consisted of the reluctance to return to prewar life. It resulted from the “accustomation” to the war. A visit home meant that the soldier suddenly faced an unnatural situation, accompanied by a reluctance to establish closer relations with his family. It was difficult for him to break through and tell them what was really going on in the trenches. Soldiers on holiday usually remained silent to spare their loved ones the suffering, they left terrible memories only for themselves. The everyday life of the war was reserved for front companions, for the initiated ones, which meant that they often subconsciously sought contact not with their friends and family in the family town but with other soldiers on vacation. They did not feel “normal” until they returned to their own unit. One of the inhabitants of Greater Poland describes this behavior in an honest way:

502 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 70.

503 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Brussels 24.02.1918.

The first moments of greetings pass in a generally joyful mood. ... The table has plenty of food. I am not accustomed to this kind of food – and the table. Anyway, I have to first wash myself and clean from dirt. Throw off the stinking rags, which certainly host millions of bacteria of various diseases, and many bugs. My mother thought about it. There is a bath ready. Fresh underwear, civilian clothes also prepared. Everything is prepared. After an hour, I am refreshed, full – and I rest. Neighbors and colleagues come – there is no end to questions and answers. And the evening approaches. An organism tired of a two-day journey demands rest. I am finally going to sleep in my own bed once again. I am going to bed, but I cannot sleep. Is it because of the impressions I have had or because I am tired? The down of the soft bedding seems too stuffy to me, too hot. For the past year, I have not undressed for bed. Lean bones stretched out on the ground or on a barrel, covered with a blanket, with a backpack under my head, felt that they were lying and resting. I feel uncomfortable in a soft bed. I finally fall asleep. Nerves accustomed to the constant banging cannot adapt to the deep silence of a small town. I wake up at dawn. Calm down. Calm down. Everyone is still well asleep. I cannot take it anymore. I get out of bed and lie down on a sofa. It is cooler and more comfortable. ... In the pubs, you usually meet people in uniforms. Non-commissioned officers and sergeants are especially visible – the so-called privileged – that is, the necessary *drückerbergers*. Drinking and gambling are in full bloom. There are patrols and a lot of troops in the streets. We see youngsters, almost children, and also fifty-year-olds. There is a lot of women among them, looking for what? Probably adventures. The charm of the first days of leave has disappeared. I have seen and met everything I wanted. My thoughts return to the front against my will. “What does all this mean to me?” “I do not belong here.” I am bored mercilessly in the next few days.⁵⁰⁴

German Officers and Polish Soldiers

The Poles on duty in the German Army often perceived the war with fatalistic expectations. They tried to adapt as quickly as possible, so that they would have any chances of survival. Hence, they accepted the Prussian drill and the conditions of their service on the front line. Kazimierz Wallis repeatedly emphasizes in his letters that only divine protection saved him from death since it appeared unavoidable:

From the beginning, I perceived the military as an inevitable necessity. Life in the army is difficult to endure already because of the drill, and some superiors make it even tougher therewithal. Activities – that is almost rushing – lasts almost entire day, and even today, on Sunday, there are different roll-calls after the church, so there are only a couple of free hours left on this day. I spend them on writing or reading. ... Although the service is tough, I do not care about it. Thank God, I was not sick yet, and I did not feel hunger. And when it comes to the troubles with the service, I offer them to the Immaculate

504 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 125–129.

Heart of Mary, and everything works out well so far. I am content with everything, no matter if it goes according to or against my will. I realized that it is very good when someone settles for everything he experiences, even if things go really wrong, because he will later realize that it was not so bad after all. If things worked out differently, it would have been even worse. Such a contentment is a great blessing for a man; I found it in myself from the very beginning.⁵⁰⁵

This attitude like in the famous saying by Švejk, “It never happened yet that it was no-how,”⁵⁰⁶ should not surprise us when we consider the fact of close connections between Upper Silesia, Moravia, and Bohemia. This Eulenspiegel-like familiarization of tragic reality remains in Upper Silesian mentality.

Hence, the indifferent attitude toward the hyperpatriotic encouragements of the German officers. The Upper Silesian regiments always celebrated the awarding of the Iron Cross. A letter from Wallis proves that he attached no importance to this fact:

Today, I received an Iron Cross II. Those who survived the fights in Flanders [near Passchendaele] gathered today in the morning on a big meadow outside the city. Commandant General Lieutenant-General Welhnam arrived, whom I already met in the division. He commands our division. After his speech, in which he mentioned the stubborn intent of the English to force their way into Flanders and that our division restrained them, he awarded us with Iron Crosses. He congratulated us and then we returned to the city. During his speech, several English airmen flied forward and dropped a couple of bombs near us. But they did not hit the target. As far as I am concerned, I did not intend to receive any decoration, I just want to return home, as my [Polish] Homeland may need us in the future, and my life belongs to our Queen [the Virgin Mary], whom I want to serve throughout my whole life. . . . I will send the Iron Cross home. Please, keep it as a remembrance of the fights in Flanders.⁵⁰⁷

The Poles in Kaiser’s army quickly recognized their compatriots. Primarily, by their language. Not only because they sometimes badly spoke German but also because they often exclusively spoke Polish with each other: “I met a non-commissioned artillery officer on my way. We talked all the way as much as the wind let us. I sat on the wheel, he sat on the horse. Soon, I realized he spoke Polish

505 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 6.02.1916.

506 In fact, Švejk cited a saying of František Škvor, the original couplet of the character sentenced to hanging goes as follows: “At si bylo, jak si bylo, přece jaksi bylo,/ještě nikdy nebylo, aby jaksi nebylo,” J. Hašek, *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*, Praha 2000, p. 233 (J. Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk and his fortunes in the world war* (Oxford Text Archive, <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12024/3010>). p. 338.

507 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Cambrais 16.10.1917.

and we naturally switched to Polish. He comes from Bobrek, Upper Silesia. His name is Snycerz. We said farewell to each other in Marquion, he rode forward, I had to turn left. We wished each other "Go with God!" and "Good luck!"⁵⁰⁸

The conditions that allowed soldiers to speak Polish in the Kaiser's army are not completely clear. The frequently repeated bans on speaking Polish indicate their insufficiency. A great part of correspondence of the Poles on the front line was written in Polish, despite the fact that – already in 1914 – the authorities forbade its use and warned the soldiers that the letters will be censored.⁵⁰⁹ Later, at the turn of 1915 and 1916, the authorities ceased to attach any importance to this matter, probably due to the situation on the front line. The German authorities returned to this matter at the end of 1916, before Christmas, when they repeated the ban on using the Polish language; even threatened to withhold Polish letters until their supervision by military authorities.⁵¹⁰ However, we know that the use of Polish language was common not only in correspondence but also in conversations. Wawrzyniec Skorupka frankly writes that, when learning of military instructions, "We struggled with the pronunciation of some words."⁵¹¹ During the offensive, when strict rules of the military drill were suspended, and the goal was efficiency, dialogs exclusively in Polish also often appeared in the Upper Silesian regiments, since it guaranteed a much quicker communication.⁵¹²

Seemingly, the use of Polish language was particularly unwelcome in the regiments of Greater Poland and Pomerania. According to the memoirs of Wroński, the Upper Silesians realized to their surprise that such a ban even exists:

The new arrivals talk in agitation and gesticulate, while their frequent "rascals" [*piernony*] only reinforce the gesticulation. After a while, we hear someone sing in Polish. I approach them to inquire where do they come from and who they are. They are new recruits from Upper Silesia. These are all wonderful boys. They manifest their playful and impulsive character at every opportunity. "Have no one forbade you to speak Polish?" I ask them, "because you are not allowed to use Polish in your correspondence." "The rascals, have them try banning it, we will beat their mugs. We may not be able to write in Polish but we will talk in our language, darn it! And you, are you afraid to speak?" They ask. We are also not afraid to speak, but we do not have anyone to talk to. There are not many Poles here. Although, it is a regiment from Poznań, there are almost exclusively Germans here.⁵¹³

508 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Cambrais 25.10.1917.

509 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 10.

510 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

511 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi 1914–1967*, pp. 60–61

512 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 70–74.

513 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 192–193.

Indeed, the mixed composition of the regiments forced the soldiers to use German as the *lingua franca*. Hence, one could get the impression that many Poles could not speak Polish.⁵¹⁴

The Germans did not consider everyone who spoke Polish language to be Poles. After all, they were used to the regional diversity in their homeland, and the German dialects varied so much that the residents of the northern regions often struggled with understanding the Swabian or Saxon dialect, let alone the specific Bavarian dialect. The appearance of bilingual Polish soldiers in the army was not a surprise for a regular German. Karol Małłek recalls his battery in this context: “[the battery] mostly consisted of Germans from the south: Bavarians, Badenians, Württembergians, Alsations, and Lotharingians. There were some from the north, so-called Prussians, a couple of Kashubians, and seven Prussian Masurians. There were huge antagonisms between these groups. The southerners called the Germans from the north “saupreis,” while the northerners called us “okspreis.” The soldiers spoke various dialects which I soon learned quicker than I ever learned the literary language at the school in Brodowo, and I can use them not so bad until this day.”⁵¹⁵

In this ethnical mixture, the Germans did not ascribe the Masurians to the Polish group, whom they perceived as completely Germanized Slavs. Based on racial prejudices, this stereotype must have been well-established since the German officers also knew it, as Karol Małłek mentions:

Right after the arrival, I got in the black books of the regiment’s commander, Major von Ahlenfeldt. He stood in front of me with his entourage and asked, “What is your name?” I answered correctly. “Where are you from?” “From East Prussia.” “From which village?” “From Brodowo, Nidzica county, Sir.” “I see, from Masuria! Did the Russians also visit your village?” “Yes, Sir.” “Did they shoot a lot of people? No, just a few units, Sir.” Major laughed and, after a moment, corrected me, “You cannot call people: “a couple of units” but “a couple of people.”” He eventually asked, “Do you know what a word “Masurian” means?” “No, Sir.” “A Masurian is of Polish origin, but he was brought up in a German way, understood?” “Yes, Sir.” The officers who accompanied him laughed, and I felt embarrassed because I thought I made another gaffe. Major touched my cheekbones with his fingers and said to his two officers, “Take a look, comrades, at the distinctly Slavic face of this young soldier.” He patted on my arm and walked away with the officers. . . . The Masurians from Elk county started to observe me: Tregel, Hensel, Rogowski, and Karczewski, also the horsemen. Only Rogowski agreed with the regiment’s commander. The other three horsemen claimed that a Masurian is a true German, not only brought up in a German way.⁵¹⁶

514 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, p. 75.

515 Małłek, *Z Mazur do Verdun. Wspomnienia 1890–1919*, p. 234.

516 *Ibid.*, pp. 234–235.

The Germans treated also the Upper Silesians in a different manner. Despite the fact that it was easy to observe that Silesians consisted of those who spoke Polish and those who spoke German, the regional bond was sometimes more important than national or ethnic origin. As Wallis joyfully describes: “There are many soldiers from Rozbark among us, and some from Orzegów. . . . First of all, that I was not sent far, to West Prussia or Alsace. Later, I was in the same room with my colleagues.”⁵¹⁷ Such encounters brought the soldiers together and quickly turned into military friendships: “I cannot take leave for the holidays, but we will sing carols and other Polish songs in the barracks in the evening, when the non-commissioned officers will leave. However, we will be sad without a wafer, poppy-seed cake, and *siemieniotka* [traditional soup for the Christmas Eve dinner in Upper Silesia], but to no avail.”⁵¹⁸

The Germans positioned soldiers from Greater Poland on the opposite pole, when compared to Masurians and the Upper Silesians, since they were afraid of provocations and pro-Polish agitation from the soldiers from Poznań, often even unduly. Even the Poles from Pomerania noticed it:

Loud and completely carefree manifestation of Polishness; that is the true nature of the soldiers from Poznań. In a similar situation, the West Prussians behave in a completely different manner. The West Prussians never talk loudly but quietly, discreetly, and emitting almost muffled sounds, heard only by those who are nearby, and only they can notice that they speak in Polish. It is a more prudent, more cautious, and more defensive manifestation, when compared to the offensive manner of the soldiers from Poznań. When they sit at the table, the soldiers from Poznań feel at home. The presence of strangers constantly repulses the West Prussians. It is a result not only of the different conditions of their national life but also of a different disposition. I immediately knew with whom I dealt with, when I heard a loud deliberation: “I only shoot during the day, if it is possible, because only then I can be sure that I will not hit anyone (among the enemy)”⁵¹⁹

As a rule, the Poles did not make close acquaintances with German officers and non-commissioned officers, but the German superiors also rarely saw any necessity for such a relationship. Despite the military fellowship necessary on the battlefield, both groups noticed each other’s difference. However, there was a complete trust among the members of the same unit, regardless their ethnic origin, because it was the only thing that could guarantee survival on the front line. As Wallis wrote:

517 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 26.11.1915.

518 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Ścinawa 9.12.1915.

519 Iwicki, *Z myślą o Niepodległej*, pp. 129–130.

Both non-commissioned officers and officers here are my companions from the beginning. Only few infantrymen joined us. We trained them in using rifles, so they belong to our group. Everyone is more or less fed up with the war, some of us express it directly, some are indifferent to everything. There are about fifteen Catholics among us, plus the two non-commissioned officers and officer lieutenant Freiherr von Biechst. He always tries to make sure that we have a mass wherever possible. The majority of us come from the region of Hannover. Some of us come from Thuringia, Westphalia, two officers come from region of Poznań. One of us comes from Królewska Huta and he speaks Polish. Another comes from Kreise Groß Wartenberg. He was from the second company in Ścieniawa, and he was in the company in Jabłonna with me. The others, who departed with me, scattered among the regiments, only one of them came here with me. He is my best fellow with whom I get along perfectly well. He is also a Catholic, his name is Bergmann. There is also a Frisian here (a Catholic), his name is Stypen. His only duty is to shave the officers and riflemen. He is also a believer and good-natured man. He came from the infantry.⁵²⁰

Bernard Potrykus similarly describes Winkler, his direct superior, “Our Winkler could not say they did not love him. Everyone was truly devoted to him, not only us, but the entire company.”⁵²¹ “We did not know when he slept or ate, he was concerned with people day and night.”⁵²² There are many more such positive opinions about frontline officers in Polish memoirs. For many years, the historians wondered how it was possible that such a peculiar camaraderie on the front line could continue intact until 1918 in the conditions of trench warfare, which later even created a sense of a transnational partnership among some of the war veterans. In the reality of trench warfare, marked by the incessant presence of death, among the rats, lice, and mud, not everything can be explained with propaganda which, with time, everyone treated increasingly critically.

It seems that historian Jay Winter is right when he attaches great importance to the sense of duty present until the end of war. The German soldiers learned for many years the strict military drill, and everybody complied with it, regardless of their origin or military rank, as the refusal of military order resulted in severe punishment. Hence, the amount of military offenses in the German Army was the lowest during the First World War. The highest occurred in the Italian Army: there were 4028 death sentences, of which 750 were executed. The second highest amount was in the British Army: 3080 death sentences with 346 executions; the in the French Army: 2000 death sentences with 700 executions.

520 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 21.02.1917.

521 Potrykus, *Wspomnienia Kaszuba spod Verdun*, pp. 49–50.

522 *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

Meanwhile, there were only 150 death sentences and forty-eight executions in the German Army.⁵²³

Not only trust toward the German superiors was key among the Poles, as the military drill also influenced their attitude. The recruits learned absolute obedience already in the training units. The same who appreciatively describes his superiors, Kazimierz Wallis writes in his journal about the methods used by a German non-commissioned officer to ensure military drill, mentioned by Winter. Wallis's notes inform us how constraint was combined with the sense of cultural superiority of the German *Kulturträger* [bringers of culture]: "A non-commissioned officer said to the major, "Das ist ein polnischer Landarbeiter der ist immer so ungeschickt." The major turned around and answered, "Na im allgemeinen sind die polnischen Leute nicht schickt. Ich habe schon sehr viele Polen in meiner Kompanien gehabt, aber diese sind meistens sehr schlaue Kerls gewesen. Es mus den Leuten nur gezeigt werden, da lernen sie.""⁵²⁴ Most often, such a training did not have such a polite atmosphere, but it was accompanied with yells and attempts to debase the inferiors, which Wroński describes as follows:

Selkow [the company's commander] ordered all the Germans to step to the right. About twenty soldiers stepped there. He told the rest, that is us, the Poles, that captain Moebius complains that we did not want to go in the first line. We have to train for an hour as a result. Captain Moebius lied, or he was drunk, as he did not know, that it was in fact our platoon, under the command of lieutenant Sales, that marched as protection of the shooting line at the very front, and remained under fire until the very end. . . . The next day, after lunch, we received an order to go 395 meters up and down with full kit and rifles on our shoulders. . . . The next day, another hour of training. Now, famous feldwebel Oswald faces us . . . "You are trash, not soldiers, rascals, dipshits, fools, a lousy bunch. You few better ones in the company (that is the Germans) have to keep a lookout for the others, so that when you notice any revolutionary attitudes, you have to immediately report them to me."⁵²⁵

Mentioned above, captain Moebius apparently shared the opinion of the company's commander, since he constantly accused his Polish soldiers without merit that they were to always ready for betrayal: "You, Poles, kiss French hands, you scream from afar – *Polonaises* – so that the French would not shoot at you."⁵²⁶

523 Berghahn, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 70–71.

524 "This is a Polish worker who is always clumsy. . . . As a rule, the Poles are clumsy. I had many Poles in my company, but those were most often very agile. One has to show them everything, then they learn it" (Wallis, *Dziennik*, 10.02.1916).

525 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 23–24.

526 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Probably not all the Poles in the Kaiser's army were interested in politics, particularly in the plans concerning the fate of postwar Poland. Only those more engaged already before 1914 searched for any mentions about it. Wallis reported every, even the shortest, information about the future of Poland, he incessantly asked in his letters to send him Polish papers, and he was delighted whenever he unexpectedly found "in the soldier's house by accident . . . in a barrack on a table, the first May issue of *Opiekunka Dzieci* [Guardian Lady of Children] and *Słowo Boże* [God's Word]." He writes that, "You can only imagine how overjoyed I was. I did not see *Opiekun* or *Słowo Boże* for a long time. I read them from cover to cover. Do we still subscribe *Przewodnik* [The Guide]? And what about *Przyjaciel Młodzieży* [Friend of Youth]?"⁵²⁷

He was incredibly shocked when he found out about the creation of the Kingdom of Poland by the two emperors on November 5, 1916. After the death of Franz Joseph I, he writes, referring to the literary inspirations from his youth, "I did not know anything about the death of Cesar Fr. Joseph. God bless him for everything he did for the Poles. God bless [the Polish writer] Sienkiewicz. Let them rest in peace in their homelands. I first found out about the freedom of Poland from Leon Loewe [a German, a companion from the army], who sent me a newspaper from Halle that included a description of the ceremony in Warsaw. I cannot believe that it is true."⁵²⁸ And when he found out about the creation of Polish army (*Polnische Wehrmacht*), he cannot believe and he dreams about "visiting Warsaw at this moment, observing the [Polish] Legions taken from the front line to Warsaw." And later, "If God allows us, we will go together to Warsaw."⁵²⁹

Józef Iwicki, who incessantly contemplated geopolitical plans about the future of Poland and Prussian province in his letters, experienced it in similar way. His views were incredibly original. From the beginning, he critically assessed the creation of the Polish Legions at the side of Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1914. He perceived it as a misconceived initiative because, as he writes, "Is it better for us if Germany or Russia wins? These are the questions that torture every Pole, but which cannot be answered yet. This is why I think that the creation of Legions is unreasonable, because they cannot decide in a battle, and they base on the premise that Austria will win. But how they can be sure that it will be actually like that? Maybe Russia will win? Anyway, these legions will make peace with the

527 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, France 14.05.1917.

528 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, France 28.11.1916.

529 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, 13.01.1917.

Russians more difficult.”⁵³⁰ Until 1916, Iwicki considered as realistic the plans to create Polish Land out of the Prussian province within the German Reich.

Our immediate objective should be the exclusion of the Eastern provinces from the Prussian control, and the creation of a separate Polish-German land in the German Reich, with a king or prince at the helm, from the Habsburg or Saxon House. Both languages would be equally included in the public institutions (railway, post), but also in schools; university for Poles in Poznań, another one for Germans in Koenigsberg, etc. I believe that, when peace comes, it will be a favorable moment for the Poles in this matter (even in the case of German victory), we will be supported not only by the nations hostile to Germany but also by its allies (Austria), neutral, and maybe some part of the southern Germans.⁵³¹

Not until the end of 1916, the hope for the creation of free and independent Poland – a key issue for thousands of Polish patriots – did start to take form by the side of the Central Powers, after the issue of the Act of 5th November. In 1917, Wallis wished for one thing only, with God’s help, to see new Poland, in which he resolutely believed: “Oh, may God give us imminent peace. We will work more joyfully, if we see our developing Homeland. The Queen [Virgin Mary] will appoint to the throne a person to govern Her country, a worthy person who will bring our country back to its former glory and glamor. And the nation will be glad and happy, as long as it faithfully serves its only Queen.”⁵³²

530 Iwicki, *Z myślą o Niepodległej*, p. 30.

531 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

532 The letters from K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, France 27.06.1917.

IV. Major Battles in the West

During the First World War, the Poles participated in all the major battles on the Western Front. Three of them play a singular role in the memoirs of soldiers: the famous Battle of Verdun, the Battle of the Somme, and fights for Lorette Hill; all parts of the operation in the Arras region. Those were the fights that broke all the records in terms of the numbers of killed and injured people. The months spent in these trenches perfectly illustrate the everyday of a regular Pole in the Kaiser's army on the Western Front.

During the war and right after its end, all the Poles in the former Prussian province knew those names. Both Germany-wide and regional newspapers informed about them, which allowed the families and relatives to obtain information about the fate of their cognates from afar.

Verdun

The reserve 12th Infantry Division was to fight for the longest time and to suffer the greatest losses in the Battle of Verdun, which included the regiments called-up mainly in the Upper Silesia: the 38th and the 51st. The first-line regiments, the 22nd and the 23rd, quartered there for a long time. Later, also the Poles from Greater Poland and Pomerania fought at Verdun in various units.

At the turn of October and November 1914, when the German troops arrived at the forefields of Verdun, it did not look like a fortress at all. Before them, they could see forts dug deep in the ground and sprawled on the numerous forested hills; those forts most often rested on solid ferroconcrete constructions. The fights concerned the control over these very hills. The French had enough time to prepare for the battle well and to strengthen the fortified hills. Hence, they had an advantage, provide that they maintain communication with the support area and avoid encirclement from the west and the south.⁵³³

Fort de Marre fortifications, famous Côte 304, and a hill called by the Germans *Toter Mann*, were of key importance from the viewpoint of Upper Silesian regiments and appointed the directions of the offensive, that these units were about to conduct. Access to the latter was part of the plan to extend the front line to the west bank of the Meuse River. However, the access to this position was

533 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 51.

very difficult. It unusually lacked trees, while its hillsides were under constant observation of the French.⁵³⁴

In 1914, the Germans had yet little experience in accessing such fortifications, built on the basis of stationary forts and connected with trenches. To encircle it meant to create a many-kilometer line of solid trenches under constant enemy fire, also on the German side. The military encountered here the problems that did not occur in other segments of the front line, so it hastily proposed provisional solutions. The ground in Verdun soaked in heavy rain as the one in Flanders. It was “as loose as liquid soap,” as one of the soldiers called it. The trenches constantly collapsed, while the soldiers had to wade in the mud up to their knees or even higher. We may at least partially imagine the conditions of these works under constant French fire from their detailed description aimed to dig and strengthen an entrenched position by the Upper Silesian 22nd Infantry Regiment in winter and spring of 1915:

One needed extraordinary energy and determination to endure one year and a half in the mud under this fire. When spring [of 1915] came, the army started to heighten the positions in order to save them from rainy weather. The trenches had the height of a high man. All the paths in the trenches had to be covered with wooden platforms at the bottom. The installation and maintenance of barbed-wire barrages, often thirty meters wide, was an additional activity for the soldiers during the night. There were also various necessary works concerning the access paths that had to be extended and repaired all the time. The two battalions in the advanced line on patrol duty were not sufficient. A battalion that was theoretically a reserve unit had to constantly commandeer its soldiers for this purpose. Therefore, it was not possible to build a second line of trenches using only their own energies. It was also necessary to provide the soldiers with a safe lodging against artillery shelling. It was very difficult to build dugouts in this area. Hard gravel mixed with claylike ground hindered the works, and only the hands of the Upper Silesian miners were capable of finishing them so quickly.⁵³⁵

However, the trenches were not a sufficient protection against the shelling of the French artillery and, more importantly, they did not afford the soldiers time to recover. The soldiers could only take a short and constantly interrupted nap, without the opportunity to wash themselves or change underwear:

[In a dugout] we lie sideways next to each other on branches, packed like sardines, because it makes us warmer. One soldier warms up from another. Turning from side to side or lying on one's back is out of question, unless everyone turns at one command. It is impossible to lie there for more than an hour. Wet shoes make our feet cold, so a

534 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 92; Keegan, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 396

535 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 68–69.

couple of soldiers start up and quickly run around the trench just to warm themselves up and they come back to their positions to take a short nap, as long as their feet do not get cold again. If we lie like that throughout the entire night, we need to repeat these procedures multiple times. . . . Drenched uniforms steam. Steam flies from the coats and through the slit, that serves us as the door, and flies outside.⁵³⁶

The hills over the German positions, that allowed the French to conduct precise artillery shelling, made the construction of the dugouts even harder. Precision hits from heavy guns, let alone howitzers, were rather rare and accidental on flat territories. They were absolutely possible at Verdun with the permanent positions and the good visibility. Hence, the frequent cases of soldiers buried in trenches and dugouts, commemorated by the famous *tranchée de baïonnette*, a place where the soldiers of two companies of the French 137th Infantry Regiment were purportedly buried alive. They supposedly did not manage to exit the trench for the offensive and only tips of their bayonets poking out of the ground remained after them. In fact, the French did die in the fight but the tips of their bayonets were left to enable the identification of the place.

Bernard Potrykus was a direct witness of such an event when he barely managed to avoid being buried alive in a dugout at Verdun:

Suddenly, the ground beneath our feet shifted. We heard a bang as loud as a hundred thunderbolts. It got dark because of the dust. Everybody ran toward the other edge [of the trench], while those in bed started to call for help. The enemy did his job: he penetrated our trench. All those sleeping were buried. "Children!" The deputy officer Winkler yelled in uproar, "help our companions!" He himself was there, and he started to dig up the ground with a small shovel that he found. Around ten people, who were more courageous and were not afraid of dying, came to help the buried. Our Winter . . . did not search for a shovel but started to dig with his own hands, he ripped his nails, he tossed the boards with his teeth. The efforts of those who tried to rescue the buried soldiers were superhuman. At first, the layer of ground that covered them was apparently not so thick, cause we could hear their cries and we could even understand individual words that they used to call for help. However, more and more ground started to fall, much more than dozens of hands could handle. A second grenade must have hit a spot near the hole, because a new avalanche of ground and stones fell on those unfortunate ones, and the third grenade hit the same spot, Winkler yelled, "Move back!" As if he sensed something. They jumped to the side, and a great part of our trench was buried. Those who tried to rescue the other soldiers were also almost buried. . . . Our situation was horrible. . . . The grenade hit half of the stairs at the exit. Although they were thick, the boards did not endure it: we heard a creak; when we turned our eyes to this spot, we could not see daylight anymore. The entire staircase was buried down to

536 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 49–50.

them bottom. There was an overwhelming darkness, like in a grave. We were also silent because everyone got scared so much that we could not speak. Only when someone lighted a match did everybody start moving. There was an undescrivable tumult. Some kept saying on and on, "We are lost now!" Others ran from one wall of the trench to the other, like wild animals in a cage, and they wanted to break them down with their chests to get outside; besides, they screamed loudly and stridently for the help of God and the saints. . . . Our commander ordered us to search through our pockets, [because maybe] we will find matches or a candle. We found a little of that. Half of a matchbox, a lighter, and, what was most important, a piece of candle, although it was small. Winkler took it all, light up the candle, and said: "Now, children, let's get down to work. We have to dig ourselves out of here. There is too many of us to just die here, and we still have healthy hands and legs. Get down to work with everything you got and we will soon escape from this unfortunate place." First, he ordered us to gather all the rifles and masks in one place, so that they do not get buried. Then, he formed us in a chain: he stood at the head by the stairs and transfered the ground to the nearest soldier. He gave it to another one, and so on, until it was in the very corner of the trench. Winkler emphasized the fact that we have to place it high and tight, so that it does not take much space. . . . We worked in silence. We only grunted heavily since the work was extremely burdensome since we lacked big shovels; we had only the small ones that we carried on our belts. We alternately worked in standing positions and on our knees, and it was even worse when Winkler blew out the candle, because he was afraid that we run out of the candle at the end. Then it often happened that one would hit his companion's side with a shovel in the dark. . . . The air was thick with dust, less and less oxygen, and it was so hot that we thought we were in a bakery oven. Sweat flew down our bodies and hurt our eyes with the dust. A crust grew on our faces, which was so big that – when Winkler lighted a match to have a look – we could barely see anything at all. The trench slowly started to fill with ground. Winkler did reach the point where the grenade hit, but the more ground we tossed, the more ground fell down, as if from the horn of plenty! . . . Space quickly diminished. We moved closer to each other, eventually working back to back. Breathing became increasingly difficult with each passing second. Eventually, one of us fainted. . . . Soon, a second soldier fell down, then a third right after him, almost when our candle faded away. "It is bad," a dry throat gasped. It was a cry that would begin general panic, which would be the end of us, had our Winkler not exclaimed with his shrilly but dry voice: "Children, I see sky!" Indeed, it was true. We dug ourselves out from the ground. . . . Then, we came out, one after another. God, what a joy! It was night, the half-moon above, so many stars in the sky! What a great difference: this sky and the black abyss. It was still much better to die here, on the ground.⁵³⁷

Only after some time did the sappers realize that regular dugout protection was not enough in this territory. Initially, a one- or one-and-a-half-meter thick layer of ground above the wooden balks was perceived as sufficient, and the

537 Potrykus, *Wspomnienia Kaszuba spod Verdun*, pp. 62–69.

construction of dugouts with three-meter protective layer was accepted as a standard only later. This delay cost the lives of many people. In turn, the artillerymen needed ground covers above the timbering that amounted to even five to seven meters, if the bunker was to perform its role, as they remained in one place for a long time. The army additionally reinforced the walls of the trenches from the enemy's side with a wide parapet; otherwise medium-caliber bullets penetrated the walling in direct fire. The army collected materials, mainly wood, from the entire neighbourhood for these constructions. They transported it on foot or by carts from local forests. The wood itself was not sufficient for artillery positions and machine gun nests. Over time, the army reinforced trench walls with concrete, sometimes even on long segments of the front line, thereby extending the existing trenches made of wood and soil. Such constructions turned out to be more stable. However, bombed elements and big concrete blocks barred pathways during precise artillery shelling and the army had to remove them from trenches with difficulty, since they precluded communication.

Over time, the first-line trenches were dug deeper in the ground. The army created more spacious bunkers and their entrances and interiors were reinforced with wide wooden timber beams. Equipped with ovens, but also with desks, cots with straw mattresses, carbide and oil lamps, and storage spaces for weapons, ammunition, and food, the trenches provided soldiers with minimal necessary space free from dangers only after many months of works.⁵³⁸ The trenches, dug deep in the ground and sometimes reinforced with concrete blocks, provided the soldiers with much more sense of security than the dugouts. Bernard Potrykus particularly valued the possibility of uninterrupted sleep in such a place:

In the morning, the entire first platoon gathered in an excavation trench at the command. It had two entrances, it was spacious and, most of all, deep. Strong, thick boards backed the walls and ceiling. Everybody claimed that the French will not expel us from here by any chance. Some soldiers wanted to daringly wait there until the conclusion of peace. . . . There were bunk beds at one end of our trench. Three, one over another. Entirely regular, built with boards, each of them had a bed filled with straw or dry grass, which soon deteriorated. Despite that, everyone was happy if they could lay down in such a bed. Therefore, the beds were immediately taken and, since there were not enough beds for everyone, some of us made their bed on the floor. A coat had to substitute a bed, a satchel became a pillow, and we soon fell asleep since we did not sleep much last night.⁵³⁹

538 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 53–54.

539 Potrykus, *Wspomnienia Kaszuba spod Verdun*, p. 38.

Initially, there was no organized support area at Verdun due to the concentration of large units. The soldiers stayed in the trenches only covered with tent rain cape at most or they sat in the dug hole with similar covering, regardless the weather and temperature, or the intensity of enemy artillery fire. Over time, more solid rest areas for the reserve battalions appeared in the support area, just when the army started to extend its positions and, eventually, created the third line of trenches linked to the connecting ditches.⁵⁴⁰

Stay in the first-line trenches at Verdun was particularly dangerous during the day. Admittedly, there were many dugouts by Côte 304, but their exits sustained constant French fire. Leaving them was impossible in good visibility. Machine gun fire started right after someone poked out his head. In any case, it was difficult to leave the trenches even at night, since the French had their guns pointed toward the bunker exits and fired without warning. It disabled field kitchens to provide the units with the warm food. It was even worse when it came to drinking water. The soldiers gathered it from missile craters, usually with mud.⁵⁴¹

The mud became the symbol of the Verdun trench nightmare. It appears in all the memoirs as the bane of soldier duty. As a soldier from the 22nd Infantry Regiment writes: "If you did not see soldiers in the mud that reached almost up to their heads during a rainy weather, you cannot even imagine it."⁵⁴² The rains destroyed the holes in the ground built with such effort. People sometimes preferred to head toward the forefield instead of sitting in sludgem for hours. It even sometimes happened that – when the soldiers headed toward the first line – they did not use connecting ditches and thereby exposed themselves to enemy fire, just not to drown in the sludge that absorbed everything. During the rain, the trenches looked like streams of dense slime, in which everything melted over time and there was no chance of avoiding it. The soldiers simply had to wait for better weather.

When the Upper Silesian uhlans from the regiment of Gliwice were directed to the infantry regiment, the infantrymen who quartered there used the uhlans for carrying the supplies, since they had high cavalry boots that allowed them to move in the sticky sludge.⁵⁴³ A resigned soldier of the 22nd Regiment writes in one of his letters from March 1915: "Everything drowned in mud. The constantly pouring rain turned the maze of trenches into a mud labyrinth. When walking,

540 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 53–54.

541 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 94.

542 *Ibid.*, pp. 68–69.

543 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 52.

one literally left his boots, and often also stockings and trousers, stuck in the mud. We could not stand the fact that any attempt to communicate with the support area was a problem. It meant no sending back of the injured soldiers, and no food and water supplies.”⁵⁴⁴

A grotesque accident happened when the commander of this regiment “drowned” in the sludge, when he went through the connecting ditch to inspect of the positions. The soldiers “fished” him out with sticks. During the relief of the units in the advanced positions, those who came from the support area usually did not see soldiers, but “only their eyes, that we could notice already in the mud, and the guns lifted in the air, it all looked like a phantasmagoria.” People limited their needs in these conditions to maintaining the physical and mental vital functions. As an Upper Silesian writes, “If only I could wash myself for once, write a letter on a wooden tablet, take off the jacket and trousers, and later, tuck into a deloused blanket. If only I could thoroughly clean my boots for once and brush my coat, and sit on a bench in front of the barrack, smoke a pipe, or even maybe play something on the harmonica and sing.”⁵⁴⁵

Rats and lice annoyed soldiers everywhere in the trenches. When we read the memoirs of the Poles at Verdun, we get an overwhelming impression that the rats were a true Egyptian plague near the fort. People constantly competed with these animals for food. New recruits could not even surmise what kind of precautions one needed to outwit the rodents. Measures like thorough packing of bread in gun protectors and hanging them on a string right under the dugout ceiling were no obstacle for the rats: “We hang bread – the most important meal – on a string above our heads. We must keep the lights on, and the guards must constantly follow these monsters with a stick, because they became so intrusive and bold that they jumped on the heads of sleeping soldiers to bite the string and escape with the bread.”⁵⁴⁶ Only tightly-closed metal boxes could guarantee longer food storage.⁵⁴⁷ After all, the rats did not lack food: “Hordes of rats that scavenge corpses flooded the ditches and secret stashes. Besides a weapon, we always carry sticks with us to kill the rats in hundreds and, despite that, there is no end to them.”⁵⁴⁸

544 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 87

545 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

546 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 85.

547 Małek, *Z Mazur do Verdun*, pp. 230–231.

548 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 85.

The soldiers did not combat the lice at all – now part of the everyday – unless particular sensitivity to their bites caused serious wounds, as in Karol Małłek's case, who complains how “the lice bit us constantly and mercilessly. I had wounds on my back and on my chest so big that I could put my fingers inside them. Thousands of lice bathed in them and bit ruthlessly. There were fewer of them after each washing and delousing, but they immediately multiplied.”⁵⁴⁹ The lack of water and the possibility of regular body and underwear washing made this fight ineffective; the soldiers at Verdun often washed themselves in their own urine, which effectively removed the thick layer of mud, later rinsing hands with rainwater, but it did not help to remove the lice.⁵⁵⁰

We have to remember that – despite its popular image – life in the mud of trenches at Verdun was not filled with constant fighting, but was mainly reduced to inactive standing at the positions under artillery shelling and machine gun fire, or to waiting in dugouts for the next duty in the first line. A similar note appears day after day in the regimental diaries at this horrible segment of the front: “Minor artillery shelling, individual grenades, it is peaceful.” According to the consensual opinion of the combatants, it was the monotonous inactive waiting, the unprotected exhibition to the fire, and the enormous physical effort connected with the construction and reconstruction of the trenches that were the biggest challenge for the German troops. The Upper Silesians regiments also experienced it for half a year, until the Battle of Verdun.⁵⁵¹ Every day, the Upper Silesians dug and maintained the permeability of the trenches in the second and third lines along with the sappers. They invented a Silesian rhyme for this occasion, while wallowing in the mud: “Low, down to half of calf,/there is slush like chocolate./And rain falls on the hat/but apart from that, it is quite good.”⁵⁵²

Fights for two hills in 1916 turned out to be particularly important in the history of the Upper Silesian regiments. The first hill was the above *Toter Mann* (the dead man; French “Le Mort Homme”); the name was in use already since the sixteenth century as the body of an unidentified man was found there. The second hill was Côte 304, west to Toter Mann.

549 Małłek, *Z Mazur do Verdun*, p. 236.

550 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 66.

551 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 65–66.

552 Unfortunately, the original text was not preserved. The author of the regimental monograph only mentions that the rhyme was created in Upper Silesian vernacular, but he quotes its German version: “Unten bis zur halben Wade/Hat man Brei wie Schokolade/ Und von oben trippt's auf Hut/Aber sonst ist schon genug!” (Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 52).

The operation started on March 6, with the participation of the reserve 12th Infantry Division, along with the other regiments of the Silesian VI Army Corps. The strike about ten kilometers west of Fort Douaumont, situated right in the middle, had great strategic importance. According to the German staff officers, it was supposed to limit the shelling of the French artillery and allow to retake the crucial offensive at Fort Vaux, whose capture was to pave the way for Fort Douaumont.⁵⁵³

The assault on *Toter Mann* on March 14, 1916, was one of the biggest German successes in the Battle of Verdun. The reserve Upper Silesian 38th Infantry Regiment played the main role in the attack, as its task was to outflank *Totter Mann* and Côte 304, that were at the core of the French defense. There were entrenched positions positioned deep in the ground and the French artillery with the heaviest howitzers that pointed toward the German positions.

A regimental diary describes this successful assault, as follows:

Tuesday, March 14, 1914, was a bright, spring-like day. Morning hazes did not lift yet above the local creek, when the brisk activity of airplanes started on both sides. We witnessed many suspenseful air fights. Our Fokkers [German fighters used in the First World War] shot down two French aircrafts, which fell down to the ground; we could clearly see it. Already the day before, we saw brisk activity in the French trenches, overcrowded by soldiers [the French relieved the 67th Infantry Division, exhausted by the fights, whose losses amounted to almost half of its initial composition, with the 25th Infantry Division that became part of the French Second Army under the command of General Marie-Eugène Debenej]. The French machine guns were active more than usual, when they saw any motion at our positions. Until about 10:30 am, the artillery was quite calm, but our artillery started the shelling later [the Germans conducted artillery shelling for two days already, but the German infantry general commander Konrad von Goßler postponed the attack for two days due to the bad weather].⁵⁵⁴ It was well positioned. From 2 pm, the fire intensified and, about 3 pm, it reached its peak, all the batteries were in use and they shot with maximal use of gunshots. Smoke of the explosions completely covered *Toter Mann*. The enemy counterattacked rarely and by surprise. At 4 pm, the offensive lines of the second battalion and the 38th Machine Gun Company of the Infantry Regiment assaulted in two rounds, one after another, keeping a hundred meter distance between each other. The third line of the third battalion followed them as support. After ten minutes we were already 600 meters away from the starting point, without regard for immediate fire of the French machine guns and infantry that survived the artillery shelling in the trenches, and we occupied the first French fortifications. Whoever managed to fight back was killed with hand grenades. The second battalion continued the assault without stopping at the French advanced line

553 J. Centek, *Verdun 1916*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 107–108.

554 *Ibid.*

and headed toward the south-east, according to the order [that is, toward the slope of the hill directed at the Cumières village]. At 4:25 pm, we occupied more French positions. We captured enemy infantry. Some French troops in tunnels and near the machine gun nests continued to bitterly fight back, and we broke their resistance only after a volley of hand grenades. The strike on further lines got stuck, since they were still well manned. This time, fierce fire of the French infantry and machine guns repelled us and forced to start firefight from a distance of 200 meters at the left flank. Only the left wing continued to head forward. It allowed us to conduct another strike at the left flank. At 4:50 pm, we fulfilled the order to occupy the main French position at *Toter Mann*. Strong patrols invaded further lines deeper into enemy territory. They incapacitated three artillery guns by blowing out their barrels and locks with hand grenades. They captured many machine guns and transmit an almost undamaged trench for the immediate use of a neighboring unit (the reserve 6th Marksmen Battalion). We conquered *Toter Mann* already after the first hour of the strike. We kept all the French positions in our hands, and there were no Frenchmen on the horizon. Only an explicit order of the military command prevented us from heading further. We could have easily headed forward. This historically true statement is necessary as the French, for whom the loss of *Toter Mann* was a particularly grievous loss, deny the facts and their own maps with marked positions. They claim that we did not conquer the hill, but only the forefield. Proper *Toter Mann* was to be further south. Such a statement is false, as there were no French positions on the southern hill [indeed, the French, who lost then over thousand of killed and injured soldiers, moved the name *Mort Homme* and used it for the neighboring southern hill for propaganda reasons after the loss of the battle].⁵⁵⁵

Conquered trenches became a place where the Upper Silesians could replenish their deficient supplies. Initially not under fire, they cleaned the trenches and covered underground tunnels. After escorting the captives, they buried the fallen nearby, about 30–40 m from the positions. There French trenches contained true treasures. Apart from various kinds of weapons (guns, hand grenades, ammunition, flares), the soldiers found woolen blankets, extremely useful in the trenches, even several furs, also military belts, unused underwear, new leather boots, and almost forgotten food products: marvellous meat preserves, sardines in oil, and wine in kegs. Since 1916, the quality of the German Army's menu increasingly often depended on the products found in the enemy's trenches.⁵⁵⁶

The French losses in the battle were huge and they resulted in the spread of a defeatist spirit. As general Georges Robert Nivelle later claimed: "In every division whose exhaustion exceeds a certain point, the soldiers enter the state of physical and mental depression, which makes the division useless for at least

555 Ibid., p. 108; Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiments*, pp. 86–87.

556 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiments*, p. 91.

one month.”⁵⁵⁷ According to the French sources, the Germans were still closer to this state than the French. In his post-war memoirs, the French sergeant Julien Suteau from the 90th Infantry Regiment describes the day of March 22 – along with the entire fight for *Toter Mann* – as a complete German defeat: “Our fire stopped the first wave of assault, the same was with the second wave. However, further waves came out of enemy trenches, the third, the fourth, but during the last attack, the Germans came off as if they did not want to come out of the trenches and they were forced to do that because of our threats. After all, we similarly stopped the last two waves with the fire of our guns and machine guns. It was constant fire during two hours of the assault, so that the barrels of our guns became red from the heat.”⁵⁵⁸

To the west of *Toter Mann* was Côte 304, the second place that went down in history of the Upper Silesian regiments. Since March 17, the soldiers started to prepare for the assault, but they managed to conquer this position only temporarily. The reserve infantry divisions were to conduct the offensive: the Silesian 11th division and the Bavarian 11th division, to its right, who both received an order to “conjoin on March 22, after the seizure of the southern edge of the forest near Avocourt and Côte 304.”⁵⁵⁹ The heavy artillery and the 2nd Landwehr Division were to support the assaulting troops. The assault started after the artillery preparation on March 20, with the participation of the Upper Silesian 22nd Infantry Regiment.⁵⁶⁰

The 22nd Regiment’s task was to seize the enemy’s trenches first at Côte 275,4, and later to continue the assault toward Côte 304, that was the key place. Special storm troops were to conduct the assault, as they underwent training with this aim in the German infantry regiments for some time. German reconnaissance units determined that the French trench line turned Côte 304 into an almost solid fortress along the line based on three villages: Avocourt – Haucourt – Béthincourt. At 8 am, the artillery shelling started which turned into drumfire conducted it mainly by howitzers and mortars. The shelling lasted four hours to the poor response of the French. Earlier, the Germans also detonated mines next to French positions. At 12 pm, the infantry offensive began: the First Battalion of the 22nd Infantry Regiment reached enemy trenches despite machine gun cross

557 J.-H. Lefebvre, *Verdun. La plus grande bataille de l'histoire racontée par les survivantes*, Verdun 2008, pp. 226–227.

558 Ibid.

559 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 83–85.

560 Centek, *Verdun 1916*, p. 110.

fire and, at 2 pm, it reported to have partly fulfilled the task and seized Côte 275.4. Meanwhile, the Second Battalion got stuck under the suppressive fire of the French artillery, supported by the machine guns from the neighboring hills. The Germans did not manage to prevent the situation, despite own artillery shelling.

On March 22, only a few German soldiers managed to beat their way to the French trenches during the assault, and they tried to conquer them with hand grenades. However, the Germans suffered great losses, particularly among officers, which prevented them from continuous assault. Long-lasting torrential rain that started after a few days of good weather made the situation worse, as it destroyed the newly conquered trenches: “The tired troops spent the night in destroyed craters with spades in their hands in order to make the newly conquered positions defendable, despite continuous shelling of the French artillery. Communication was completely destroyed. The soldiers that bathed in the mud shivered from cold. Some of them did not wear boots, and many had unusable weapons due to the dirt.”

Constant artillery shelling precluded communication with commanders. Once again, liaison officers were the only reliable source of information, if only they managed to beat their way through the forefield under the constant fire and through the connecting ditches. The liaison officers sometimes needed even seven hours to travel a segment only a half-kilometer long, so their information could not influence the decisions, which the commanders needed to make immediately.⁵⁶¹

The fights of the Second Battalion on March 22 were one of the typical examples of the evolution of the art of war, which occurred during the trench warfare at the Battle of Verdun. Enemy artillery shelling during the assault overlapped with suppressive fire. The soldiers often could not recognize if they fall under enemy fire or their own. It was impossible to command the troops, even at the company level. The confrontation of two hostile armies was fragmented into individual fights, without communication between units or any possibility to harmonize actions; to stop them, to hasten, or to accelerate them by the battalion or the regimental staff. A unified assault was out of the question. There was no distinct beginning and end of actions. The soldiers simply strived to come from one entrenched position to another.

How many meters were there? When and what time? How long did it last? All of these questions were left unanswered. We did not see a human during the day, we could relieve the first-line troops only at night. When we fired the illumination rounds, and

561 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 94.

everything turned bright for a while, at that moment, everyone crouched very low, near the ground. Despite nighttime, gunshots constantly ripped the air. Suppressing fire ferociously cleared the no man's land back and forth. Aircrafts circled above the entrenched positions from dawn till dusk. They noticed even the smallest motion. They determined the places between which the soldiers built any path between trenches that could show communication routes. They noticed every new trench that appeared during the construction of a dugout. It was at that time when Verdun became the synonym of this war, an all-crushing "mill," "hell," "fire barrage for the entire Germany."⁵⁶²

The fights were so fierce that – since the beginning of the German offensive on March 6 – Côte 304 lost thirty meters of its height as a result of the shelling and explosions. As later description of the battle show, "the seizure of enemy positions is bloody and horrible, but keeping them is true hell."⁵⁶³

The assault on March 22 cost the 22nd Regiment as many as twenty fallen officers and 608 soldiers; over 20 percent of its initial composition after only two days of combat.⁵⁶⁴ This bloody day caused huge losses also in other German troops that participated in the assault. Three thousand soldiers fell while Côte 304 remained unconquered, which allowed the French artillery to continue the shelling of German positions. The commander of the French Second Army, former brigadier general Philippe Pétain, could report two days later to the president of France, Raymond Poincaré, who visited this segment of the frontline, that the French managed to maintain the defense and uninterrupted communication with the support area through the famous Sacred Way (*la Voie Sacrée*); the only way from the French side that allowed the transportation of supplies and soldiers.⁵⁶⁵

The fights for Côte 304 lasted for the next two months. The German troops only once managed to reach its peak, on May 10, for a short period of time and with huge losses. However, the place looked eerily: "Many dead Frenchmen, probably killed after the gas attack, lied around in the craters. Due to constant rain, everything formed a sludge that consisted of clay and human bodies. In the assault trenches, one could move only while crawling, during the day."⁵⁶⁶ The attempts to conduct further strikes by the decimated Upper Silesian regiments were completely pointless:

562 Ibid., pp. 88–89.

563 W. Biermann, *Alptraum Verdun*, in: *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, ed. G. Krumeich, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2006, p. 150.

564 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 83–85.

565 Centek, *Verdun 1916*, pp. 112–113.

566 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 97.

Right on the appointed time [4:50 pm], we received an order to conduct the assault. We moved forward under the fire of our artillery that tore the ground in the forefield. . . . The ground firmly stuck to our boots, and it considerably hindered our movements. When we were twenty to twenty-five meters away from enemy trenches, machine guns suddenly started to fire. Sergeant Eckert and I were almost at the height of a trench that led to the French position, so we jumped into a connecting ditch filled with water, along with a couple of our companions. Eckert reached an obstacle in the trench. Machine gun fire stopped him. We could not move forward any longer. We saw the French supplies that came from Côte 304, and we tried to fire at them. To our right, part of the company still headed forward, but we saw our dead companions on the side. It was already dark. There was dreadful silence. We did not know who was still alive. Then, some figures appeared next to us. It was sergeant Eckert and Schygulla. We crawled toward them and informed them about the losses. Most of our companions got shot in the head, including the commander of our company and others. Most of the injured had wounds on their legs. We took the starting positions for the assault, but we were utterly exhausted. Nevertheless, the company began the assault anew, with an identical result.⁵⁶⁷

When the fights for Côte 304 continued, other Poles, this time from Greater Poland, participated in the extremely bloody fight for Fort Vaux. In March 1916, when the Germans repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to seize these fortifications with huge losses – they succeeded only after repeating the attack in June 1916 – the newly recruited soldiers replenished the exhausted troops. Wawrzyniec Skorupka mentions such a conscription from Greater Poland:

One a partly spring day at the beginning of March 1916, the commanders situated the company at full strength and they started picking candidates for the Western Front. They selected about eighty men from our company, including a couple of Polish companions from our room. . . . They were all robust men. . . . The chosen received new field equipment and – after they changed clothes, gave back their old stuff on the next day, and listened to patriotic speeches – they hastily headed to the railway station and went on train toward the Western Front, to Verdun. A couple of the worst non-commissioned officers were on the transport. In one week after their departure, during the evening reading of the orders for the next day, our feldfebel told us that our companions already participated in the Fort Vaux fights. . . . Nevermind – he squawked with a shrill voice, a typical local *Etappenschwein*⁵⁶⁸ – that after the relief of those decimated regiments, their successor regiments from Saxony had to give the conquered fort back to the French, but the glory will always remain with us! However, he did not add, how many soldiers fell because of this questionable glory.⁵⁶⁹

567 Ibid.

568 “Pig of a stage” – a name used for the non-commissioned officers and officers who tried to avoid being sent to the front and performed military jobs in the support area.

569 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi 1914–1967*, pp. 74–75.

In total, as many as thirty-eight officers and 1510 soldiers of the Upper Silesian 1st Infantry Regiment (the 22nd Infantry Regiment) died in the Battle of Verdun, that is, half of its initial composition! Hence, the regiment had to retreat to the support area after two months. It was incapable of further combat and required immediate replenishment.⁵⁷⁰ The 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment, which also participated in the fights from March 6 until April 29, 1916, lost five officers and 307 soldiers, while twenty-eight officers and 1279 soldiers were injured (one officer and sixty soldiers were missing). Almost half of the regiment was eliminated. Whereas, starting from 1914, the number of fallen and injured soldiers in the regiment amounted to as many as eighty-three officers and 3663 soldiers, which exceeded its initial composition at the moment of departure from Silesia to the frontline.⁵⁷¹

Reports on losses always included those severely injured because – even though they managed to escape the battlefield – they rarely returned to their initial unit quickly, after the stay in the field hospital. Recovery during the First World War in the support area was usually long and meant a recuperation of several weeks, enabled by the medical infrastructure in the depths of the German Reich that was virtually intact. A soldier from the 38th Regiment, who was in the field hospital in Wiesbaden, describes his recovery in a letter to a companion from his unit:

Suddenly, something fell into our trench. It hit my head and I fainted. For how long – I do not know. I only woke up for a while and I was cold then. I did not feel any pain, so I wanted to go forward because everything was over (the sun already rose). Only then did I realize that my hip was injured. Completely helpless, once again, I started to feel weakness that I could not overcome, and I fell asleep. I only awoke in the field hospital. They explained to me what happened. A sister who sat next to me did not allow me to find the source of my pain. I could not do it, because I could not see anything. I did not know whether it was day or a night, the windows were covered, so it was constantly night for me. Or maybe I lost my sight? I did not know even this. After some time, they transported me and other injured to a nice field hospital in a barrack, where I was glad to finally see the sun after days of complete darkness. Unfortunately, I was there only for a night. The very same evening they transported me by car to Stenay [in France, several dozen kilometers to the north of Verdun]. The transport on these roads was terrible. We got there around midnight, but the corpsmen had to look for a place for us four. After a long time, I was sent to a room with thirty beds. After a couple of days in the room, the corpsmen took me from my bed and transported to another field hospital, which was a couple of houses farther, they did not explain anything to me. When it was my turn, they

570 Ibid., pp. 98–99.

571 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 109.

took off the bandage from my head. A doctor stood in front of me, he examined my face, then he talked to the other doctors. He asked for a utensil and told me to look at him. A quick grip, new bandages, and I had to go back to my bed; it all happened very quickly. Now I know that I lost one of my eyes./More days went by (they changed the dressing every day) and, without knowing why, I suddenly felt an unbearable pain in my left knee of increasing intensity with each hour. I called for help and asked to check it; since they could not solve the problem, they called for the head doctor. He came and looked closely; he claimed that the dressing was too tight. I told him that if they do not loosen it, I will tear it off myself, because the pain exceeds everything that I can handle. Then, they changed the dressing. Diagnosis! Gangrene in the knee. Without further delays, they took me to the operating table where I quickly lost my left leg, up to the knee. Now came about peaceful days, while the perfect hospital care allowed me to survive this time with the Heaven's help. It is so terrible that, now, I cannot bite, my left ear is unresponsive, my right arm is mutilated, and I lost my leg. Shortly before my leave from the hospital, the head doctor told me that he did not expect me to survive and be able to return home, because only two more hours were enough for the infection to cause my death. During these sleepless days and nights at the hospital, I succumbed to true despair. I imagined what an unwanted burden I would be for myself and others. Often, I wanted to never wake up again. I was detached from my brothers in arms and – like a wreck – I relied on the help of others, whom I burdened.⁵⁷²

The survivors moved to “barracks towns” in Lorraine, as every Upper Silesian regiment from Verdun. For most soldiers the view of casinos for officers and soldiers, cantines, bathhouses, and reading rooms was shocking after months spent in the mud. There was electric light everywhere. Special narrow-gauge railroads were used for transportation. In one of such towns, there was even a designed market square with well-tended garden and a commemoration monument for the fights in the center of regularly situated blockhouses. There also was a cemetery built next to the military settlement, where the injured who died were buried.⁵⁷³

On the other hand, the 22nd Regiment, which fought at Verdun a year and a half without returning to the rear area, was transported near Cambrais. The survivors received comfortable lodgings and real beds. For the first time in a year and a half, the soldiers from the regiment could go on leave; thirty soldiers for ten days from each company. Those who stayed visited Cambrais in their free time or they left for farther Belgian cities, Ostend and Brussels, or even to French Lille.⁵⁷⁴

572 Ibid., pp. 110–111.

573 Ibid., pp. 53–54.

574 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 106–107.

The decimated regiment now consisted of only half of its initial composition, which meant that it required rapidly trained reserve soldiers: thirty-eight non-commissioned officers and 1458 soldiers. After a couple days of rest, the companies with new compositions jointly trained marching, trench digging, grenade throwing, assaults on fortified positions, telephone communication, and machine guns service.⁵⁷⁵

This is how the nightmare of Verdun ended for the Upper Silesian regiments. They did not participated in the further fights around the citadel. The soldiers did not expect that they would encounter an even worse frontline segment, opposite the English troops that prepared for the Somme offensive.

The Battle of the Somme

Besides the Battle of Verdun, the Battle of the Somme was the second classic example of an operation that sought to gain a strategic advantage by depleting enemy human and material resources; the Germans called this material warfare (*Materialschlacht*). However, this time, the Allied powers were the side that initiated the confrontation, contrary to Verdun, and they the ones to pay the huge tribute of blood. Inconsiderate to horrendous losses, they attempt to break the German defense line after their initial limited successes. After the plan of the infantry general Erich von Falkenhayn to bleed out the French at Verdun in 1916, the Allied powers introduced the tactics of mass artillery shelling invented by English general Henry Rawlison.⁵⁷⁶

For a regular German soldiers, the tragedy of this battle consisted in the fact that the command kept to outdated tactics, which they changed right after the experience in Flanders, but only in autumn 1916. They summarized it in a short formula, “The German soldier falls where he stands” (*Der deutsche Soldat fällt da, wo er steht*), which virtually meant that it was prohibited to leave the trench line without the approval of the High Command, even in an unfavorable situation. Even if the enemy devastated it with artillery drumfire on an unknown scale, incomparable to the one from Verdun of spring 1916. They did not use deep defense, the multi-kilometer extension of the first trench line back. The troops had to maintain the segments of the frontline every time until the very last soldier, no matter if they were short or long, strategically important or not. The German infantry, including regiments with Poles, remained isolated under

575 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 112.

576 Berghahn, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 69–70.

constant fire for many days, with the increasingly distinct enemy advantage, both in artillery and aviation.⁵⁷⁷

The absurdity of assaults that never succeed, in that period of the war, caused natural immediate defense reactions among soldiers. They hesitated to leave the trenches as they were conscious that it meant certain death, but they tried to find excuses to keep up appearances of military drill. Stanisław Drygas describes his dilemmas at the Somme as follows:

Suddenly, artillery drumfire began on the support area. A breathless officer of the neighboring battalion furiously barged in, calling for help. We looked at each other. No one wanted to go. The officer took out his revolver. "I will shoot all of you like dogs, you cowards! There is bloodshed there, and you are standing here." "We have to defend our own segment," someone from us dared to say. The officer was outraged. He threw a torrent of abuse and swears at us, then he started to push us toward the right flank, while holding his finger on the trigger. The smarter among us immediately headed toward the place where he led them, but then disappeared on their way. My reflex was a bit delayed. I lingered. I deluded myself that the officer will go for support farther and I will have an opportunity to spring to the side in the meantime. However, it did not happen, apparently our group was sufficient for him. He held my arm and pushed in front of himself. He caught another two soldiers on the way. I picked up the pace, sprang to the side, and exclaimed, "The English got through!" Indeed, we could see some figures run in the distance, but I could not see whether they were English or the fleeing grenadiers. I jumped over a couple of craters and I fell into a huge gap. I stayed there until dawn.⁵⁷⁸

Trenches at the Somme were terrible, as everywhere in Flanders. In many cases, the regiments that stayed there found the positions completely unprepared for combat. There were no positions for individual riflemen and machine gun nests. Since it was impossible to build them in the first line due to the inconvenient lay of the land, the army excavated only small shallow niches every five meters, from which the soldiers could shoot, but only in a recumbent position. The trenches were 1.8 meter deep, so they did not provide sufficient protection from enemy fire. The soldiers had to move in them, while constantly bending under the line of precise fire. The situation was even worse at some advanced positions. Their depth barely amounted to 1.5 meter, while the connecting ditches were filled with mud like at Verdun. There were no dugouts in many places, while the army did not manage to replace them with concrete shelters everywhere. The soldiers only dug for themselves so-called rabbit holes (*Kannichenlöcher*) in the front part of the trenches that faced the enemy and they sheltered there to avoid the shelling,

577 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 117–118.

578 Drygas, *Czas zaprzeszyły*, p. 255.

when they were not on duty, which is when tried to rest there. As they were not stabilized with timbering or wood shuttering, even imprecise bombardment made these holes into soldier graves as a result of subsiding ground.⁵⁷⁹ Only temporary shelters, sometimes covered with rain cape, they did not protect against the rain in bad weather. Hence, there was no place for food storage. In turn, this resulted in frequent stomach diseases.⁵⁸⁰ Supply of warm food to positions verged on miracle, which occurred in the maze of trenches, under constant fire, and only at night. Darkness was an impediment, since it was impossible to move in this labyrinth without its detailed knowledge. Each company had own permanent guide, who they sent late evening to the rear for food.⁵⁸¹ At night, quartermaster services carried water, food, and ammunition to the local forest in the support area, where they left it for the company liaison officers.⁵⁸²

The Upper Silesians were present at the Somme in those unsafe shelters of the Flanders trenches, and they became the victims of the most severe artillery shelling in the war so far. Even the spring fights at Verdun pale in comparison to the firestorm that the Allied prepared for the Germans before their offensive.⁵⁸³ On July 1, Three English armies (the 4th, the 6th, and the 10th) of fifty divisions and the French Sixth Army attacked the German Second Army – under the command of infantry general Fritz von Below – in the four-kilometer area from Chaulnes to Comécourt, shelled from June 24; before even the Battle of Verdun ended.⁵⁸⁴

The armies conducted the shelling for many days with the use of a large number of cannons. At first, the shelling was supposed to last for five days, with the focus on barrages in the forefield, while later targeting the fortification (trenches, connecting ditches, and machine gun nests).⁵⁸⁵ On the twenty-kilometer segment of the frontline, also occupied by the Upper Silesian regiments, 1400 cannons, howitzer, and mortars shot 1.5 million bullets in the last days of June shot the German positions.⁵⁸⁶

According to the description in the diaries of the Upper Silesian 21st Field Artillery Regiment, the day of June 24 started with mortar fire targeted at the first line of the German trenches. Its intensity grew. According to the German

579 Ibid., p. 103.

580 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 110.

581 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 128.

582 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 119–120.

583 Keegan, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 407–408.

584 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 100–101.

585 Centek, *Somma 1916*, p. 76.

586 Berghahn, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 69–70.

estimates, twenty-five to thirty mortar bombs of the heaviest caliber fell this day on the frontline segment that about two-hundred-meters wide. Later, the cannons and howitzers joined them, so the shelling sometimes turned into drumfire. Gradually, the fire moved deeper into the positions occupied by the regiment, where the heavy guns could reach. When a heavy bomb fell on an observation position, that was in theory in a safe place, it completely destroyed the position. Some trenches were obliterated already in the first days of the shelling. Even the second-line infantry positions were nearly annihilated. Previously safe connecting ditches in the underground paths were filled with soil. Villages in the support area that hosted staffers ceased to exist. Only walls remained.⁵⁸⁷ Relatively safe until then, sites distant from the front line were now under constant fire of the heavy artillery as bombs fell on abandoned cities with a terrible sound. The soldiers in the reserve could only observe the buildings crumbling after a precise shot and disappear one after another in clouds of dust, accompanied by the smell of burning wooden construction that spread all over the area. The soldiers incessantly heard the drumfire in the first line from afar, which penetrated the support area as the sound of a thunderstorm in the distance. In the evenings, the soldiers could watch a striking performance that initially mesmerized Apollinaire: lightning bullets and missiles in all colors quickly rose in the dark sky while shrapnel and artillery shells fell with loud explosions. In turn, the day saw clouds of impenetrable dust and smoke for many meters above the ground, which marked the first line of the front from far away. Soon, rear area lodgings hosted soldiers from more than one unit. They rested on bare ground, because there was not enough straw for everyone. It was impossible to carry it over, as the transport of ammunition and food to the first line had priority. This time, there shortage of drink water affected even the support area.⁵⁸⁸

The view of the first-line trenches after the shelling was frightening. All around the almost obliterated shelling area the ground was covered with bomb craters situated next to each other as far as one could see. One could smell gunpowder that irritated noses and the gas used during the shelling. The burial of fallen soldiers was impossible since corpses were torn to ribbons, shaken by further artillery shelling.⁵⁸⁹

Upon first-line infantry's request, the army tried to respond with field artillery shelling, but it gave away its positions, primarily prepared for conducting

587 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 95.

588 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 101.

589 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

suppressive fire, and exposed it to immediate heavy artillery shelling of the enemy. The advantage of the English heavy artillery made Germans helpless in the face of English heavy artillery fire from covered remote positions.⁵⁹⁰ Hence, German field artillery lost most of its entrenched positions and – if the guns were not destroyed on the spot – it retreated to new positions in the forefield to conduct suppressive fire. They barely managed to entrench the positions when the English concentrated the fire on the new position, so the panicked units had to hastily retreat and hide in dugouts.⁵⁹¹

Usually low, the losses in artillery regiments at the Somme were very high, as revealed by the statistics of the 21st Field Artillery Regiment. Over the course of one month (from June 24 to July 31) the regiment lost thirty-two cannoneers, with twelve missing and 150 injured.⁵⁹² At the evening of the first day of fights, the fire increased so much – while moving in waves from the first lines through the support area and back – that one only waited for infantry strike. This experience made the Germans perceive each relocation of the shelling wave to deeper positions as an imminent sign that the infantry reached the forefield, so it was necessary to begin suppressive fire. However, it was only a maneuver, repeated again by the British. They incessantly conducted fire, all night long, and all day long, and they succeeded in destroying the barbed-wire barriers and trenches, which only partially resisted this fire; there was not a single whole dugout left in the section covered by the 63rd Infantry Regiment, although at that time the rule of covering them with at least three meters of soil was already in force. When the fire weakened for a while, the infantry immediately proceeded to rebuild the positions and telephone communications. However, the shelling continued on June 26–27. The cloud of smoke rose for about twenty-thirty meters above the German trenches for good. After breaking of telephone communications, regiment commanders had virtually no possibility to command the troops in the first line, they did not even know whether the troops survived under the terrible shelling. Despite previous preparations to ensure constant communication, including the establishment of reserve telephone lines, the cables were constantly broken. The use of lead wires by the Germans was another mistake, as they proved efficient under moderate artillery shelling but failed under constant fire. The wires were not only susceptible to breaking after a precise shot but also crumpled due to the pressure caused by an explosion, even if not hit directly.⁵⁹³

590 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 106.

591 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

592 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

593 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

The messengers sent with orders and dispatches became the only effective means of communication at the Somme in July 1916.⁵⁹⁴

From the viewpoint of the 22nd Infantry Regiment quartered near Maurepas, the artillery shelling looked as follows:

Drumfire gradually destroyed first-line positions. The companies quartered there were in retreat and sought shelter in nearby bomb craters. The losses were great. At night, we managed to partially rebuild the trenches and construct necessary underground shelters with enormous effort. In the morning of July 18, mortar and artillery shelling intensified so much that the commanders of companies felt forced to retreat the troops to a nearby sand quarry and to leave only guard posts on the spot. The troops were extremely exhausted physically and mentally. As hunted animals, the soldiers jumped from one crater to another. The commander of the battalion planned the dispersal of companies under enemy's fire to avoid the tragic effects of artillery shelling, but he had to abandon this idea, since overdue dispersal could weaken the forces before the enemy's strike, according to contemporary doctrine. Only later did commanders agree to retreat the troops to that sand quarry.⁵⁹⁵

Since on June 28, the weather worsened and planes could not operate, the shelling temporarily weakened (due to the lack of possibility for precise reconnaissance of targets). But as soon as the evening came, the sky became clear and artillery fire started again. At the Somme, the advantage of Allied aviation was already distinct. Many aircrafts incessantly circled above German positions. Usually, the German fighters did not chase them away at all.⁵⁹⁶ With information about places with any signs of life, the artillery conducted precise shelling. The aircrafts also often shelled trenches with machine guns and threw hand grenades toward the trenches, sometimes causing great losses among the Germans. At a segment of the 157th Infantry Regiment, thirteen soldiers were killed and thirty-five injured in such an attack.⁵⁹⁷

The army tried to quickly draw conclusions from the experience of the first weeks at the Somme. The German headquarters frantically searched for ways of limiting the advantage of artillery fire of the Allied forces. At first, they thoroughly analyzed the manner in which Allied artillery was used at the Somme. It turned out that the strikes of Allied forces were of the same pattern in June–August 1916. They started with mortar shelling and, later, every morning (rarely in the afternoon) the army moved the shelling toward farther segments of the

594 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 120.

595 *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114.

596 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

597 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

frontline while turning it into drumfire of their entire artillery. As a rule, such a shelling lasted for twenty to fifty minutes, which effected in nearly 3000 bullets falling on the German lines. The Allied aimed at attacking unexpectedly, after an unknown iteration of waves, when the German teams hid in dugouts, after leaving their positions.

As soon as in the autumn of 1916, the German headquarters sent directives to regiments, informing them on the new tactics adjusted to the situation of the advantage of Allied forces's artillery. First, the Germans ordered soldiers to conduct continuous observation. However, it did not guarantee to decrease losses. At the end of October, the headquarters verified this decision and ordered guard posts to retreat in such cases and begin suppressive fire immediately after the start of enemy fire, so that it would hindered the enemy's strike. However, this idea also turned out misbegotten due to the lack of ammunition in the German Army, as the artillery would need copious amounts of ammunition to continue such duels.

When shifting from suppressive to drumfire, one field artillery battery at the Somme used 1000–1500 bullets daily. Moreover, the conduct of effective precise suppressive fire was itself a big problem. Particularly during night shelling, the army received dispatches that its own trenches are under fire, not the no man's land. The artillerymen denied the accusation, convinced that it was enemy shelling from the flank, while the cannoneers fired on the basis of precise training and tables created on the grounds of daily shelling data. Only at the end of the war did the soldiers receive new tables, which indicated that night and morning shelling from covered positions required the gunners to add at least fifty meters to the gun sight with every shot when compared to day shelling, due to the dampness and cold at night and in the morning.⁵⁹⁸

On June 29, when the shelling continued, some Upper Silesian regiments (the 62nd and the 63rd) were relieved from the first line. At that moment, they were decimated and extremely exhausted. The ones to replace them were the Bavarians of the 6th Reserve Infantry Regiment, part of the 117th Infantry Division. The shelling continued until July 1, when it turned into drumfire of the entire line. The Allied infantry attacked only after seven days of such shelling. The German artillery did not react as it was partially destroyed, but also due to the dense fog on that day (also artificial one), which hindered effective suppressive fire. The advantage of the Allied aviation allowed them to quickly destroy the German tethered observing balloons. The description of the fights conducted by the 38th

598 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 117–118.

Reserve Infantry Regiment shows that it was particularly depressing for the soldiers, when they say that the Allied forces buried six out of eight German balloons, while they saw fifteen intact balloons on the Allied side, from which the watchmen could see every movement of the German army and command successful artillery fire.⁵⁹⁹

When the fog rose at 9 am, the commanders of the Upper Silesian division received information that the Allied strike was successful and they occupied part of the positions in the first line.⁶⁰⁰ The British disregarded the losses: 30,000 soldiers died or were injured during the first half an hour of the attack out of 60,000 soldiers who were in the first line; until July 29, as many as 90,000 British soldiers died.⁶⁰¹ John Keegan offers an even higher number of British losses on the first day: 20,000 British soldiers dead and 40,000 injured out of the 100,000 who were in the forefield.⁶⁰²

On July 1, the 157th Infantry Regiment tried to prepare for the defense at all cost, before the English infantry would begin its assault. Already organized by individual regiments, sapper commandos cleaned the trenches and rebuilt the barriers. When the soldiers noticed the British infantrymen, they immediately fired red lightning bullets, which signaled the field artillery to conduct suppressive fire in the forefield, but it was impossible in many segments of the frontline, due to the fog and damages of artillery positions. Requesting shelling in such a badly recognized situation, when guns in new positions were not ready, turned out to be double-edged sword. Despite green lightning bullets signaling that own positions are under fire, German heavy artillery caused a fair amount of damage.⁶⁰³ The English pushed forward in tight waves and they managed to reach the trench line in many places, where they began mellee combat after throwing grenades at the trenches. Moreover, both sides used flamethrowers in the Battle of the Somme.⁶⁰⁴ Despite their effectiveness, neither side could use them very often as soldiers with containers were easily hit and, moreover, they broke down when clogged in field conditions.⁶⁰⁵

The English tanks also appeared and this fact was initially a big surprise for the Germans, since they thought that their usage is impossible in a forefield

599 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 116.

600 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 83–86.

601 Berghahn, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 69–70.

602 Keegan, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 412.

603 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 115.

604 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

605 *Ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

deeply cratered by artillery bombardment. However, the tanks very often rode in front of the English infantry. The Germans could relatively easily combat them with machine guns and hand grenades, unless the tanks got stuck on their own in the field. At the time, the soldiers did not experience the consequences of no properly organized anti-tank defense. But the fact that the Germans disregarded the new weapon after the experience in Flanders soon became a disastrous negligence. The tanks came back in 1918 on the Western Front, where their effectiveness was decisive in the breaking of German positions in summer.⁶⁰⁶ The Germans managed to stop the English attack at the Somme before the segment defended by a battalion from the 157th Infantry Regiment. After the retreat of the Allies before the trenches, there were forty Englishmen lying in the forefield who were reported killed. During the fight, two Upper Silesians even managed to capture an English officer with maps and plans, so they were later even singled out in the regimental order by name: Skora and Gojek.⁶⁰⁷

All the Upper Silesian regiments still in the first line were extremely exhausted and decimated. After the British entered the trenches of the 11th Reserve Infantry Regiment, only a few men survived out of the 175 soldiers assigned to the hundred-meter-long segment, two out of five machine guns were left, and the Germans had to destroy even them that remained during the retreat. All the soldiers from the machine gun company were either killed or severely injured. There were no hand grenades or firearms ammunition left. For many days, the soldiers only ate preserves and bread sometimes brought from the rear. The lack of water was particularly troublesome as the thirst was terrible due to the heat, dust, and exhaustion. Direct communication with the artillery was defective. The enemy's infantry did not encounter the suppressive fire in the forefield since communication via light signals was ineffective. Apart from that, there grew a sense of enemy advantage in technology. The fate of the injured was horrible. As far as the battalion of the 11th Regiment is concerned, thirty injured soldiers lied next to the sanitary block for forty hours, as it was impossible to transport them to the field hospital due to ongoing fire and the lack of staff.⁶⁰⁸

The army decided to retreat from many segments, not only from the first but also the second line. The soldiers usually retreated after dramatic mellee combat, described by a non-commissioned officer of the 157th Infantry Regiment in the following way:

606 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 108.

607 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 104.

608 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

The English managed to reach us in the afternoon. From that moment, we fought at two fronts. We constantly threw hand grenades and shot from rifles so that the barrels heated. However, our resistance gradually weakened due to the enemy's advantage. Loudly screaming that we have to endure, the reserve lieutenant rushed us, and he threw grenades at the English troops, one after another. However, our losses were huge and our companions, fell into the trench usually after shots in the head. The line of defenders dwindled. Some of our companions ran amok, they held entrenching tools and ran toward the enemy, which is when they were killed with bayonets and gunstocks. There were growing piles of dead companions in front and behind of us. . . . There were twenty of us when we got cut off at the short segment of about fifty meters by constant English strikes. We were surrounded by them far and wide. We still maintained our position and prevented overwhelming us, but it could not last for long. We were almost out of ammunition and had only a few grenades. Our only machine gun was long useless. The situation became calmer at the evening. The English called us in German to surrender. We responded with grenades. It was only then, when the fight became more quiet, and we realized how serious our situation is. We could not think about any rescue, after all, where were we supposed to find it? Therefore, we gave up on our "plan to attack London." We destroyed our gunlocks and waited. We were worried. Lieutenant Neugebauer constantly encouraged us to endure. Suddenly, the sentinel on the right flank of the segment of our trenches informed us that a German soldier approaches. It was a batman from the 11th Reserve Infantry Regiment who got lost. He went through a nearby shallow drainage ditch to get to us. We wanted to use the ditch to retreat to the rear area. . . . We decided to retreat from the position while crawling in five-meter spaces between us. Initially, everything went good. However, the soldiers quickly started to get nervous and began to run crouching instead of crawling. It was then when the English discovered us and directed machine gun fire at us. We all started to run. Some of our companions died on site, some were injured. However, we ran to save our lives. Completely exhausted, we entered the position of the 11th Reserve Infantry Regiment. Only eleven of us survived.⁶⁰⁹

After the first day of fights and the loss of some positions, the commander of the German Second Army in Saint-Quentin ordered a counterattack and wanted to use the regiments that belong to the Reserve VI Corps under the command of Infantry General von Goßlar.⁶¹⁰ The counterattack started with the strike of the 12th Reserve Infantry Division. The 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment attacked the main segment, near what Germans called the Bavarian Forest, in the company of the 23rd Reserve Infantry Regiment.⁶¹¹

609 Ibid., pp. 117, 121.

610 Centek, *Somma 1916*, pp. 111–112.

611 Ibid., p. 114.

Admittedly, first counterattacks before the end of July were unsuccessful, as expected, but, with great losses, the Germans managed to regain part of the lost positions. In the open air of the forefield, these counterattacks looked like suicide missions. The soldiers perceived the perspective of leaving safe trenches under artillery and machine gun fire to be a death sentence. However, the Germans gradually introduced at the Somme the tactics of storm troops, which no longer attacked in waves and was more effective.

After the experience during the first phase of the Battle of Verdun, the Germans were very effective in their counterattacks. A participant of a night assault of an individual company of the 63rd Infantry Regiment at the Somme in July 1916, describes it as follows:

Before departure, we leave our satchels, take only supplies, ammunition, weapons, and entrenching tool [*Sturmgepäck*]. We reach first-line positions without losses. The attack is to start at 1.30 am. We jump out of the trenches to get to the first appointed position one hundred meters away. "Forward – jump forward!" We all jump forward, only bent figures can be seen. First, then a second flare! "Down!" We fall silent. There is ground cratered with bullets, explosions, shifting ground, machine guns fire in front of us. – The bullets fly close to us, they crack and hiss. Forward! A jump – and down to the ground! Only a few steps left, there are remains of a newly dug trench. Some figures lie there – are they dead? Are they alive? Machine gun bullets fly above our heads. Oh, how they rumble – they saw and heard us! Oh no! The flares soar and fall, the front gets nervous. It is bad, we will not succeed this way. The assault has to be unexpected. We all have hand grenades. It is 1.30 am! We unscrew the fuzes, the hands hold the shaft. The enemy is somewhere nearby, in the middle of the hill, we can see it, when he fires the flares. We remind ourselves of the storm's direction. Our grenades hiss this time. We form a tight group and lay down, one on another, the trench is really shallow, people group together in every crater. Our heads are tightly jammed. Each *Stahlhelm* lies almost on our shoulders [the Upper Silesian regiments received new steel helmets just on the eve of the Battle of the Somme; despite initial reluctance of the soldiers to wear them, due to their weight and discomfort, already the first experiences showed that "*Stahlhelmen* work wonders. We feel a bit more secure, we even start to like them"].⁶¹² I look at the watch, a flare soars, it is 1.30 am! At the same moment, the fire of the German artillery moves toward the enemy. The flare fades away – we jump forward! At the same time, our hand grenades fly in a curved line toward the enemy. The explosions and screams begin, some bayonets shine – another flare. "Jump forward! Forward." We hear a horrifying, literally savage human exclamation: "Hooray!" Screams and wheezes; enemy grenades follow immediately after. They rip soldiers and throw them on the ground. The madness begins! We approached the enemy and now comes the scariest moment: fleeing figures immediately in front of us, but huge fireballs on our right and left at the same time; we

612 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 136.

see lines of bullets above our heads; we hear the clanking of an English machine gun. Our companions fall nearby in a violent flash of numerous flares. Roars, cries, last hand grenades fall on the machine gun. A soldier on my right takes out a grenade, switches off the safety, and wants to throw it when we is hit as if with a whip – a scream – and he falls on us, his arm shot through. The man tightly hold hand grenade in his hand, but he throws it away, I bend over him; if the hand grenade exploded, it would tear us to pieces! The attack moved us only for twenty meters. Now we lie in the open field in bullet craters while, above our heads, machine guns cut everything down likr scythes. The enemy's artillery throws shrapnel at us. Here, in the front, it will not reach us, we lie within a stone's throw from enemy positions. The arm of the infantryman is already bandaged. August used his belt. The soldier is conscious, he wants to go to the rear, but it is impossible. Everyone is shelled as soon as one pokes out even a centimeter of one's head. "Use entrenching tools!" We frantically dig, sweating and asking ourselves, "Will the death come tonight – or tomorrow in the morning? Will they kill us here?" The entrenching tools are our only rescue. We soon form a shallow chute, lie next to each other, a bit deeper. The back already disappeared from sight but the legs, damn, they can still see them. So the soldier below digs under the legs of the soldier above. Everybody digs deeper and deeper. The bullets continue to fly above our heads, the mortar bombs howl, and the shrapnel that hit the ground spray all around. They still cannot shoot us with artillery fire, but they can unexpectedly attack us with bayonets. There is but a few of us in the front. Most of us died, there are injured – we hear it – we must listen to it – it is horrible. In the morning, we are so deep entrenched that we can crawl to each other, we even make turnouts, so we move more freely. I crawl while crushing others, my direction is the road. The view is the same everywhere grey soldiers buried in the ground or, in fact, groaning bloodstained people. I ordered the capable injured to immediately crawl toward the trenches, those unable to do so must be accompanied by their companions. We do not have to say anything, we cannot do any other thing. In the morning, there will be no rescue for them. People know it, they gather and drag eighteen companions through a shallow trench, they lift one after another low above the ground – it is a crazy task – only the fear of the approaching day allows us to fulfil this heavy task. The trenches next to the road are cratered. Knocked trees block them but, at the same time, they give us some protection against infantry fire. ... We have to get in touch with the battalion. Eventually, we hear German voices by the road. We jump over a road, and we fall into the trench. We did it, it is a left wing of another company that kept its initial position while we travelled a long distance forward. The battalion was destroyed during the attack. I find its commander. We both agree. We have to immediately dig a chute through the road and construct a trench in the front, to reach our people. Right after that, the entrenching tools and spades hit the surface of ruptured gravel road – stones fly – it is very exhausting, but we have only an hour left. A bullet crater in the road makes it easier for us. We have dug a ditch in the road. Now, back again to the company. ... Meanwhile, they continued their work, the trench is already

one-meter deep – it helps a lot. Some soldiers may already crouch, the building of a new trench line started.⁶¹³

Bogdan Hulewicz, similarly described his experience as a young platoon commander at the Somme. He perceived his appointment for the commander of the group meant to attack in the first line as a death sentence, as he assessed many years after the war. But even without ideological incentive – Hulewicz joined the German Army as a volunteer, since he wanted to prepare himself for the fight for the Polish independence – the trained military drill turned out to be stronger than self-preservation. This automatism resulting from training gave German units a huge advantage in the field:

Two youngest officers will conduct the first assault wave. I am one of those “youngest.” I admit that I was flustered. I was to jump out of a deep hidden position, jump over the battlement, and push directly forward under enemy fire until they stab you with a bayonet. Besides, seventy people await your orders, and you are responsible for them. You cannot be a coward, stick to the niche in the ground and pretend to be injured. They will notice everything. It is a matter of honor and soldierly ambition. I give a sign with a whistle when the flare is up. I push forward with a Mauser in my hand; I will shoot only when they attack me. I am almost there, a jump – and I am in a deep ditch of the French. No one is here. I lean on the wall of the ditch and pant heavily, my Mauser is ready to shoot. After a while, two privates from my platoon jump into the ditch. At that moment, a black infantryman leans out of the corner with bayonet and charges at us. A private from my platoon jumps into the ditch right behind him, and bangs his back over the neck. He collapsed and did not budge. A black Senegalese with earrings; two rows of white teeth shine in his gaping bloodstained mouth. There commences fierce combat nearby, no fencing, gunstock punches, or single shots from one side to the other. The entire French team was killed off. It is impossible retreat now. The assault lasted for several minutes. Our losses were not significant, literally ten killed soldiers from the platoon. But we annihilated the entire French team.⁶¹⁴

In August, the Battle of the Somme switched from the offensive of the Allied forces to numerous attacks and counterattacks on both sides. For a regular soldier, it meant a repetition of the trauma of Verdun. Mutual attacks on positions were pointless. No one understood the aim of this hecatomb that sometimes had a tragicomic character:

The fight continued. The English attacked us many times today. If they crowded us out of our positions, we would return on the very next morning. We most often fought with hand grenades and flamethrowers. No one knew where exactly were the trenchlines of

613 Ibid., pp. 138–140.

614 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, pp. 60–61.

each side. Once, the English with captives from the 9th Rifle Regiment jumped into our trench with friendly smiles on their faces and were bewildered to see Germans in front of them. At the segment of my platoon two Australians brought four captives and had to admit with regret that they made a mistake. However, they quickly accommodated to the new situation. They threw their rifles away and took out packs of cigarettes, which is why we quickly took a liking to them.⁶¹⁵

However, both sides were usually very suspicious of each other. For the first time in the war, the Allied forces began the propaganda war at the Somme that later lasted nonstop until 1918. The advantage of their aviation really facilitated the task. They released paper balloons above German positions with excerpts from letters of German captives that stayed in England, in which they praised their conditions.⁶¹⁶ Both sides used speakers that – during moments of silence – called for switching sides.

Huge losses that the Allied forces suffered during the offensive, along with the lack of distinct expected successes, weakened the warfare at the Somme in autumn 1916. Undoubtedly, the decision of German commanders contributed to it. The Upper Silesians from the 22nd Infantry Regiment noticed the fact, as they returned to this front in September and stayed there until November. Admittedly, artillery fire was still heavy but its successive waves were separated by long periods of silence. The Germans reinforced their own artillery at the segment, and no longer lacked the ammunition, which allowed them to conduct artillery duels and decreased the amount of precise shellings at their positions. The penetration of position by Allied aircrafts was also limited due to the involvement of a higher number of German fighters and the reinforcement of independently organized anti-aircraft defenses. The latter consisted of especially adjusted guns and machine guns to combat enemy planes. The positions were considerably extended, while concrete shelters became numerous and stable, particularly in the second and third lines.⁶¹⁷

The battle of the Somme became a real challenge for the medical services, due to the great amount of losses. It was the first time, when they encountered the mass phenomenon of shell shock, later described repeatedly, that mainly resulted from long-term exposition to artillery shelling. On July 5, after multiple hours of bombing, numerous dugouts of the 38th Regiment were covered with soil, while entire segments of the trenchlines were obliterated; most people

615 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 127.

616 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 121.

617 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 126–127.

quartered there already experienced severe attacks of shell shock. Many of them had to retreat from the frontline.⁶¹⁸ Drinking became increasingly popular. Until then, vodka and wine distributed among the German soldiers did not cause much trouble with the drill. Admittedly, the German soldiers claimed that they received much less amount of alcohol than the French and the English did, but they also admitted that the alcohol cheered them up, “To the extent that we could survive the worst in our lives.”⁶¹⁹ But when the soldiers started to use the alcohol as a mean to switch off from the overwhelming nightmare of the war – at least for a while – it became a problem for the commanders. The cannoneers of the 21st Field Artillery Regiment refused to follow an order of a non-commissioned officer to supply the ammunition to the appointed position. As it turned out, they were drunk. When they sobered up, they were indicted by the provost court and severely punished; it was not registered in the sources whether they were indicted for the refusal of following the order – which qualified as an act subject to capital punishment – or if they only received a severe prison sentence for insubordination.⁶²⁰

Naturally, one of the biggest problems were thousands of injured. A description of activity of the physician of the Second Battalion of the 22nd Regiment is shocking, as it reveals the organized activities of the medical services, on the one hand, but on the other hand, their helplessness with the insufficient number of means essential to prevent human losses:

The corpsmen carried the severely injured to safe places near fighting position [first-aid posts] where, after having their wounds dressed, they waited in a relatively well-covered area. The tiny room quickly filled with injured and corpses. Over time, if the staff noticed that someone died, they took him outside to make room for other injured. . . . Medical teams had a difficult task of carrying the injured from these places to the posts where carriages parked. From there, they transported the injured to the field hospital. A pile of corpses and amputated limbs heaped in front of the barracks was a terrifying view. The position looked a bit like a cemetery. Here, the Silesians lied, there the dead French. Over time, the corpses’ stench became unbearable.⁶²¹

Even fragmentary data shows the enormity of losses suffered in the first line. In the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment, between July 1 and July 31, five officers and 153 soldiers were killed, sixteen officers and 931 soldiers were missing, while twenty officers and 778 soldiers were injured. Overall losses of the regiment

618 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 126

619 Ibid., p. 156

620 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 119.

621 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 119.

during just one month of their service in the first line at the Somme amounted to forty-one officers and 1862 soldiers, which amounts to almost two-thirds of its initial composition.⁶²² In the 157th Infantry Regiment, during only eight days of fights (July 19–27), six officers and 136 soldiers were reported dead, 284 missing, and 525 injured. It meant the elimination of fifteen officers and 936 soldiers from the fights; one-third of its initial composition.⁶²³ The 63rd Infantry Regiment, which fought at the Somme from the beginning of July until August 9, lost four officers and 92 soldiers, 176 soldiers were missing, while 593 were injured.⁶²⁴ Overall, it meant the annihilation of one-third of its initial composition. The losses of the Upper Silesian 22nd Infantry Regiment, which fought in the first line until July 25, amounted to 233 killed (including seven officers), 996 missing, and 737 injured soldiers. In the Upper Silesian 1st Infantry Regiment – during a period shorter than one month of fights at the Somme – each company on average quartered eight days at the first-line position, which resulted in the incapacitation of almost 60 percent of its initial composition.⁶²⁵ In total, the Upper Silesian 12th Infantry Division lost at the Somme 164 officers and 8144 soldiers, while the 12th Reserve Infantry Division – 147 officers and 7261 soldiers; which meant the annihilation of approximately two entire regiments.⁶²⁶

On the basis of his own observations, Bogdan Hulewicz assessed that even up to 4500 soldiers were killed during the drumfire in the defense area that was up to one-kilometer long, when two to three artillery shells fell on one square meter. Despite that, the English army did not manage to break the defense lines or enter reserve positions and field artillery quarters. The only success of the English was that they temporarily curved the frontline to the maximal depth of 300 meters.⁶²⁷

Respite during the Battle of Somme was only possible in the depths of the support area, usually near Lille. This respite was a routine for all regiments: they spent it in lodgings in neighboring villages or in “barracks towns” in the support area, where there was everything the soldiers needed. Apart from barracks with lodgings for soldiers, the biggest barack towns had stationary kitchens, their own small power stations, field hospitals, lumbermills, carpenters, locksmiths, smiths, baths, and delousing stations. Such a “town,” La Forgette, had also a foundry, a repair shop, a special subunit to work on rivers and canals which had

622 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 140.

623 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 123.

624 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 146.

625 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 117.

626 Centek, *Somma 1916*, pp. 277–278.

627 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, p. 61.

a steamboat with a crane and a narrow-gauge train. Around 3000 soldiers were permanently detached to serve this town.⁶²⁸

The stay of the regiment retracted from the first line was usually seven- or ten-day long, which always looked the same. At first, the soldiers spent two to three days on personal hygiene, including delousing, cleaning of weapon, and washing of uniforms. At the same time, the army tried to provide them with the illusion of regular life so that they would switch off from the traumatic war reality at least for a moment. Military orchestra gave concerts every day for a couple of hours. On Sunday, the soldiers had the chance to participate in service, both Catholic and evangelical. The soldiers often went to neighboring Lille, where they visited the city, went to the theatre or the local restaurant, if only they could afford it. The poorer soldiers used relatively cheap “military houses.”⁶²⁹ After four days, the training started again, which aimed at preparing the troops for their return to the frontline. Stay in the support area was also used to spread propaganda. It was also a time when the ceremonies of decoration with iron crosses occurred, they were usually accompanied by speeches of commanders. In 1916, the Upper Silesian regiments, which underwent a baptism of fire in the Battle of Rossignol, celebrated their regimental holidays (*Rossignolfest*) for the first time. On that day, canteens distributed beer and cigarettes among the companies of these regiments, while supply officers tried to make sure that the kitchen would prepare special holiday lunches. In 1916, each company at the Somme received a pig, which they slaughtered in a traditional manner.⁶³⁰

Lorette

While Verdun and the Somme are commonly known as the battlefields of the First World War, equally bloody fights at Arras are less known in Poland, although they should be primarily connected with traces of Polish soldiers on the Western Front. The fights at Arras precisely occurred at Lorette Hill, as the Germans called it, or, in fact, Notre-Dame de Lorette Hill, where the Chapel of Virgin Mary was located.

When I began my research in the history of the Upper Silesian regiments during the war, I knew very little about the legend of Lorette and the terrible battles that happened there and at the nearby Vimy Ridge. I associated the name itself only with Loreto in Italy, the famous sanctuary with the so-called *Santa*

628 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie*, p. 142.

629 Ibid.

630 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 132.

Casa, which was purportedly built with the stones that came from the house of Virgin Mary in Nazareth. Meanwhile, I discovered that the Upper Silesians most often evoked this place as the symbol of fights in the West in collective postwar memory.

From the Polish viewpoint, the tragedy of the fights for the Chapel of Virgin Mary – where the French so fiercely defended themselves – consisted in the fact that most of them also believed deeply in Her care, which was a result of their upbringing. The pilgrimages to Częstochowa were the spiritual heritage of Polish Catholicism. The Chapel in France itself was built in the eighteenth century, when Florent Guilbert, an inhabitant of Ablain-Saint-Nazaire, founded it as an expression of his gratitude for his cure in Loreto, Italy, at the local sanctuary. Now, there is a monument dedicated to this battle. The French Lorette developed after its destruction during the French Revolution. In the second half of the nineteenth century, it also became a well-known place of worship and pilgrimage at the Seine River, thanks to the commitment of the local priest, Pingrenon, who built there a small church.⁶³¹

When I traveled to Ablain-Saint-Nazaire, I already knew from previous reading that this French town is associated with the fights of the Poles in the Kaiser's army. I expected to find little more than graves with Polish names in the military cemetery of Notre-Dame de Lorette. I had no idea that there are also places that refer to the battles fought by other Poles in the First World War. For Polish war history, Lorette turns out to be a hill comparable to Monte Cassino in the Second World War. However, it does not stand out in any particular way. It would be difficult to even notice it, if not for the signposts. From the entrance side, it looks like a typical hill, admittedly densely forested, but with numerous open fields with farmlands. The cemetery is placed on top of the hill, built after 1918. A huge ossuary – bigger than the one known from Fort Douaumont near Verdun – strikes the viewer with bones of over 20,000 fallen soldiers of the French army, but the large cemetery with further 20,000 Frenchmen are buried only emphasises the experience. A new monumental Neo-Byzantine chapel stands nearby. The small prewar church was completely destroyed. It was located about 200 meters from the present chapel and only a monument marks its previous existence.⁶³²

I was shocked right after I entered the church. The white and red flags were the things I saw inside. My association was irrational. I thought that somebody

631 <http://ablain-st-nazaire.pagesperso-orange.fr> (12.01.2013).

632 Y. Buffetaut, *Notre-Dame de Lorette*, Vol. 1, Louviers 2003, p. 37.

finally noticed that Poles fought in the Kaiser's army, that part of this church-monument commemorates the victims from the Upper Silesian regiments. I was wrong. The banners told a completely different story.

The banners told the story of the Bayonne Legion soldiers, who stayed here as members of a small Polish unit established as an initiative of the Committee of Polish Volunteers for Service in the French Army (*Comité des Volontaires Polonaise pour la Service dans l'Armée Française*), founded by Waclaw Gąsiorowski, a writer and a publicist. The unit numbered one company that belonged to the 1st Regiment of the French Foreign Legion. The famous Polish artist Xawery Dunikowski was one of the Bayonne Legion soldiers. Other companies of this regiment of the French Foreign Legion consisted of Czechs, Belgians, and Italians. The commander of the Polish 2nd Company was lieutenant Maksymilian Duomic, later replaced by captain Lobus, as the entire officer corps consisted of the French. Later, a second company was established in Rueilly near Paris. On October 22, 1914, the Bayonne Legion first headed to the frontline near Reims – to join the 11th Moroccan Division – and then to Arras, in early spring of 1915.⁶³³ For some time, they fought with the Upper Silesians, who were in the German trenches at the foot of the hill. The association with Monte Cassino seems quite obvious – considering the poppies that grow on both hills – but the number of fighters in both battles is incomparable.

In this book, the most important is the task that the Polish company of 200 people received after the Bayonne Legion had gone to Champagne. As Piotr Cichoracki writes,

In December 1914, the French command received information that in one segment of the front, the Poles defend the German side. The French command decided to try to have them join their side. The Bayonne Legion was to convince their compatriots to desert. The action was to occur on the segment controlled by the French 51st Infantry Regiment. On the night of December 7 and 8, 1914, half of the section – about thirty people – moved to the position opposite to the positions occupied by the Poles in German uniforms. Both sides entered into contact with each other. The Bayonne Legion took their banner out of the French trenches as a sign of credibility. However, it was soon shelled from the German positions.⁶³⁴

633 H. Bułhak, P. Stawecki, *Początki armii polskiej na ziemi francuskiej w latach pierwszej wojny światowej*, in: *Wojsko Polskie 1914–1922*, Vol. 1, ed. B. Nowak, Koszalin 1986, pp. 166–167.

634 Information about the Bayonne Legion Soldiers, but also the quoted excerpt of the text, come from the article written by Piotr Cichoracki, *Bajonczycy. Polscy ochotnicy w armii francuskiej w latach 1914–1915*, *Biuletyn IPN*, November–December 2008, No. 11–12, pp. 24–30.

The notes documenting the actions of the 157th Infantry Regiment that quartered in the frontline in Champagne, near Reims, include information about the action conducted by the French, but with a different date. According to these records, the action happened not in December, but at the end of November 1914. It is possible that it was the same operation, especially when taken into account that we have confirmation that there unexpectedly appeared a white and red banner in the French trenches:

Over time, the enemy tried to convince our soldiers to join their side or at least enter into contact with them. As much as these attempts were doomed to failure, they still introduced some entertainment in the everyday of trench warfare. On November 24, the French dropped a written proclamation in which they called for joining their side without weapons. They wrote that we would lead a carefree life and, after the war, we would return satisfied to our homeland. On November 27, to our great surprise, a French parliamentarian brought a letter from some Colonel Légrand to the commander of our segment, in which he asked for a two-hour-long ceasefire to gather and bury the bodies that lied in front of the positions. In order to avoid a pointless rapprochement between the soldiers of both sides, the commander rejected this wish after negotiations. According to the description of the German regiment chronicler, white flags with a red eagle appeared in the French trenches the next day and they called us in German: “Do not be so stupid and fight for the Polish nation!”⁶³⁵

The Bayonne Legion moved to Arras in April where the company was annihilated on May 9, during an attack on the German positions near Vimy. All the officers died while the rest of the unit – various sources say that it ranged from thirty to fifty soldiers – formed a collective company.⁶³⁶ The killed soldiers lie in a mass grave near Ablain-Saint-Nazaire, next to an identical monument and cemetery of Czechoslovak volunteers. However, no one noticed so far that there is a mass grave of other Poles fighting at Lorette nearby. In May 1915, when the Bayonne Legion was decimated, the Poles in Kaiser’s army fought in the Upper Silesian regiments on the other side, and Lorette became a symbol of fights in the West for them.

When the Upper Silesian regiments arrived in the area in the spring of 1915, after the end of the so-called First Battle of Arras in the autumn of 1914, the Bavarian VI Corps stationed around the hill as part of the Sixth German Army under the command of Bavarian Crown Prince Rupprecht; after the fights at Arras, he received the honorary title of “the victor at Arras and La Bassé.” On the opposite side, there was the Tenth French Army, since April 1915 under the

635 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 36.

636 Bułhak, Stawecki, *Początki armii polskiej*, pp. 166–167.

command of General Victor d'Urbal. At that time, the Upper Silesian soldiers who approached Lorette saw it in a completely different state than it looks today. First of all, the Bavarian troops who were the first to arrive there in October 1914, had already built a solid trenchline around the chapel, as part of the preparations for the assault. Day and night, the German artillery bombarded the hill and the chapel that was completely destroyed. It was the centre of French defence during a year-long battle; from October 1914 to October 1915. Upon the arrival of the Upper Silesian soldiers, the German positions were no more than a hundred metres from the top of the hill.⁶³⁷

The surroundings of Lorette seemed familiar to the Upper Silesians. The nearby town of Lens was full of industrial workshops. There was a number of headframes over mineshafts that were so familiar to them. A soldier of the 22nd Infantry Regiment writes with surprise: "Almost like in Upper Silesia. The landscape reminded us of mines and headframes over shafts, heaps, and coal depots. But again, it is the same here. It is not work, but a combat position with death lurking over a heap."⁶³⁸ Everywhere, they encountered houses of dark red brick, which they knew from their hometowns of Świętochłowice, Królewska Huta, or Zabrze. The surrounding area was urbanized but simultaneously severely damaged by the fights of 1914. The whole area was still under constant fire of the French artillery. Many towns and villages with their factories and buildings were already in ruins.⁶³⁹

The hill itself looks different today than it did a hundred years ago, and it is not a question of the monument on its top. At that time, it was steeper and more forested. According to a soldier from the 157th Infantry Regiment: "The hill situated inside the French zone is [almost] vertical from the German side, ends with a narrow ridge with the Notre-Dame de Lorette Chapel in the distance. Here, the French and German positions are very close to each other. To the west of Douai, in the German area, the hill of Vimy towered over the Douai surroundings."⁶⁴⁰

The Upper Silesians were deeply convinced that the sanctuary was of great importance to the French. Rumor has spread about a legend related to the chapel and its miraculous image, which even had the power to reverse the course of the war. People believed that whoever would conquer this place would be the winner in the war. It encouraged the French to frantically fight at the ruins of

637 Buffetaut, *Notre-Dame de Lorette*, p. 37.

638 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 134–135.

639 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 51.

640 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

the chapel.⁶⁴¹ Here, there are striking similarities to the role played by Jasna Góra Monastery in the heroic myth of Polish renewal at the same time (following its role in the “Swedish Deluge”).

The peculiarity of the position at Lorette was the proximity of enemy trenches and, thereby, a small forefield. A distance of one hundred meters is a minimum for the conditions of trench warfare, which allowed very precise firearms shots, and even well-prepared trenches could give protection against it, since the steep slope provided great visibility to the higher-located French shooters. Similarly to Verdun, equally clay-filled ground turned out to be the bane of soldiers, they admittedly could dig it deeper into the ground but – after minimal rain-fall – it quickly filled up with mud that flew down the slope along with water streams. Therefore, there were bumps made out of dry or squishy soil all around, depending on the weather, but also bomb craters filled with stinking water.⁶⁴²

In the memories of the officer of the 63rd Infantry Regiment, the trenches at Lorette were unsuitable for fights. These are his first impressions after arrival at his post near Souchez:

The trench was virtually impassable, because it was shallow and flattened. . . . Here, there supposed to be the left wing of my segment that stretched down toward a transport road. In fact, it was not a trench but only a line of single holes intended for soldiers at guard posts. I myself was also in such a deep hole on the left wing of a steep slope. I could virtually only stand there. I was just about to form a unit and only searched for a place to put a gun, flares, and ammunition, when suddenly something rustled close by and a bullet of light field gun exploded just a few meters away from my hole. *Donnerwetter!* [Bloody hell!] Maybe it is just a coincidence?! When I was still thinking about it, I heard something like a multiple, deafening rumble. Afterward, all I saw was a lightning that threw me down on the ground. Dust and stones hit me in the face and something started to hiss at the same time. A fire column appeared in front of me! It was already aware what happened. A disaster. A few bombs exploded right next to me and their hot fragments hit the flares, which caused the explosion. So my hole now burned with green, red, and white lights. You could see it from afar. I wanted to get out of my burning shelter. I tried to do it a few times but in vain. The walls were too steep, and my greatcoat – smoking after the explosion – made my movements even more difficult! Desperate, I tried to put my smoldering coat out first, and I started to stick to the walls of my hole with all my might on the side opposite to the explosion. At the same time, I tried to throw out the exploding flares./This action wore devastated beautiful gloves and burned my fingers. Besides, I had burned my greatcoat and ammunition, not to mention the fact that I lost my combat ration when my batman fell [before I reached

641 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

642 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 84.

the trench]. In every sense of the word, I was completely “burned.” . . . Determined and motivated, almost as if I wanted to achieve a result at the olympics, I finally “broke free.” . . . I had to quickly find a new shelter nearby. I noticed one and jumped into a large crater that was about one-square-meter big, when another four small grenades fell and crushed the ground again. How good it was to run so fast and to look around so quickly! If I were a second late, I would be dead. It turned out that this tiny shelter was already full or, in other words, overcrowded. Six soldiers literally crouched on top of each other. But it was not important, I was glad that at least for a few moments, I was able to stay in a safe place.⁶⁴³

The constant and easy shelling of the French artillery affected the terrible condition of the trenches and the lack of proper protection of German soldiers, as the French artillery was located in a convenient place on the hill and behind it, on positions poorly recognized by the Germans. The trenches and dugouts on the slopes of the hill did not have protection from light artillery shelling. It could shell straight ahead over here and the French did not have to use howitzers and mortars to wreak havoc at German positions.⁶⁴⁴

At the whole segment occupied by the 157th Infantry Regiment, there were visible traces of fights that lasted for many weeks. The trenches had breaches, in some places the water was not only inside trenches but also in dugouts, even up to one meter high. One could not sit or lie down to rest. Most segments had no communication means with other companies, as the creation of connecting ditches carried the risk of exposure to fire not only from the front but also from both wings. There was a dramatic view in the forefield: “On the remnants of barbed-wire barrages, there were piles of corpses: of Germans, but also of white and colored Frenchmen intertwined with each other. The stench of decaying bodies was unbearable. Any backward or sideways movement was impossible during the day. Almost all telephone connections were broken, so coordinated command was out of question.”⁶⁴⁵

The transport of supplies to these posts from the support area bordered on miracles. Although the army delivered ammunition and building materials to the depths of the support area, behind the third line, on a special narrow-gauge railway or by road transportation by sideroads, the last mile required soldiers to move everything to the unfortunate slope under enemy fire; that is, both building materials and daily stock of ammunition, not to mention food cooked in field kitchens in the rear. The permanent location of the kitchen allowed the French

643 Ibid., p. 86–87.

644 Ibid.

645 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 55.

to quickly determine the approximate transport route of the food, where they directed fire day and night, when the meals was delivered to subdivisions, which additionally delayed – sometimes even made impossible – the delivery of food to the first line.⁶⁴⁶ The only moderate consolation was that the French trenches had similar problems with food supply during heavy fights. When the soldiers of the 157th Regiment took a black Moroccan man in captivity at Lorette, after a routine interrogation, he threw himself onto a bowl with cold potato that stood next to him. He complained that the French sent them to the front line and forced them to attack the Germans by setting up machine guns behind them.⁶⁴⁷ The graves of fallen Moroccans remain at the Notre-Dame de Lorette cemetery; there are 576 graves with Arabic inscriptions positioned toward Mecca.⁶⁴⁸

The constant harassing shelling at Lorette in 1915 was unbearable and, according to the account of a soldier of the 63rd Infantry Regiment, only rats were able to withstand it alongside humans:

Concentrated shelling rages over the 3rd Battalion; it is directed from enemy tethered balloons and airplanes. Shells fall on assembly points, access roads, and artillery positions. Also reserve lodgings, crossings, and railroads are under fire; should enemy artillery lack the reach, the bombers will hit the mark. In the first hours of the night, advanced front companies receive a written message from the regiment's command that – according to the testimony of one of the fugitives – the French can attack at 5.00 am. . . . In dugouts and ground dens, we now sit next to each other for the third day and night, in dirty wet muddy uniforms, without any warm food, and suffer from thirst. Nearly stunned by the drumfire! Instead of the expected enemy attack that would raise our hopes for the end of the shelling, the artillery and mortar fire intensifies. At 5.00 am in the morning, it reached an unprecedented level of wild: the ground constantly trembles and stirs. Segments A, B, and C were completely annihilated. The few shields we had were destroyed. Many people, some with rifles, hand grenades, and ammunition boxes, were buried in the ground in their positions. The connecting ditches and the rocky road to the staff basement lost their earth-wooden cover. Around 1.00 pm, everything fell silent, but only in the first-line trenches. Now, the ground in the forefield

646 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 56.

647 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 62.

648 In 2007–2008, these graves became the object of three shameful profanations as anti-Islamic inscriptions appeared on them. The young offenders were apprehended, while local communities unanimously protested against these incidents. “Nouvelle profanation de tombes musulmanes du cimetière militaire Notre-Dame-de-Lorette,” *Le Monde* 8.12.2008. https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2008/12/08/troisieme-profanation-de-tombes-musulmanes-du-cimetiere-militaire-notre-dame-de-lorette_1128207_3224.html.

started to rise up and turn to the other side, as if it was plowed. "They come," called out the observation posts; the few that remained in trenches.⁶⁴⁹

The response of German artillery to this fire was insufficient. The lack of an adequate number of heavy guns was the problem, but also the location of artillery positions was highly unfavorable, as they were located at the foot of the hill. The barrels reached red heat, so the soldiers put wet rags on them out of fear of their decalibration, though the rags immediately burned and it was not enough to protect the infantry at the positions. On some days, the Upper Silesian 21st Field Artillery Regiment fired up to 9000 bullets, while the average use of bullets in the regiment during fierce battles was estimated at 8000–10000 a day, which in calmer periods amounted to only 500; then the regiment simply lacked ammunition in batteries which, in turn, was the result of problems with transportation. After unloading at railway stations, ammunition columns could not deliver it fast enough under fire constantly penetrating the rear area, also by Allied aviation. Therefore, they most often delivered it only at night. Moreover, the number of gunners significantly decreased. There were only four gunners left by each gun out of the obligatory number of seven. The rest died or were injured, some of them were detached to infantry positions. Only twenty people in batteries had to operate four cannons, carry ammunition, serve at guard posts, and work in trenches. All of this happened under constant fire. It led to the weakening of artillery regiments' combat strength and, as a result, the significant raise in the advantage of the French artillery (not only due to flawed strategy).⁶⁵⁰

The 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment quartered near Arras had to make enormous efforts to keep the trenches in a proper condition. One of its soldiers recalls that these were the worst trenches he had ever seen during his duty:

The ground at the new positions [near Thélus] was terrible for trench warfare. Soft clay in rainy weather often turned into a muddy slush, while in dry weather it crumbled on the walls. We constantly fought with this ground. That was more exhausting than the fights with the enemy. It was never the case that the communication in trenches would work well. Either the trenches were destroyed by enemy fire or bad weather annihilated the results of our laborious rebuilding. We did not manage even once to make sure that at least one position in both lines along with the connecting ditches would ensure free movement back and forth. There was always an obstacle, either the explosion of a mortar grenade covered the trench or mud simply blocked the passage. If you did not experience it, you cannot imagine what it was like in our case. What a hopeless fight we conducted against shit and mud. The return to the rear was often possible only outside

649 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 113–114.

650 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 66.

the trenches, since there was a threat of drowning and suffocation in the slush inside them. We got used to many things at Verdun, but here the situation repeatedly exceeded what we already experienced and what could be called the preservation of human dignity. We lived in this front-line shit like rats, and there were hundreds of real rats both in the trenches and dugouts. There was no way to protect the food from the rats, and it was impossible to keep elementary cleanliness. It makes everyone cringe to think about the terrible state of latrines at these positions even today; it was just terrible. I do not have to explain that the state of health was bad in these conditions. It was a true miracle that there was no outbreak of an epidemic.⁶⁵¹

At Lorette, apart from the task of avoiding the shelling, the soldiers always had to observe the underground works of the enemy. In this area, it was relatively easy to undermine enemy positions due to short distance between the trenches. Therefore, soldiers constantly listened whether sappers did not conduct any works, if there was no explosion at a segment for a long time.⁶⁵² In the German regiments there were special sapper units consisting of about one hundred men. They were equipped with heavy minethrowers (*Lanz-MW*). Due to the frequent occurrence of unexploded bombs and manual transport of heavy equipment to positions in the front line, the use of heavy minethrowers required a lot of effort that did not always bring the desired results. Therefore, the army usually used the traditional method of making a second underpass under the enemy's path and burying both corridors after an explosion.⁶⁵³

Not only regular soldiers but also front commanders experienced such conditions. Mortality in this group was even proportionately higher than the one among privates. This led to the gradual collapse of caste prejudices, which played such a great role in the German army before the war. It became frequent for an officer to live with soldiers in the same or very similar lodgings. He also ate basically the same thing. Here is a description of a lodging of a commander of the 157th Infantry Regiment in May 1915 near Lorette:

It was an example of some kind of architecture. The entrance to this place led through steep stairs consisting of about fifty stone steps, when you entered a large spacious rock cave, which sheltered about 300 people. As it had only one window, the room was very poorly lit. Here was the command post of the segment. At the same time, it was also a place where the units in reserve sheltered, and a sanitary point for the wounded, because there was no other safe place where the injured could be transported. Living conditions in this room were terrible. Late in the evening, it was completely dark, so that artificial

651 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 156.

652 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

653 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

lighting was always necessary. Lamps and lanterns were used very economically, which filled the room with a kind of magical and terrible dimness; it felt as if the air was heavy and dirty. It stank with a mixture of sweat, skin, blood, and drugs. The telephones rang all the time. Liaison officers kept going in and out all the time. Leaving and coming units of soldiers with munitions or injured, who moaned and screamed, prevented any rest. Besides, it was very solidly packed, so much that soldiers could not even lie down. It was far better to remain outside than in this terrible lodging of the commander.⁶⁵⁴

Some lodging of the soldiers were in even worse condition. According to the description of Sergeant Geburk of the 157th Regiment, the shelter located near the church in Ablain-Saint-Nazaire was in complete disarray after a successful French attack on May 21:

Including a machine gun team, there were now sixty-five soldiers in a place that could accommodate forty at most. It caused huge problems with finding space. The shelter itself was built with the simplest means and intended only for a dozen or so people. Therefore, its designers paid no attention to ventilation and similar necessary equipment. Besides, it only gave shelter from rifle bullets. Any artillery shell could penetrate its weak ceiling and beams. . . . So we had to take off the satchels and put them in the left corner, place the rifles tightly in the right corner near the exit, and the soldiers had to sit in such a way that one soldier sat down between the legs of another. In the morning, we did not notice yet the bad consequences of this crowding. The small window in the wall and the door around the corner, did not let any fresh air inside; especially the sixteen people who crouched on the bunks and under the two bunks in the back of the shelter had nothing to breathe with. At first, it was good, when it was cold. However, the higher the sun rose and the more the artillery and mine launchers fired, the more unpleasant this narrow room became. Already at 5 am, we had two injured soldiers, one of them had a concussion as a result of a hit by the pieces of bricks flying around after a heavy explosive device hit the remnants of the church. However, the two injured soldiers had to stay with us, otherwise the enemy would have noticed our shelter and shot even more precisely. After all, we were in a completely open air that was perfectly visible from the Lorette Hill. As hours went by, the thirst became unbearable. We lacked water that they promised to deliver. Besides, corpses and parts of bodies lied with a terrible stench. It made our torments even more excruciating, so much that we almost lost our senses. We fairly distributed everything that we could drink, but it was so little during such a long time when we were unbearably thirsty. People on bunks had to be relieved every twenty minutes by those who sat closer to the door so that they would get some air. But they walked over each other's heads and shoulders to get there. Empty cans of preserves circulated so that everyone could at least urinate in them. Three heavy mines that exploded nearby caused a violent trembling, thankfully without consequences. Until 9.30 pm, we dried out of thirst for full nineteen hours, and survived only because of strict discipline.

654 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 52.

When we left the room, I was shocked to see that two people suffocated to death on bunks, they did not manage to walk to the door.⁶⁵⁵

Therefore, it took a lot of effort and dedication to maintain such positions, not to mention conduct the assault, which Kazimierz Wallis confirms, even if he was on the same battlefield at Arras only in April 1917:

Last night, we stormed the enemy positions. Before evening, the artillery prepared the French ditches for the storm. They shot whatever was able to come out of the barrels, and the minethrowers joined them, throwing their cans of fifty and 100 kilograms into the French ditches. After half an hour of this heavy fire, the storm began. We took away from the French the ditches on the entire right wing, whereas we did not quite manage to do so on the left wing due to great difficulties. Then, the French artillery started to bomb our camp that lied on a slope of a mountain. We heard a hell of a noise of French grenades that exploded. A couple of us were just loading hand grenades in the depot when the bombardment started. But we soon hid in a nearby officer barracks, which stood in a protected area, because the smallest piece of grenade, even a spark, could easily ignite the capsules and blow up the whole depot. The officers took refuge in *Stollen* [dugouts].⁶⁵⁶

At Lorette in 1915, the tactics of retreating from the occupied areas was still in force, and it could be summarized in a concise sentence: “Do not voluntarily leave even a foot of ground [for the enemy]” (*Nur keinen Fußbreitboden freiwillig räumen*).⁶⁵⁷ Sometimes to keep position, not to mention conduct a counterattack in such conditions, became a suicidal mission. The soldiers had to move upward under constant precise fire, with little hope that they would receive a precise and effective artillery cover. This is how the counterattack of the 63rd Infantry Regiment looked like through the eyes of its soldier:

After the end of a hellish artillery shelling, only a few guard posts entered trenches at destroyed shooting positions, with shields reaching only to their shoulders. We believed that suppressive fire flew high above our heads. But it was not a real suppressive fire. The enemy threw gas missiles at our batteries and completely destroyed our support. The smoke hovering over our positions when we saw the French who walked in close ranks, not as if to conduct the assault, but as if to take a walk, without hurry. I think they were told that the crazy drumfire did not leave even a rat at the German positions, let alone people who would still make an effort to defend themselves. . . . Already the first wave of the enemy broke our defenses, but with large losses from German fire. Then, still in close ranks, the enemy started a new assault, which aimed at Neuville in the support

655 Ibid., pp. 57–59.

656 The letters from K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France 27.04.1917.

657 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 155.

area, that is, it hit the left wing of the 11th Grenadier Regiment, located on our right, and also the right flank and rear area of segments A and B. When we focused our eyes on the enemy who attacked us from the front, we heard shots from the right side behind us. “The French are in our rear area.” They managed to break through the left wing of the Grenadier Regiment and were already behind the segment, and they kept going further to the rear area. With a few men left, the deputy officer reached the secondary segment earlier and managed to alert the companies that stood there. In the segment broken on the right from our regiment, the enemies easily crossed the second line, due to the destruction of trenches by drumfire, destroying many weapons and overtaking the secondary segment as well. However, by 3 pm, we managed to retake the secondary segment thanks to our counterattack.⁶⁵⁸

Despite distinct advantage in terms of occupied positions in a challenging area, the French at Lorette were unable to break the German positions. Temporarily conquered trenches returned to the original line after a time. For instance, after the attack on May 10–12, the chapel was in German hands for a time, but on May 18–20 the French took it back during a counterattack; though, after another attack on May 22, the entire hill was occupied again by the Germans.

The losses suffered at Lorette were comparable to those that occurred later at Verdun and the Somme. The 157th Infantry Regiment itself lost ten officers and 386 soldiers after the battles in May, until June 5, while eleven officers and 965 soldiers were seriously injured. Moreover, 237 soldiers were missing. This meant the loss of more than half of the initial composition. At that time, the regiment received two replenishments from Silesia, otherwise it would have ceased to exist: on May 31 there arrived four officers and 380 soldiers, while on June 4 – three officers and 463 soldiers.⁶⁵⁹ The 63rd Infantry Regiment at Souchez, north of Arras, suffered even greater losses in percentage: 478 died, 1394 were injured, and 194 were missing; which meant more than 60 percent of the initial composition.⁶⁶⁰ As usual, the losses of artillery regiments were lower, but in this case the training of cannoneers took much longer and it was more difficult to replace them.

The soldiers from Lorette could briefly rest in the surroundings of Lens. Located about twenty kilometres north of Arras, the town played the role of support area for the entire 12th Infantry Division. The proximity of the front did not influence the intensity of life on its streets negatively, as they were filled with soldiers. “The town looks like during peacetime, only from time to time can we

658 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 113–114.

659 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 61.

660 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 112.

hear artillery long lasting fire. It is not a very beautiful town, but there is vibrant life here. Shops are open everywhere. They are expensive, but you can buy food goods of all kinds. Bustling soldiers in *feldgrau* uniforms rush everywhere, the French observe grumpy, while chic French women cross the streets with small steps in their see-through summer dresses to do shopping.”⁶⁶¹

On November 7, 1915, the soldiers erected a cemetery in Lens and a monument commemorating the Battle of Arras for the fallen Germans. The Upper Silesian 12th Infantry Division made the monument and participated in its presentation. The monument did not survive until today, as it was destroyed during the later shelling of Lens.⁶⁶² The local German cemeteries are the only trace of the stay of the Upper Silesians at Lorette, Arras, and Lens; we easily find Polish names on each of them.

Both the few Bayonne Legion soldiers fighting near Arras, who survived the fights in May 1915, and the Polish Upper Silesians, who crossed the front line, later belonged to the Polish Army in France. This is how the story unexpectedly made a full circle. After three years since the Battle of Arras, in which they fought against each other, they now stood side by side, fighting for the independent Poland. For this reason, Lorette should become a symbol in Poland. Unfortunately, today, no one remembers about the drama of the Poles fighting each other for Notre-Dame de Lorette a hundred years ago.

661 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 61.

662 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 76.

V. On the Eastern Front

Galicia and the Carpathians

The majority of Poles serving in the German regiments spent the First World War at the Western Front. Some of them also temporarily fought in the East. Since 1915, most fought there after the break of the Russian front near Görlitz. They reappeared at the Eastern Front one-year later, after a transfer from the Western Front to prevent the offensive led by the General of the Cavalry Aleksei Brusilov. The Poles remained in the East until spring 1917. They participated in campaigns both in Galicia and the Carpathians, right as at the north-east front near Daugavpils. Experiences from these fights proved to be very different from those gathered in the West.

On June 15, 1916, Brusilov's offensive commenced and caused another collapse of the Austrian defense.⁶⁶³ Due to the defeats of the 4th and 7th Armies, the Russians claimed Volhynia and Bukovina. They pushed the Austrians into hardly accessible areas of the Carpathians, but the assault continued, which posed a threat to the Austrians of losing further territories after the seizure of mountain passes. The opening of the route to the Great Hungarian Plain was particularly perilous. Despite engagement at Verdun and Somme, the German High Command decided to transfer numerous German divisions to the endangered Eastern segment of the front to defend their ally from imminent defeat. Among others, they sent the new Upper Silesian 117th Infantry Division, allocated to the 7th Austrian Army led by Colonel General Karl von Pflanzer-Baltin. Initially, this support was futile, because the Russian offensive was so powerful that it pushed back the Central Powers' units toward the Carpathians and, in the summer, the German units even experienced a brief collapse in morale.⁶⁶⁴ The Austrian general was recalled for incompetence and the German division was then subject to a new commander of the 7th Army, Colonel General Karl von Kirchbach auf Lauterbach; shared headquarters was established known as *1. Korpskommando*.

Neither German soldiers nor officers pretended to value their allies from the Austro-Hungarian Army. After reaching the front in mid-September of 1916,

663 T. A. Olszański, *Ofensywa Brusilowa 1916 i dalsze walki w Karpatach*, in: *Pierwsza wojna światowa w Karpatach*, ed. T. A. Olszański, Warszawa 1985, pp. 41–43.

664 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi*, p. 90.

the newly established Upper Silesian divisions first neighbored the Austrian 5th Landwehr Regiment. They despised the multiethnic composition of this Regiment. Excluding Germans, it comprised of Romanians and Italians, which was sufficient reason to treat it as unreliable. This view mainly stemmed from the numerous desertions in such units, allegedly amounting to as much as 25 percent in certain companies. According to the Germans at checkpoints, “a moment of neglect was enough [for Romanians and Italians] to escape to the other side.”⁶⁶⁵

In August 1916, the 117th Infantry Division was transferred to the East. The soldiers hoped for at least a brief stop in Upper Silesia, since the route of their journey led from Namur through Cologne, Hanover, and Berlin to Wrocław, but they could see Opole and Racibórz only through train windows. There was no chance for an even brief meeting with families at the train station.

Kazimierz Wallis, who travelled through a similar route one-year later, remembers the east-bound transport kindly, since it meant a few days of rest for the common soldier:

On February 1, we left our whereabouts. March etc. Then we boarded the train and rode with packages, horses, carriages etc. Through Maubeuge, Namur, Luxembourg etc. On the fourth day at 5 am we arrived in Sarrebourg in Lotharingia. On our way through Belgian Luxembourg we passed by beautiful areas. To the right and left of train tracks, we see calm and silent villages, fields and forests covered with snow, everything calm, one hardly thinks that he takes part in a war. As if one journeyed through Germany. Everywhere one sees calm people occupied with everyday labor. . . . But when I turn my head away from the window, my eyes meet rucksacks stacked to the car's ceiling. Belts with bayonets and pistols hang and tell: you can't return home yet. Until the world ceases to fight and our barrels receive well-deserved rest so that they never again need to be aimed at human chests other than on a training field. . . . During the transfer, they fed us well, only we froze a bit in the cars. We have few duties here and plenty of food.⁶⁶⁶

Usually the destination was unknown. Thus, the soldiers guessed which segment of which front the regiment would support from the names of passed stations. “We pass through the beautiful Silesia. We just stopped . . . near Wrocław. . . . Soon we will surely pass through beloved Upper Silesia. We don't know where, to Russia or to Galicia. You will discover later where they have sent us,” writes Wallis.⁶⁶⁷

665 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 154.

666 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France, 7.02.1917.

667 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, east-bound transport near Breslau, 22.07.1917.

The train with the 157th Infantry Regiment turned near Bytom toward Bogumin and, through contemporary Austria, reached Tarnów to continue through the Carpathians to Hungary. At evening of August 21, after 120 hours, the transport reached its destination, which appeared to be the village Körösmező, today Ukrainian Yasinia, in the valley of the Tisza River.

First contact with the locals was shocking and triggered all of racial prejudices concerning cultural superiority of the Western nations and countries, taught in the European schools since the nineteenth century. The German regiment chronicler writes:

Körösmező had about one thousand inhabitants before the war. They comprised a real mixture of nations: Hungarians, Jews, and Ruthenians. At this point, none of us expected that this town would become our location for almost a year. Ruthenians [probably Hutsuls] formed the majority of local populace, they dwelled in small wooden huts, mainly on mountain slopes, up to the line of forest. They were poor and engaged almost exclusively in cattle pasturing and cultivation in its simplest form. Completely savage, they tended to lean in their sympathies toward ethnically related Russians. The low level of their education showed itself even in their appearance and the way they dressed, not to mention that they were usually illiterate. Women wore simple linen clothing in summer and winter covered with woolen doublets; men wore linen pants and fur jackets. On their feet, they had leather carbatina strapped with laces. Men have their hair cut short but, just as women, they rub them with grease so that the hair shines, though it makes them smell unpleasant. They are ignorant of beds, entire families sleep on huge four-squared furnaces. Cleanliness is a foreign notion for them, as their dwellings and clothes usually become a real paradise for parasites of all sorts.⁶⁶⁸

Thus, the Upper Silesians found themselves in completely foreign mountain conditions, among people who they could not even understand well. In 1916, despite several changes connected to the flow of reinforcements, the 157th Infantry Regiment remained entirely Upper Silesian. The soldiers comprised a specific group with unchangeable characteristics, which influenced the operational power of the regiment: "In a short period of time, all companies of the regiment completed a huge construction works. This physical effort in mountain air, to which they were unaccustomed, triggered voracious appetite. In particular, they complained about scarce bread rations. Thus, the rations were increased from 750 to 1000 grams per day."⁶⁶⁹

German regiments transferred to the Eastern Front underwent a special training already in August and received auxiliary, even if insufficient, equipment.

668 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 134–135.

669 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

This training based primarily on mountain climbing which became especially tiresome for units sometimes comprised not only of young people. Like Alpine tourists, the soldiers were to climb with the help of long sticks, but each had to find his own stick and carve it from available materials. Since standard means of transportation proved useless, the regiments received so-called *Panjewagen*, small vehicles pulled by ponies (tarpans, Koniks) that could move in mountains. The 157th Infantry Regiment received one hundred ponies with coachmen along with special water containers, baskets, and adjusted grips for carrying heavier loads. The ponies were relatively small, 130–140 cm to the withers, but resilient and undemanding in upkeep. Later, they proved indispensable in the mountains. Loaded with weights, they carried up to thirty kilograms of heavy packages in an almost impassable territory and ensured the supply of ammunition, nutrition, and materials required for developing positions. They also participated in the transport of heavy machine guns to the peaks of mountain ranges.⁶⁷⁰ Only after three months, in October, did specialist mountain equipment reach the regiment. Luckily, before winter each soldier received pants reinforced in knees and buttocks with leather, a pair of mountain boots spiked with nails, and thick stockings or footwraps.

Each battalion was allotted a few pairs of additional skis and sticks and many toboggans for carrying supplies or injured.⁶⁷¹ Fear of the Russian winter, especially in the mountains, was huge among the German troops. Kazimierz Wallis, at that time stationed in Ukraine, writes with relief at the end of September, glad that he would spend winter in conditions better than summer uniforms and primitive dugouts on the front line:

[At the back] they build winter dwellings, but they are not ready yet, so I slept in a tent. On the first night, it rained and was rather cold. On the second night, I boiled and laundered my undergarments. I received winter undergarments, stockings, and gloves. In the afternoon of the second day we worked on the winter dwellings. It is a log barrack, one and a half meter deep and covered with logs and soil. Walls are made from logs as well and surrounded by soil. Inside a floor covered with planks [from a dismantled mill], braided beds from wire, a furnace, windows, doors – just like a common Russian hut, just in the ground.⁶⁷²

In contrast with Wehrmacht in the Second World War, military service in the East in the First World War was much easier for Poles, because they arrived

670 Ibid., p. 136.

671 Ibid., p. 159

672 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 25.09.1916.

there already after the grand campaigns of 1914–1915. When the soldiers of the 157th Infantry Regiment reached the trenches, they discovered them already well prepared. The entire segment was very long, it measured three kilometers, so one company was responsible for one kilometer, much more than at the Western Front.⁶⁷³ Jan Mazurkiewicz, located in trenches near Pinsk, greatly valued this service as much calmer than in Flanders or Lotharingia: “Fens near Pinsk appear at this time [autumn] as lakes with little isles. It is nothing like the French trenches. There only are positions 400–500 meters apart. *Stützpunkten* [points of support, bases] are organized on the hills while pit-houses on the ground level. Russians are on the other bank of the Strumień River, at the distance of two kilometers; we walk freely. In the warm season we use skiffs, shoot wild ducks, fish, bathe, and sunbathe, just like in a summer resort. . . . Sometimes we observed Russians on the other side walking freely, without fear, which encouraged us to similar ease. There was no shooting, no fear, no hatred. Time passed calmly and joyfully, among hope for a swift end of the war.”⁶⁷⁴

It appeared that soldiers had at their disposal not only much larger pit-houses than in the Western Front reinforced with wooden logs – an abundant material in the area – but they could also erect wooden blockhouses at the back, due to the almost complete lack of far-reaching artillery shelling. The units which built them emphasized that they would be both practical and nicely furnished. In the battalion commander’s house, there were even a few rooms established for the sake of medical personnel, and one room served as a communication center. Moreover, they built barracks with regiment mess. Isolating the roofs of these buildings was a problem due to the lack of tarpaper. Eventually, the units found a solution and utilized the – partially forgotten in the Upper Silesia but very popular until mid-nineteenth century – wooden shingle made of conifer wood. On the walls of these wooden barracks one could find various inscriptions, often crude.⁶⁷⁵

Sometimes in this period of fights in the East the weather caused more trouble than the enemy. The pace of the Russian offensive at the time of transferring the Upper Silesians to this area proved to be significantly slower. The Russian positions were located in the distance, as far as 600–1200 meters, which provided soldiers with a sense of safety in comparison to the Western Front. Even so, since the beginning of autumn, water that ran down the mountains in many

673 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 167.

674 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, pp. 28, 30.

675 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 157.

places swamped the trenches, which is why the soldiers painstakingly produced breastworks and arm protection from fallen trees.⁶⁷⁶ As early as in the end of September there appeared light frosts, which became really cold in the beginning of October. First it rained heavily and then it snowed; this foretold the imminent coming of winter and necessitated further works in pit-houses and blockhouses. Due to precipitations, the trench walls collapsed and had to be additionally strengthened with wood. The soldiers built drainage ditches and drainpipes, and they equipped all of the trenches with grates on the floors, just as on the Western Front.⁶⁷⁷

Probably due to relatively easy hygiene sustenance, the state of soldiers' everyday health was fine. Lice were the only plague impossible to eradicate. In order to eliminate them, sometimes two or three groups of soldiers travelled for two days to Körösmező to undergo delousing. Later, the regiment had its separate bathhouse built, but they never fully eradicated this epidemiological threat.⁶⁷⁸

The rear part of the front in this part of the Carpathians was also completely different than in the West. The territory was not urbanized, which admittedly facilitated obtaining source material but hindered communication. The German troops conducted wide-ranging engineering works aimed at constructing roads and crossings to guarantee efficient supply delivery. There were only narrow paths, hardly passable even in the summer; thus, the creation of a communication network was a necessity in order to ensure supply for thousands of soldiers in the mountains. Before that, the companies serving on the front line often for a few days lacked the food prepared in field messes. They nourished themselves with field rations: canned meat, vegetables, and fish. Thus, the ponies were the only effective means of food transportation; they could cross mountain ranges and reach the trenches located in the mountain passes.⁶⁷⁹

Since September, the 157th Infantry Regiment was building a road called Naumann Weg to facilitate supply of the front units. Its goal was to connect front battalion positions with regiment headquarters located in the deep back, in Körösmező.

Territory was often full of crevices and the road led almost exclusively along steep mountain slopes. It required building ten bridges, some of them twenty-meters-long, to

676 Ibid., p. 167.

677 Ibid., p. 157.

678 Ibid.

679 Ibid., p. 147.

cross mountain gorges and mountain stream valleys. Many places required the crushing of rocks. Toppled by wind and age, countless huge trees from virgin forests obstructed the road and had to be removed. In mid-September, after about two weeks, the road was almost ready and passable by draught animals. Thus, field messes and pony stables could be moved closer to the positions, to the town of Stebnyi, which ensured the supply of the battalion. Later, similar roads for movement were built directly behind battle stations.⁶⁸⁰

Means of transportation changed in December, when a thick layer of snow covered everything and the maintenance of unobstructed transportation in trenches and supply roads required a lot of effort. The army then used toboggans and many soldiers learned how to ski. They did it willfully, treating winter sports as an unexpected pleasant change in the quite boring service in front of Russians' weak activity and lack of other entertainment.⁶⁸¹

True winter did not arrive until January. Nonetheless, the Upper Silesians welcomed it as quite a surprise. The thickness of the snowcap in mountain positions reached up to two meters while night temperature fell to -30 degrees Celsius. Nevertheless, this was still just a nuisance, as the soldiers were not disturbed by the Russians and considered their conditions much better than at Somme or Verdun. During the two-hour-long guard duty, soldiers were elaborately covered that they resembled mummies rather than real people. Temperatures shortened guard duty to one hour but soldiers still returned half-frozen. However, pit-houses were pleasantly warm. There was plenty of wood so fire was constantly sustained. Since reaching anywhere with supplies was difficult, soldiers enthusiastically welcomed a ropeway constructed by sappers, which connected them to Stebnyi magazines and field kitchens. Thus, they saved priceless horses, which previously ensured all the transportation.⁶⁸²

In the Carpathians, the soldiers spent the first calm Christmas Eve in two years. Already on the previous day, a field mass was officiated and, on the next day, in the catholic church in Körösmezö there was a midnight mass with delegations of officers and soldiers. The front was completely calm. The Russians did not shoot whatsoever. In all of the pit-houses and blockhouses appeared Christmas trees with candles. Many gifts arrived for the regiment from the garrison town of Brzeg. Moreover, each soldier received a small souvenir in the mess. They spent the New Year's Eve just as calmly.⁶⁸³

680 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

681 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

682 *Ibid.*

683 *Ibid.*

The 117th Infantry Division reached the front in the Carpathians in the joyful period of complete Russian passivity after the last failed offensive of June 1916. It was peaceful everywhere. When the German units conducted the most serious operation during their eight-month stay at this front, storming the Kukul Peak, 1539 meters above the sea level, they met only weak Russian resistance. Only a direct assault on trenches suffered some losses, although relatively small, when breaking through barbed-wire barriers. But having thrown grenades at the enemy, the Russians lost their will to fight and did not resist any further due to German machine gun fire. They threw their guns away and surrendered. Sometimes such battles looked almost comical in comparison with the nightmare of the Western Front: "When during the assault one of the giant bearded Russians had his gun ready to hit, the battalion drummer stroke him with the drum without second thoughts with all his force, so that he turned the instrument into a ruff while the Russian surrendered without a fight."⁶⁸⁴ When the majority of the 157th Infantry Regiment stationed near Körösmező, the 1st Battalion was detached to the Austrian 200th Infantry Division operating in the area of Maramureş, in the least densely populated area of the Eastern Carpathians. Before the war, barely anyone from Central or Western Europe visited here. The peaks, highest of them amounting to 1500 meters, were covered with snowcaps for the whole year. Streams ran freely through narrow ravines. Virgin forest spread everywhere with spruces and firs, and dwarf mountain pines in higher parts. There were virtually no roads, just paths and steep ascents. One could often encounter lynxes or even bears, not to mention deer. It was a paradise for hunters, and officers from the 157th Regiment eagerly took advantage of the situation.⁶⁸⁵ But in comparison to the remaining battalions, this one suffered burdensome fights in very difficult terrain conditions. The Russians found their way into the line defended by the Austrian 200th Infantry Division.⁶⁸⁶

In March, the time of the February Revolution when tsar Nicholas II abdicated, the Russian troops in the Carpathians nearly disintegrated. Deserters arrived at German trenches on daily basis. During the Orthodox Easter, some attempts of direct bonding with Germans occurred. Nevertheless, the German command issued an order categorically forbidding such parlays, although they also forbade shooting at Russians outside of trenches. Moreover, they dispersed

684 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

685 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

686 *Ibid.*

leaflets and propaganda gazettes, printed in Germany and written in Russian, informing of the changed approach toward Germany.⁶⁸⁷

On April 15, at the segment manned by the 157th Infantry Regiment, the soldiers noticed white scarves from a distance; later, first silhouettes abandoned the trenches and then an entire crowd of Russian soldiers walked toward the German trenches. They carried gifts: Easter eggs, salt, and bread; the Germans, in return, gave them vodka. Around noon, Russian officers appeared too and demanded audience with the German commander. They decided that, for four days, both sides would refrain from any hostilities. During parleys, the Russians admitted that they do not receive mail for two weeks. Thus, they do not know of the situation in Petrograd. In particular, they were interested whether information from the leaflets and gazettes is true and whether a separate truce would be signed. They assured of their peaceful approach. The soldiers belonged to the Russian 660th Infantry Regiment. A significant slackness was apparent among them: they were malnourished and did not subject to orders. Officers had to constantly coax them into obeying the simplest commands.⁶⁸⁸

The following morning, on April 16, the Russians reappeared before the German positions. They wanted to speak with German soldiers and proposed an exchange of supplies. Tsarist officers initially kept their distance, but they eventually acknowledged this temporary ceasefire at the segment manned by the battalion of the 157th Regiment. The Russian soldiers doubted the artillery, partially commanded by the French officers. Finally, a spot for regular meetings of soldiers and officers was designated. Since then, barter flourished on daily basis. One could exchange German alcohol for everything the Emperor's soldiers lacked: soap, backfat, bread, and tobacco. But at the end of April, the Germans forbid such meetings, fearing the effects of revolutionary propaganda. Since then, only appointed intelligence officers could lead such conversations. For over three months, not a single shot was fired by the German side at the segment of the front manned by the Upper Silesian regiment, and when artillery tested their barrage fire accuracy, they loyally informed the Russians. During this unofficial ceasefire, Russian deserters constantly reached the German trenches, even though they were sent back in line with the agreement.⁶⁸⁹

On May 1, 1917, occurred the only incident of using guns, when the Germans suddenly heard a loud "Hurray!" coming from the Russian trenches and

687 *Ibid.*, pp. 165–166.

688 *Ibid.*

689 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

considered it a possible sign of Russian surprise attack, because it was accompanied with gunshots and hand grenade explosions. But quickly it was silent again. Next day in the morning, they discovered that a voting on the further conduct of war or making peace occurred among the Russian, who cheered since they chose the immediate end of war almost unanimously.⁶⁹⁰

The calm course of the nine-months-long service in the Carpathians is acknowledged by the scarce losses suffered in this period by the 157th Infantry Regiment. On February 25, the day of the most intensive fights and particularly strong artillery shelling, the front manned by one German company saw losses of two killed and eight injured with forty-six killed and fifty injured Russians. These numbers were incomparably lower to those in the Western Front. Generally, the regiment during its Eastern Front service lost less than 10 percent of its initial state.⁶⁹¹

Transylvania

In July 1917, the entire 157th Infantry Regiment moved to Transylvania. The new prime minister of the Russian government unsuccessfully tried to convince Russians for the next offensive. However, this time, the second Brusilov's offensive quickly broke, despite its initial successes at the Austrian front against the 2nd and 3rd Armies.

On July 19, the counteroffensive of the Central Powers commenced – strengthened by the German units – which resulted in the capturing of the whole Galicia and Bukovina.⁶⁹² Then, after French officers reorganized the Romanian army, there occurred a relief attack on the German-Austrian right wing (*Armee gruppe Gerok*); this is where the 157th Infantry Regiment was directed. But the command initially separated it from its primary 117th Infantry Division and, when the Romanian offensive in Transylvania stuck, it participated in the German-Austrian counteroffensive along with the entire force of the army commanded by a victor from Gorlice, Marshal August von Mackensen.⁶⁹³

The regiment operated near the town of Soveja in the eastern Romania in Moldavia. The continuation of the offensive in this area was very difficult. It based on constant marches in difficult mountain conditions. Soveja is located

690 Ibid.

691 Ibid., p. 164.

692 For more on the Romanian campaign, see Olszański, *Kampania rumuńska w Karpatach*, pp. 45–53.

693 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 203.

in a hardly accessible mountain valley and can be reached only after thirty kilometers of march through the mountains. At that time, the road to this modern tourist resort was basically a mountain path. The regiment traversed the thirty kilometers only after three days. Exceptionally heavy rains pouring in July hindered the road. Soldiers only camped in tents. The path was completely soaked with water, thus the soldiers dragged through it with effort. It was particularly difficult for draught animals. The ponies received from the Austrians were in a terrible state even before: malnourished, with calluses and open wounds, loaded with cargo, they could hardly walk on slippery clay roads. During ascents, baggage fastened to saddles fell down and required refastening. Sometimes the ponies fell, then their saddles were removed and they “remained on the sideway, as no one had time to care for them.”

What is worse, after the unit eventually reached Soveja, they heard from the local commandant that there are no quarters. Thus, they camped in the open field with nothing to eat. Only the 3rd battalion had luck, as some thought. In a nearby town of Rucareni, where they were directed, the soldiers found a plum orchard. They ate these trophy plums without restraint, even though they were not ripe yet, so most of them quickly became sick.⁶⁹⁴ There was nearly no food available. Steady supply was lacking, and tins and very poor bread comprised the basis of the diet, which led to the rise in digestive illnesses.⁶⁹⁵ For the brief period spent in Transylvania, the regiment suffered relatively high losses. In July and August 1917, twenty-nine soldiers died and 182 were injured. Moreover, over fifty-three soldiers were missing. In sum, the losses amounted to 264 soldiers, including five officers.⁶⁹⁶

In Northern Russia

In January and February 1917, further Upper Silesian Regiments reached the Eastern Front: the 63rd Infantry Regiment and the 21st Field Artillery Regiment. They traveled by train from the occupied Belgium, through Lübeck and Szczecin to East Prussia. First to Kaliningrad, then to Tilsit (modern Sovetsk), next to Latgale to the front near the town of Eglaine near the road to Daugavpils in the south of modern Latvia, next to the border with modern Lithuania.⁶⁹⁷

694 Ibid., pp. 205–206.

695 Ibid., p. 214.

696 Ibid., p. 218

697 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 156.

The first impressions were not good. The Upper Silesian arrived in the midst of a frosty winter. Thick snow lied everywhere. The conditions were completely different than those on the French and Belgian plains. Moreover, there were no good quarters or barracks, while dugouts were only in preparation.

However, the calm front allowed to build solid shelters from wood and, with time, the soldiers considered them to be superior to those in the West. These constructions provided protection from the chilling wind and low temperatures that dropped below -30 degrees Celsius. The regiment received special winter uniforms, wool linings, kneepads, earmuffs, gloves, and mittens, in which they could operate a gun for just a moment.⁶⁹⁸

Maintaining adequate temperature in dugouts and protection from hypothermia in the open air was much more important in this segment of the front than the threats posed by the passive Russians. One of the soldiers from the 21st Field Artillery Regiment describes his impressions from the first days after reaching Eglaine:

Everything in blinding-white eastern melancholy. We covered the end of our road on foot. Marching in thick snow. Russian captives help with the carts. But we still had to add horses to the carts. Some of the quarters were excellent but the remainder was cold and unpleasant. Already in the first evening, temperature fell below minus thirty degrees Celsius and we had to quickly take measures to prevent frostbites. The constant heating of the quarters was the simplest means. We heated day and night with wood from nearby forests. Despite that, water in dugouts froze in the morning, the cold and dampness permeated through thousands of crannies between logs. Even when one covered himself with three blankets, his teeth chattered. Thus, we warmed ourselves with grog, mulled wine, or some other hot drink. Deep snow was everywhere. Since many horses got scabies – during travel or already here – 263 replacement horses had to be brought here from as far as Sedan.⁶⁹⁹

In February and March, when the days grew longer and weather became sunny, even if still frosty, the dampness and cold were not so severely experienced. The soldiers appreciated this stay in the distant northern front. In 1917, healthy exercise in fresh air and terrific view of snow-covered virgin nature fostered a relatively calm life among brothers in arms. Some soldiers even claimed that staying in the Eastern Front became “a nice change from often really depressing and hopeless boredom of position warfare.”⁷⁰⁰

698 Ibid.

699 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 132–133.

700 Ibid., p. 137.

Alongside his fellow Hanoverians, Kazimierz Wallis reached this segment of the front half a year later; he was delighted not only with nature but also with towns at the Baltic's seashore, which they captured. He describes Riga with esteem: "Yesterday afternoon at 2 pm, we marched in a parade formation into the town of Riga. The Russians burned down a large bridge before Riga, our pioneers built a floating bridge through which we marched. The large iron train bridge was split in half from an explosion. The town is connected with steamboats through the Daugava River. Free travel for the troops. Electric railway which connects almost all the city streets is also free. The town is big like Warsaw, with elegant wide paved streets, beautiful alleys, high houses, ornamented buildings, churches with large gilded domes. Population is German, Ruthenian, and Lithuanian. Almost half speaks German, although poorly."⁷⁰¹ Satisfaction with staying in the East was not disturbed by the problems with maintaining clean quarters, especially during the spring thaw. In April, water was dripping from every possible crevice for a few days. Artillery positions and ammunition magazines – practically any low located site – immediately filled with dirty water and there was no way to prevent it. The only possible thing was removing the water through ad hoc improvised ditches. The troops tried to safeguard the weapons, already fatigued by fights in the West, and moved it to more suitable places, so that it would not become completely useless when corroded.⁷⁰²

In March 1917, just as in the Carpathians, the Russian Front disintegrated after the February Revolution. The Germans learned of the events in Saint Petersburg before their enemies. Since information concerning the Tsar's abdication and establishment of a republic did not reach the Russian soldiers or it was blocked on purpose, the German soldiers presented to them large boards on which they described these events in Cyrillic writing. Surely it was no soldiers' initiative but a well-thought activity of the High Command, which expected Russia's collapse and the signing of a separate peace treaty in the Eastern Front. The order to stop any action directed at the Russians proves this as well. From this point, there came a time of silence at the front, because the Russians behaved peacefully as well.⁷⁰³ Even the unfortunate incident with the doctor of the 63rd Infantry Regiment did not change this approach. Captain Hofrichter carelessly assumed that the situation at the forefield is already fully controlled. Thus, he left the trench and was shot by a Russian officer. The resulting struggle was limited

701 Letters of K. Wallisa to his father Łukasza Wallis, Riga, 14.09.1917.

702 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 141.

703 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 160.

to a brief exchange of fire. The German command upheld their order to open fire only in case of an attack, still expecting imminent ceasefire.⁷⁰⁴

Different than in the Carpathians, the north saw no soldier fraternization or gift exchange. When Russians attempted to do so, artillery behind their trenches – often led by English and French officers – opened fire. The complete disintegration of discipline was successfully prevented only in these elite types of units. Thus, the hopes for a ceasefire appeared to be hasty. Instead of parleys, the Russian positions started showing boards calling for the end of the war by soldiers themselves. Increasingly often the symptoms of bolshevization of some Russian units appeared, which were proved by writings on the boards: “Come to us, we will give you freedom and bread.”⁷⁰⁵

In practice, the Upper Silesian regiments did not conduct any larger military operations for five months until May 1917. This is visible in the losses in the artillery regiment were absent and, as for the First World War conditions, minimal in the 63rd Infantry Regiment: twenty-three soldiers died, including two officers, and sixty-eight were injured. When it left the Eastern Front, the regiment almost returned to its state prewar state: three battalions, excluding headquarters and quartermaster service, of sixty-eight officers and 2627 soldiers.⁷⁰⁶ The Upper Silesian regiments were relieved at the end of April and they reached the rear of the Western Front again in May.⁷⁰⁷ Before the return journey, they underwent a traditional delousing. At the old border between Russia and East Prussia, there were special barracks only for this purpose. In the town of Chernyshevskoye there was a place called Lausoleum, which conducted mass disinfection and delousing for any passing army transport, for humans, horses, uniforms, and other elements of equipment. The German command believed that the outbreak of dangerous epidemics can happen primarily at the Eastern Front. That is why, before returning to Germany or to the West, every soldier underwent mandatory disinfection.

Located at the border of the Kingdom of Poland, the delousing stations cost the Germans almost one million marks. This procedure was conducted separately for officers and for soldiers. Inside the barracks, there were special steam machines, disinfecting apparatuses, baths, care rooms, and even dryers. First, one had to strip naked, then soldiers placed their clothes along with sleeping

704 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 141.

705 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 161.

706 Ibid.

707 Ibid., p. 160.

bags and boots in a window, and then showered, where they were obliged to stand under a hot stream for half an hour. Finally, they moved to a steam bath, and the entire process ended with drying. When they left, they received washed uniforms and undergarments treated with a sterilizing substance.⁷⁰⁸

After visiting the Lausoleum, the Upper Silesians traveled through Poznań, Cottbus, Leipzig, Erfurt, Fulda, Worms, and Saarbrücken to arrive near Metz.⁷⁰⁹ Everyone expected the return to the Western Front. Unexpectedly, they were transferred to the Austrian-Italian front, where the regiment played a crucial role in the break of the Italian lines near the Isonzo River.

The Eastern Front in the Eyes of a Pole in a German Uniform

Kazimierz Wallis spent a lot of time at the Eastern front, although not with the Upper Silesian regiments, but alongside his own Hanoverian regiment. His letters illustrate well, how a Pole from Upper Silesia, dressed in a uniform of the German army, perceived the partitioned Polish territories, but also his impressions and moods on the Eastern Front. From today's viewpoint, descriptions of German-occupied lands of Congress Poland are particularly interesting. Wallis stayed in a German camp in Jabłonna near Warsaw for almost three months. Thus, his observations, particularly pertaining to Warsaw, provide a brilliant view of the city a few days before the declaration of the Act of 5th November of 1916 to create the Kingdom of Poland.

He was transported to Jabłonna at the beginning of April from Ścinawa, where Wallis underwent training. On this occasion, he could witness battlefields from the first two years of the war. They exerted a shattering impact on him, especially the vicinity of Sochaczew, which was at the frontline for few months during the fights near the Bzura River:

On our way, we saw the battlefield on both sides of the railway. It looked the worst near Sochaczew. We saw rifle ditches – both our own and enemy's. In front of us and behind, there were small ditches in which soldiers started to entrench, but in a moment flew forward once again. Every few steps we saw holes from grenades and shrapnel. We saw how grenades on both sides of the ditches burst, how artillery slowly palpated enemy's positions. Airplanes helped a lot. Every few steps we saw graves, small mounds, some with crosses, others simply with a field stone. On some a little stick with a Russian cap on it. From time to time, we could also see mass graves. We witnessed a lot of collapsed

708 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 210.

709 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 144, 147.

houses. Detonated bridges and in their place the so-called *Notbrücke* [provisional bridges].⁷¹⁰

It is interesting that, for Wallis, the Kingdom of Poland had a double meaning. On the one hand, the old Poland was his homeland, he mentions it many times. On the other hand, it is a territory of the enemy's country, a part of the occupied Russia. In 1916, when Easter approached, he notices: "I will celebrate my first holiday in the enemy's country."⁷¹¹ Thus, he observes a foreign land, but with an affable interest. Despite confinement in the camp in Jabłonna, he writes that he is fond of his surroundings, even though he assessed them as poverty-stricken.

He cannot find here even the most basic food commodities and, thus, instead relies on the supply of the local "soldier's house."⁷¹²

This sense of dissimilarity of a Pole from the Prussian province in relation to Poles from different partitions was common. It appears in memories from Pomerania and Greater Poland. In the first years of the war, when the Germans might impressed everyone, as Józef Iwicki writes, one should have reckoned with a long-lasting period of subjection to German rule and aim at establishing the "Polish-German federal state of the German Reich."⁷¹³ Even the proclamation of the Act of 5th November did not change Iwicki's view, who accurately notices: "In their politics, the Germans completely distinguish us from those from the Kingdom of Poland. The Poles must reckon with this and thus each partition has to conduct separate politics. Because there is not a single word concerning the fate of the Poles from the Prussian partition in the Emperor's manifesto and nothing indicates any improvement of their existence, the Poles of this partition need to take position only in relation to the politics directed at them. This position has to be an opposing one in this case."⁷¹⁴

Differences between partitions surfaced during the First World War and their nature was not only political. For the first time, the war became a premise for the mass migration of Poles to Galicia and the Kingdom of Poland, not the other way around. Many for the first time confronted their image of Poles from lectures with real inhabitants of the central and eastern territories of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Wawrzyniec Skorupka writes with

710 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Jabłonna, 4.04.1916.

711 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Jabłonna, 18.04.1916.

712 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Jabłonna, 10.04.1916.

713 Iwicki, *Z myślą o Niepodległej*, p. 69.

714 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

disarming honesty that, when his unit was directed to Lviv, his associations of Poles from Galicia stemmed only from his readings of Sienkiewicz's historical novel *With Fire and Sword* and he was surprised that the city inhabitants were called Ruthenians instead of Zaporozhians.⁷¹⁵ Without a doubt, such meetings showed mutual sympathy, even if the other Pole fought in the Russian Army.

Often, the sense of ethnic community fostered the decisions for desertions, even in the cases of Poles fighting in the Tsar's army. Jan Mazurkiewicz describes it:

Someone jumps out of a ditch and stands in front of us. I set my bayonet. "Sir," this dark figure speaks in a clear Polish, "we want to surrender but we fear the German soldiers." "Fear nothing, nothing will happen to you," I respond. "Germans brought a huge number of artillery and will eradicate all of you unless you surrender," I explain frantically. . . . I hear a voice of my compatriot from the Russian army, "But sir! Nearby, there is yet another ditch and there are brothers as well who would want to surrender. . . ." "Tell them to come here" I say angrily. "But if I will not be able to tell them that German soldiers are present – they will not come." . . . Having covered about thirty meters we stand over the ditch. I address people in there. . . . After a moment, the Russians exit the ditch. A giant soldier comes to me and holds my hand which disappears in his shovel-sized palm. . . . We flee to our ditches. The captives are escorted to Hill 151. . . . The compatriot who came to me first remains with me to help his injured colleague. After a moment of rest, we take the injured and carry him to Hill 151. Here, we discover that the number of captives we brought amounts to 221 privates and three officers. In the dugout we entered, this Russian soldier tells me that he is a Pole and lives in Riga. In candlelight, he shows me a photograph of his two sisters, for whom he provides, since they have no parents anymore.⁷¹⁶

We observe this fascination with unknown Poland in Wallis as well, for whom a visit in Warsaw was crucial. He fell in love with this great city despite its poverty, which he witnessed all around. Already during his first stay, Wallis writes as if enchanted:

Yesterday, we were in Warsaw with half of the company. The first half visited during the first holiday. Warsaw is an amazing city. Over fifty churches. For five pfennigs one could travel half of the city. We visited a few churches. Then we all took part in a supper in *Soldatenheim*. We paid fifty pfennigs. Salad with potatoes and sausage slices. We were in the Saxon Garden. It is a very beautiful park. We saw train stations destroyed by the Russians: the Petersburg Train Station and Terespol Train Station. The Vistula flows through the Praga district. One can buy nothing, shops are closed, and everything is terribly expensive. Only *Soldatenheimen* offer cheap nourishment.⁷¹⁷

715 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi*, pp. 82–83.

716 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, pp. 41–42.

717 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasza Wallis, Jabłonna, 26.04.1916.

Wallis hears Polish language around and is delighted with it. He treats his journey as an opportunity to personally witness the places from Poland's history he previously only read about. Nonetheless, he senses his dissimilarity. For example, he notices that his Polish is different:

I went to church service for the first time in two weeks. There was no singing, only the priest sung during the whole mass. The priest's Latin singing differs somewhat from ours when it comes to melody. The church was packed. Having left it, I was on Ulica Nowy Świat in order to run some errands in shops. There are many postcards with scenes from Polish history, but it is hard to buy everything, one is prettier than the other. On every step, I hear the Polish language, not like the one in our region, but a clear one which sounds so beautifully and pleasantly that even Germans like it. The order is maintained by the city's militia with red bands on their arms. . . . I send you a national postcard along with the small map.⁷¹⁸

Two of the most interesting descriptions of Warsaw come from the end of Wallis's stay in the city: from Sunday, May 22, and from the Feast of Corpus Christi. Especially the former shows the fascination with Poland shared by many young Upper Silesians:

Today, on Sunday, I was in Warsaw with Poloczek. We embarked at 9 am and arrived at 10 am in St. John's Cathedral on Ulica Jańska. During the holy mass, there was a Polish sermon, both in language and meaning. Before the service in the church, there was a procession of clergy and people, during which priests and seminarians sang: "Through Thy Holy Resurrection." During the mass, a choir sang in Latin. It ended at noon. . . . After the dinner, we went to the exhibition of the Society of Friends of Fine Arts on Ulica Królewska. We paid twenty pfennigs for entry. We saw rooms with paintings. I've never seen anything so amazing. Paintings from the Polish history by various masters. There were ones by Matejko, Żmurko, Kossak, Fałat and many others. When you look at these large pictures, you experience moments depicted on the canvas. The Russians took many works with them when they retreated, for instance *The Battle of Grunwald*. Even so, the exhibition is exceptionally rich. I regret that I do not work in Warsaw, because I would visit the exhibition and sketch a few paintings. Three hours passed before we noticed. We talked with a few Polish artists there, overjoyed that there are Poles among the German troops who can still keep to their Polish hearts, despite uniforms. They led us through all the rooms, explained all the paintings, who and when painted them etc. etc. From all the paintings – all of them pretty – I liked the most the huge one depicting Chopin playing the piano. In front of him pass various figures in accordance with what the master plays. There parade king's jesters, an Old Polish feast, peasants, nobility, heroes, kings, the entire Polish history appears in front of the half-closed eyes of the master player, and he plays, plays, and explicates in accords what his soul feels

718 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Jabłonna, 1.05.1916.

and sees, and I could almost hear these tones flowing from under his fingers; that is an effect of a well-made painting. One can see city types, Polish dances and customs, figures from our history etc. I always imagined such an exhibition as something very beautiful and wanted to see Krakow for a long time, but I did not expect it to be something so amazing. One could spend the whole day with these paintings without getting bored. And then we saw the collection of tools from the Stone Age and prehistory. We went through this part quickly as we soon had to return.⁷¹⁹

Wallis also spent the Feast of Corpus Christi in Warsaw, on June 12. As a sharp observer, he meticulously registered differences between Warsaw and the Upper Silesia:

At 10 am I was at Warsaw Kovel Train Station. From there, I took a train to Plac Zamkowy. Then to St. John's Cathedral on Ulica Świętego Jana. A procession through the church commenced with Krakow's metropolitan archbishop, three bishops, twenty-one seminarians and a crowd of people singing, "Through Thy Holy Pentacost, forgive us, Lord, our sinning." Between these songs, brief prayers were told as well. Then a short mass took place, ordained by the archbishop, assisted by two priests. The archbishop had a bishop's miter on his head and a crosier in his hand. I saw it for the first time in my life. The feast looked marvelously. After the gospel, there was a brief sermon. The service ended at noon. From the church, I went to *Soldatenheim* on Ulica Nowy Świat. It was overcrowded but one cannot go anywhere else. Nowadays, Warsaw is the city with the cost of living the highest among all of Europe's cities. Thus, I waited for a free spot and checked the magazines in the reading room. Then I drank two cups of coffee and ate two pieces of *babówka* [pound cake] for ten pfennigs and the bread from home. In the afternoon I entered the botanical garden of the University of Warsaw. It is located near the Łazienki Park on the other side of the city. It is a beautiful, big garden. There are a few thousands of trees of different shapes, colors, and leaves. A plate is holstered to each with the tree's name, species, etc. in Latin. Moreover, there are many thousands different shrubs and plants. All planted separately. Also many varied species of grasses. For the sake of water plants, there are four square pools. But there is no time for carefully observing everything. At 3 pm, I entered the Łazienki Park. It is a very large garden with many alleys and paths, a small river flows through the middle with a royal palace located on its bank in which king Poniatowski lived during summers at the end of his reign. In the castle's interior, there is a floor made of wooden bricks with flowers drawn on it. The wall is made of faux marble, in some rooms covered with red silk. There are many paintings by Rembrandt and other artists on the walls, but the Russians took everything when they retreated from Warsaw. On the ceilings of some rooms, there are paintings four to six meters wide. These are amazing works by old masters. There are relief sculptures on the walls, wondrously done. There are marble sculptures as well. There are monuments of kings: Stefan Báthory, Jan III Sobieski, Kazimierz Wielki, and Stanisław August Poniatowski. In the park, in front of and behind the palace, there are

719 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Jabłonna, 22.05.1916.

many monuments as well. It is peculiarly silent in the garden, only the water hums and trees rustle silently.⁷²⁰

These three months spent in the Kingdom of Poland were exceptional for Wallis. He often returned to these memories, regardless of current station.

From the calm Warsaw of 1916, where Wallis witnessed the war from far away, fate threw him to the dangerous front in Volyhnia, during Easter. There, just like the Upper Silesian peasant Wawrzyniec Skorupka, Wallis searched for Polish traces inspired by Sienkiewicz's *The Trilogy*. The landscape instantly reminded him of the Wild Fields: "The area is like steppes described by Sienkiewicz in *The Deluge*. Sometimes, when I ride a horse at night with a report to the battalion and the wind rages, or when the night is calm and the moon shines, areas described by Sienkiewicz come to mind. Nearby, there are large marshes."⁷²¹ However, reality diverged from the colorful adventures of literary heroes. Wallis soon participated in a fierce battle of Kovel, with his 20th Infantry Division. The engagement of the German soldiers was to aid Austro-Hungarian troops and prevent the Brusilov's offensive, which lasted since summer.

Thus, Wallis found himself at the Eastern Front in a largely different situation than the Upper Silesian regiments. It was not a calm segment, where confrontations were scarce. The young Upper Silesian appeared in the center of fierce fights that happened in Ukraine at the time. Everything was new to him, as for each soldier for the first time on the front line of trenches. He heard a lot in stories, both during training in Ścinawa and later in Jabłonna, from soldiers and non-commissioned officers who served on the front. His initial impressions from the trenches, despite his innate optimism, were daunting: "The gun is ready to shoot at all times, same as the pistols at hand. At night, two of us have guard duty. Only one during the day. We change every two hours. I could wash myself this morning for the first time in the last three days. But it cannot be otherwise. To the left, there is a river a few hundred steps away, but reaching it is dangerous, for there is no cover. . . . The soil is clay, so that even small rains cause water to remain and one has to remove it."⁷²² Wallis does not know that the worst is still awaits him. Soon, he has to build trenches and dugouts himself, under Russian fire: "Now we build *Stollen*, which is an underground apartment or kennel with five to eight meters of soil above the head. It is a good cover against mines and

720 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Jabłonna, 12.06.1916.

721 Letters of K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, Russia, 13.10.1916.

722 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 4.07.1916.

grenades. The work is hard, we must carry out the soil in sacks and bring planks through a tiring way through ditches for four hours.⁷²³

In a few days, Wallis would dig trenches in much more difficult conditions where the works did not yet commence:

There was not even a hole in the ground to sleep in. On the first day, we dug a small ditch to be connected with the main trench. We slept through the first night in this ditch covered with coats. Luckily, there was no rain. On the second day, we dug a hole for a dwelling, a two-by-two meters square, two-and-a-half meters deep. Rain flooded it, so we had to remove the water. For two days, we transported logs from a forest to cover the hole. The road took four hours in a ditch, often with water and mud reaching over our knees. Sometimes, we looked nothing like humans. Moreover, the logs were so heavy that we could hardly lift them, not to mention carry in a narrow ditch, meandering left and right. In the evening, we couldn't even move. One night, the alarm went off. The Russians started a firestorm. It seemed like hell on earth. Gun bullets flew over our heads in hundreds and exploded nearby. Grenades, shrapnel, and mines covered the whole area. Everything stopped near 3 am. There were a few injured. But the Russians did not come. On the next day, we started the work early. We sweated nonstop with a shovel in our hands or a log on our backs. I know I worked these few days. Our cabin is 1.20 meters tall, covered with logs, and supported by logs as well. Above, there is about 1.50 meters of sand and soil covered with grass.⁷²⁴

Even during summer, these lodgings were dark, cold and damp:

Nothing but rain for the whole day and night. One did not dry from the previous rain and already the next one begins. Our ditch is made of sand, thus our dugouts collapse due to dampened sand. Yesterday, two of them fell down when their lucky inhabitants were both on duty. Now it is 5 pm. I sit in my dugout – or rather a whole in the ground – and write. I hanged my coat in front of the entrance hole, so that the rain pouring for one hour did not fall on me too much. Every now and then, I look around to check if the planks still hold, so that the entire thing would not collapse on me. The swarm of flies hid from the rain in my hole and they buzz terribly in my ears while the rain continues. It is a downpour. The same was on the night we arrived here. During the entire route, behind wagons. The road was full of holes and bumps. The wagons leaned from one side to the other. It was dark as in a sack. Without notice, one could find himself knee-deep in water, but a soldier must suffer such hardships.⁷²⁵

In three months, Wallis learned about the majority of threats that threaten soldiers on the first line. In the German army, he transformed from a Polish recruit into an experienced soldier of trench warfare at an accelerated pace.

723 Letters of K. Wallisa to his father Łukasz Wallisa, Russia, 10.08.1916.

724 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 24.08.1916.

725 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 19.07.1916.

First, he assimilated to the curse of every infantryman during the First World War: artillery shelling. He believed that he owes his rescue to Virgin Mary:

For two days, we were under heavy shelling of the Russian artillery. The whole ditch was leveled, one could not tell where the first line was before. We sat in a shelter, a few times they shelled our entrance so that we had to unearth it under grenade fire. The ditch was completely leveled to the ground. Only what was in shelters in and under the ground was safe; we had nothing to eat or drink. No one dared to exit the shelter; the distance to the battalion in the forest is four kilometers. Eventually, I took my chances and – having recommended myself to Virgin Mary – I left. I had to crawl. I finally reached the back after a few hours through barrage fire. It was my rescue. Because the Russians already captured our shelters only a few hours later. They threw hand grenades in them and many lost their lives. The crew of my gun, just like many, was taken captive. The guns shot to the front when the Russians encircled them from behind and captured them. They took all my things with them.⁷²⁶

The view of both his own and Russian trenches frightened him: “One can imagine how such ditches look after the cannonade. Near our ditch, there is a Russian one, completely destroyed and neglected. This morning I looked into it by accident. It was a frightening sight. Underground parts collapsed, scaffoldings fell, a lot of scattered guns, boots, hats, etc. Everything ripped to pieces. The ones who were met by fire in there – poor men. The entire ditch was a heap of debris.”⁷²⁷

Wallis did not feel out of place in the German troops. He valued frontline camaraderie and knew that his survival chances depend on it. After all, it was a common experience in the German army among frontline soldiers in the East. Jan Mazurkiewicz even mentions the sensing of something similar to a supra-national community of all those who suffer the same hardships on both sides of the front:

We get some new people, among others a small tailor who likes politics and allot the whole of Poland and Belgium to Germans. France will need to withdraw its eastern borders closer to Paris and pay war reparations to the Germans. Any other, more benevolent conditions of peace for the enemies are inconceivable. Otherwise, Europe could not exist at all. That is what our tailor claims. “You will probably do it all by yourself!” irritated Silber answers. “When the Germans will capture the whole world, then you, Silberberg, will be the king of Palestine, and I will be your prime minister. And we will have tailcoats and dress uniforms tailored by our friend who arranges such wonderful

726 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 8.09.1916.

727 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 19.07.1916.

peace conditions for the Germans” We did not differentiate between Germans, Poles, and Jews or men from any other nationality. There was no difference between religious and atheistic colleagues. We felt as true brothers. We were amenable, sympathetic and willing to help each other.⁷²⁸

On July 3, Wallis once again served his duty by the machine gun as part of an MG company:

Yesterday evening, I received an order to substitute one of ours who got sick by the machine gun. . . . I received a Mauser carbine for ten bullets, self-loading; I left my gun and rucksack near baggage. In darkness, we rode for nearly an hour, but not on the usual way of field kitchen, since this road was in artillery shelling range. Having reached a small forest, we stopped. Food was meant to arrive there. Suddenly, a grenade whizzed over our heads and exploded a few hundred meters behind us. Then, the second one, the third, and the fourth, to the right and left. We had to hold our horses, so that they would not bolt. But it ended with just fear. The Russians probably shot blindly knowing that we are somewhere in the woods. In a few moments, there were many people around us, giving food, mail, and portions were allotted. Then we moved to the position. . . . The gun is located on a small ascent, concealed from the front. One man always remains on guard. After we reached the trench, we divided portions, canned meat, a piece of smoked meat, and a bottle of wine for eight people. I was received friendly over there. That is where one can witness friendship. One forces another to eat. Everyone cares for each other. After supper, the soldiers laid in *Unterstanden* [dugouts]. I stayed for a *doppelt Posten* [double guard duty] from midnight to 2 am. Then I slept till 6 am. After breakfast, I slept again till noon. The weather was nice, it got cloudy near 4 pm. It rained a bit, we lied except for those on duty in *Unterstanden*. Our *Unterstand* is a hole in a ground, two meters long, 1.20 meters wide, and a quarter meter high. There is some straw on the ground. In the night, I will cover myself with a *Mantel* [coat]. To the left and right lies infantry; its posts shoot a few bullets whenever they notice any movement near enemy trenches or when someone sneaks between trenches. Today the enemy did not shoot at all. The enemy's trenches are about 400–600 meters away from ours. The enemy constructs at night a *Sappe*, which is a ditch allowing them to use hand grenades. Thus, our artillery throws two grenades every fifteen minutes at night directed at the place where the enemy digs in order to hinder their work.⁷²⁹

Wallis took place in storms and defenses of trenches: “There were moments when the Russians shelled us from three sides with bullets, grenades, shrapnel, and mines; one could lose his hearing. These monsters exploded, a dozen or so at a time, ripping huge holes in the ground and covering a ditch and *Unterstanden* in many places. There were many injured around us. I was under fire for the

728 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, pp. 29–30.

729 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 3.07.1916.

first time.⁷³⁰ He notices the senselessness of brazen propaganda of glory supposedly waiting for the volunteers who die for the German homeland: “Last night, from the first company of our battalion, a larger patrol embarked toward the Russian trenches. It was welcomed with mad firing from the Russian side. . . . The patrol destroyed one Russian magazine and returned having one killed and two injured. Each of the participants will receive ten marks and eight of them will be awarded iron crosses. But what does it do for those that died?”⁷³¹

The sight of injured and killed was a new experience for Wallis as well, but he quickly got used to it and later remembered similar events in his letter without strong emotions, even at the beginning of the frontline service: “Already on the first night, when we came here, we had one injured. At night, in a dense rain, the Russians came stealthily nearby our trench and threw hand grenades into it. One went off near *Feldweibel* [sergeant] Rose and lacerated his leg over the knee, so that it needs to be amputated;”⁷³² “Returning to the trench [from the kitchen] we have to pass next to the killed Russians, which lie here in the field since the previous assault. . . . Some have their gas masks still on, so that one can assume that the positions were captured with assault gas.”⁷³³

At the front line, the soldier devoted most of his time to amend the assigned portions of nourishment. The shortest interruption of fights was treated by Wallis and his colleagues as an opportunity to delight in simple pleasures, even in the most primitive conditions:

For three days now I stay at the back, behind the front line. There are two of us here. Me and Antoni Keksel, from our gun. We built a tent here, the two of us, filled it with straw, lied on *Manteln* [coats] and covered ourselves with blankets, which we have on gun carriages next to rucksacks, and slept through the whole night, the first one in nearly a month. On the second day, we got up at 8 am. The day was beautiful. We carried water from a well quite far away, cooked our undergarments over the fire, and hang them in the sun, so that they would dry. Then we cleaned our other clothes, washed ourselves again, and it was 4 pm. We boiled a large kettle of potatoes and *Gemüsekonserven* [canned vegetables], my comrade had a box of pork meat, we mixed half of it with potatoes and ate with unprecedented delight. We ate other half with potatoes and soup on the next day. In the evening, we cooked a kettle of pears, but it took long because the pears are still hard. Near 10 pm, the field kitchen arrived with food. We received our portions and ate quite well. I had my boots fixed, my uniform sewn by a tailor, I shaved and, today in the afternoon, I will go swimming in a nearby pond. It is the last day of my

730 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 26.08.1916.

731 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 10.08.1916.

732 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 19.07.1916.

733 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 5.08.1916.

rest and this evening I have to move to the position again. Here, in the woods, it is so calm, that one has to adjust to this calmness in the first day, because one is used to the whizzing and rumbling on the front line.⁷³⁴

Food supply posed a problem for Wallis from the very beginning, even if he regularly received packets with food from home. He carefully instructed what can be sent and what should be avoided, because it would be no longer edible when it arrives. Even on the front line, he looked for a possibility of acquiring additional nourishment from deserted households:

Yesterday, at 3 am, when it got clearer, I was with our *Gewehrführer Gefreiter* [machine gun crewman corporal] Straus and we collected potatoes in a nearby village. We moved stealthily through a ditch and through fields behind ditches, because the Russians did not shoot. It was calm, we dug about half a bucket of edible potatoes, even if they were small. We gathered small carrots and garlic in the vegetable garden and returned. When we dug potatoes, the Russians spotted us and started to shoot. They fired densely and very close. We sheltered in a destroyed hut. I bolted into the basement, thinly covered with straw, but luckily there was no water there... We boiled potatoes and carrots and ate garlic and onions with bread. It tasted delicious. Here we are assigned to the 6th Company for food, but we have no more such food as the one from our own kitchen.⁷³⁵

What was issued by the kitchen sufficed to alleviate hunger, but the food not always reached the soldiers: “Yesterday evening, we were given half a bottle of sour wine, a spoonful of jam for eight men and one tin of blood sausage. It would go better if they would care for us more often. For dinner, we had *dörr gemüse* [dried vegetables] with cut meat. It tasted good. But the road to the mass is one and a half hour, we move at 8 pm. It is still slightly light, so we must go through *Laufgraben* [communication ditches], leading in meandering lines to the forest in the back, where the kitchen arrives. The return takes only half an hour.”⁷³⁶ The constant lack of drinking water was the most aggravating. Wallis mentions in his letters every single detail about a canteen of coffee or a bottle of mineral water: “When I am very thirsty I sometimes think how big a treasure it is what people have at their homes in pipes. One would give a few marks for a bottle of water here, but it is nowhere to be found. And if it is somewhere, it is such that one does not even think of drinking it, since it comes from a ditch, where it stands for weeks and is full of dirt. Once a week, we receive one-third of a

734 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 16.08.1916.

735 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 10.07.1916.

736 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 5.08.1916.

mineral water bottle, but it is nothing. With God's help, if I ever return home, I will fill myself with water."⁷³⁷

Wallis tried to constantly follow what was written and said about Poland. The first information regarding the possibility of regaining independence and the existence of Poland as a satellite state of the Central Powers ignited his enthusiasm: "Information that Poland will be independent brought me joy. Let God make it happen as soon as possible. Here they mention the various nations of Austria in relation to the end of war, but one would not know the truth, that is the catch."⁷³⁸ Wallis sulks that he does not receive Polish newspapers from home. Let us add that his command of Polish, and partially of Russian, was particularly useful in the German army, which raised his self-esteem: "You write me that sending newspapers is prohibited. Was there any law issued in this case? I received the newspaper you have sent to me under the headband. The others receive journals on a daily basis. Or maybe only the Polish papers are forbidden? Write to me how it is. Here our paper arrives every day. When it comes to me, do not trouble yourself. You will cause me no hardships. I live quite well here and have good relations with everyone. Sometimes, before the attack, they are glad that I am with them. My knowledge of Polish and Russian is often helpful to many, when it comes to speaking with someone."⁷³⁹

In the summer of 1917, when he briefly returned with his regiment to Galicia, near Halych, Wallis even served as a regular translator from Ukrainian which relieved him from first-line duty, an opportunity unobtainable to a common soldier: "People here are mostly Ruthenians [Ukrainians], there are only small colonies of Poles and Masurians coming from western Galicia. The Ruthenian is a mixture of Polish and Russian, so I can communicate in it quite well and constantly have to serve as a translator to the officer or to my companions. It came very handy that I learned some Russian."⁷⁴⁰ The Ukrainians welcomed the entering Germans quite enthusiastically: "Day before our entry, there were Russians, Cossacks, and Circassians. People were overjoyed that we arrived. They brought us milk, bread, sour milk, apples, eggs, etc. They made wreaths on the roads. Because Cossacks and Circassians ruled here for three years, they plundered what they could and harassed people. Everyone was relieved. All the time, I have to serve as a translator to the officers of our company, when they buy eggs,

737 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 10.08.1916.

738 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 26.08.1916.

739 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 29.08.1916.

740 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 16.07.1917.

milk, etc. or when they talk with the locals. There are about 1800 Ruthenians and 1000 Poles. The village [Kliuvyntsi] is very beautiful and big.”⁷⁴¹ Unexpectedly for a Pole in the Emperor’s army, his knowledge of Polish allows him to spend the best period of his duty: “I have a lot to do with commanders, I have to write passes and notices most of the time, for no one knows how to write names. When I get up in the morning, even at 6 am, a lot of people wait for me next to the headquarters.”⁷⁴² Wallis also adds: “I have more food than I can eat, cause they give it everywhere you go, especially when you speak Polish.”⁷⁴³

741 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 23.07.1917.

742 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 5.08.1917.

743 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, Russia, 23.07.1917.

VI. On the Italian Front

The Italian-Austrian front in the Alps was one of the most surprising theaters of war operations in which Poles in the German regiments participated. Admittedly, a significant number of Poles fought there, but primarily in the uniforms of the Imperial-Royal Army. When transports from the Vosges traveled with the Upper Silesian divisions to the east in 1917, they expected a return to the Carpathians. Nonetheless, the goal was always unknown to the common soldier. As the inquisitive Wallis writes: “We may remain here as the reserve for longer time or we may be transferred again to the Swiss border or to Mesopotamia, or anywhere else. They can send us wherever they wish, the more of the world we visit the better.”⁷⁴⁴ This time, the German High Command decided to intervene when Austria-Hungary could not overcome the Italian positions at one of the worst segments of the front – near the Isonzo River, the Slovenian Soča, in the Julian Alps – and dispatched some of their own units from the Western Front.

In August 1917, the eleventh battle of Isonzo commenced. Italians achieved a partial success and planned to continue their offensive in autumn that year, which was known to the commands of the Central Powers. Thus, the latter wanted to begin an anticipatory counteroffensive, but Vienna was no longer capable of organizing such a large operation with its own forces alone. On August 26, 1917, the new Austrian Emperor Charles I asked William II for help. The German Emperor answered positively on September 1. The Germans sent seven divisions and heavy artillery.⁷⁴⁵

They decided for a joint attack near Isonzo and wanted to enter Tagliamento should conditions be favorable. For this new offensive – the twelfth battle of Isonzo – the Germans dispatched the newly formed 4th Army, commanded by Infantry General von Below, whose seven divisions were tried in mountain fights. They were joined by a few particularly valuable Austrian divisions. The

744 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France, 19.02.1917. The perspective of duty in Mesopotamia was not unreal for a Pole. For instance, the later field bishop of the Polish Army, priest Józef Gawlina served there. Drafted to the German Army in 1915, he was first sent to the Western Front and, in 1917, to the Near East Front. There, the English captured him in October. He wrote his memoirs from this exotic stay (J. Gawlina, *Pamiętniki 1917–1919: Wielka wojna — lata w niewoli*, Białystok 2006).

745 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 275–276.

German Army was divided into assault teams (*Angriffsgruppen*). The 117th Infantry Division and the 12th Infantry Division with the Upper Silesian regiments were in the “Stein Group” named after its commander, Infantry General von Stein from the Bavarian 3rd Corps. The group was meant to attack the towns of Tolmin and Kobarid. The Slovenian Carniola served as a concentration point. Even though the Italian knew about these preparations, the offensive ended with the German victory and stopped as far as near the Piave in early November.⁷⁴⁶

But before the Upper Silesians reached Carniola and Gorizia on this very difficult segment of the front, they underwent a special mountain training. It happened in the Vosges in August 1917. It was quite diversified. The training comprised headquarters training with maps for the officers, so that they could identify the territory of operations, while the soldiers had to adjust to the new terrain through tiresome marches and mountain climbing.⁷⁴⁷ Earlier, personnel unable to serve in strenuous mountain conditions due to age or health was substituted. New draught horses appeared as well, shod for mountain conditions and with full equipment needed to carry heavy load in special yokes. The army also exchanged the carts to light carriages supplied with chains, wheels with nails, and drag shoes. The soldiers received new boots, previously equipped only by the Alp shooters.⁷⁴⁸ Right before they left, their whole uniforms were replaced. All of the division’s units received new uniforms, designed for mountain fights, which included winter undergarments, pants reinforced with leather, rucksacks, and mountain sticks for climbing.

A new type of gas masks for low temperatures and mountain environment was a novelty for the soldiers. They were made of gum, more airtight, easier to put on, and not as tiring to breathe as those made of leather (*Ledermaske*).⁷⁴⁹

In artillery, besides the usual routine exercise based on firing from covered and uncovered fire positions, target reconnaissance received additional emphasis. Small subunits were established in order to fulfill this goal. Their role was to keep with infantry in the front line and observe flare signals given by the infantrymen in order to convey them to the main artillery positions.⁷⁵⁰ Basically, it was meant to change unit habits acquired during previous three years of position warfare back to the requirements of maneuver warfare.

746 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 234–235.

747 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 194–196.

748 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

749 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 168.

750 *Ibid.*, pp. 166–167.

The stay in the Vosges was partly utilized to rearm and modernize the battered equipment. The machine guns were replaced by a new type: model MG 08/15. Each company received six such guns and soldiers meant to use them underwent a separate training. The heavy machine gun companies had their fire power enhanced by receiving twelve guns in place of nine. Moreover, the units received special anti-aircraft machine guns.⁷⁵¹ A commission checked the cannons. Some of them were so worn out that they posed a threat to the gunners, because they constantly left unexploded shells in the barrel. Thus, they were left in the Vosges and the batteries from the relieved regiments from the Western Front were acquired.⁷⁵²

Despite hard training, the Upper Silesians remembered their stay in Alsace almost with nostalgia. The exercises happened in August and September on territories almost untouched by the war. The soldiers valued their exceptional quarters in private houses. Orchards and vineyards blossomed in the warm and sunny weather. Since there lacked workforce for field work in the Alsace villages, the soldiers willingly helped. For many, it was a substitute for their everyday life at home. On these occasions, the soldiers established great relationships with local inhabitants.

For their work done in their free time the soldiers received fresh milk, meat, eggs, fruits, and wine, which were commodities hardly seen by them in the previous three years. The food quickly improved their health. Stomach problems and colds soon disappeared.⁷⁵³

In September, the echelons moved toward Slovenia. First from Freiburg through Baden and Bavaria to Salzburg, then to the south through the Alps to Villach in Carinthia. The division's concentration point was located near Klagenfurt, which was their goal. At the moment of arriving in Austria, the division subjugated to the 25th Command in Klagenfurt. From there they reached the Julian Alps near the Isonzo.⁷⁵⁴ The breathtaking landscapes amazed the Upper Silesians: "They passed through areas at best known to the brave Upper Silesians from school lessons, beautiful areas that enchant and delight the eyes and the soul."⁷⁵⁵

751 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 236.

752 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 166–167.

753 *Ibid.*, pp. 165–166.

754 *Ibid.*, pp. 170–172.

755 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 174.

The population of Carniola, partially of German descent, observed the marching German soldiers sympathetically. However, when they approached Bled and the towering massif of Triglav, 2864 meters above sea level, the attitudes changed. The Slovenians inhabited this area in majority. They did not treat the Germans as enemies, but they did not trust them and were rather hostile, even more so as the relatively fine supply of the German Army by the Austrians came from requisitions on territories through which the German Divisions passed. Only the Upper Silesian soldiers sometimes overcame this barrier of distrust, because they could find a common language with the Slavic inhabitants.⁷⁵⁶

When they finally crossed the range of Triglav and arrived at the appointed positions, they tried to camouflage the arrival of the German troops at this segment of the front at any cost, as this was the segment of the upcoming offensive. Having relieved the Austrian units from the trenches, the Germans were ordered to remove their characteristic German steel helmets and put the Austrian kepis on. Since they did not suffice for everybody, a household production of “fanciful headgears based on Austrian caps” commenced.⁷⁵⁷

After arriving at the positions, the fine supplies ended. During the stay at the Italian Front, complaints about food repeated until the capture of Italian magazines at the end of October. Importantly, these complaints stemmed more from the necessary change of dietary habits than from the actual hunger. The Upper Silesians especially missed rye bread, but also greases and sausage, even “marmalade,” about which they often complained before. These could not be replaced by dried vegetables or canned meat. Well-known stomach problems reappeared, which in some units reached epidemic proportions. According to the soldiers, it only got better when the German quartermaster replaced the Austrian one.⁷⁵⁸

On October 24, when the offensive commenced, the Upper Silesians played a key role in its initial phase. Maybe as important as the one from the period of fights for Le Mort Homme near Verdun. They overcame the Italian positions and started the march on the Piave. The attack began with showering the Italian positions with gas grenades with previously unused phosgene. Positioned in a valley where the gas cloud settled, the Italians did not even have gas masks.⁷⁵⁹ Later, the 12th Silesian Infantry Division attacked and ruptured the Italian lines

756 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 172, 174.

757 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

758 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

759 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 275–276.

to create a breach twenty-seven-kilometers deep. Thus, the whole front up to Tolmin was encircled so that the surrounded Italian soldiers were taken captives.

The first day of the attack, which initiated the later German successes, is described by one of the soldiers of the 63rd Infantry Division as follows:

The first sound of our machine guns appeared at 7.30 am from the hills on both banks of the Isonzo River. A wall of led fell down the slope minute after minute. Were it only 8.00 am! That's the time of the attack. A grey puff of dust rose from bullet-ploughed soil, which allowed us to leave the trenches covered from enemy sight. At last, the anticipated minute came! Fizzing, our green lightning flares appeared and signaled the attack. Bended in half, waves of assaulting soldiers raised like a wall. Until that moment, they observed the waves of iron flying over their backs with a howl with ill-mannered satisfaction. Now, the soldiers raised up as a wall. Some enemy machine guns still clangored here and there, but it was already almost calm at the forefield. Our artillery enabled a leap forward as the lines of assaulting soldiers couldn't wait to enter combat, filled with the faith in success. With a single leap, we reached the first enemy trenches. The flabbergasted dizzied Italians crawled out from the half-buried holes. They remarked with hands that they want to go behind the German lines. The regiment managed to cross to the other, western bank of the Isonzo River at first try. We encountered no resistance with melee weapons. The Italians crawled out from the remaining trenches on the first call already and were led behind the German lines. The majority of the Italians had to give away their wonderful coats first, which were gladly appropriated by the German storm troops in the tiresome rain. Only the enemy's barrage was slightly felt. . . . After a few minutes, the first Italian position was entirely captured. Ceaselessly, we pushed forward and we soon entered the positions of the Italian artillery, whose cannons we captured almost without a fight.⁷⁶⁰

The German units, including the Upper Silesian regiments, pushed west toward Kobarid without meeting any stronger resistance and, in November, they reached the Piave River in the Carnic Alps. In consequence, they were supposed to enter into the Po Valley. But near the Piave River, the front stabilized due to the enormous efforts of the Italians supported by the Allies. On the flatter terrain, the Italians began to not only use infantry but also armored vehicles. Experienced from the Western Front, the German troops could fight with either grenades or frontal artillery shelling. It was particularly useful in maneuver warfare, when field cannons were immediately hoisted whenever threat appeared.⁷⁶¹ However, the Germans lacked ammunition, particularly for artillery, and its transportation through the Alps was especially difficult. Moreover, at the end of November

760 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 178.

761 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 197.

it started to be cold and rainy, which further hindered the attempts to cross the Piave River.

Having fired thousands of bullets, the cannons were mostly damaged and partly out of alignment, while unsecured ammunition stored in damp conditions was useless. Spread of over one thousand meters was not a rarity.⁷⁶² The German march no longer had the previous October impact, when the offensive commenced. Thus, the front returned to position warfare, which meant artillery shelling on both sides. After two weeks of fights, the German offensive force was almost completely exhausted, which was even worse at the moment of reinforced Italian resistance. Building a line of trenches was the only possible solution in order to maintain the already captured territories.⁷⁶³

The Upper Silesian units remained in Italy after leaving the front line until December 1917. It was one of the most eagerly remembered periods from the four years of service –thanks to the prevailing calm and loots found in untouched Italian magazines. Food products unknown in Silesia raised large interest among the Upper Silesians. They could only hear about them at best. Admittedly, many products that we today consider delicacies were not appreciated by the Upper Silesian soldiers, who leaned toward their traditional cuisine. In deserted canteens and army magazines, they found large quantities of ripened cheese, eggs, sausages, lemons, wine, grappa, and various liquors.⁷⁶⁴ As one of the soldier from the 157th Infantry Regiment writes: “Many magazines with clothing, undergarments, and food supplies were untouched [in Tolmin]. A large number of tins, chocolate, and wine remained. Everyone took as much as he could lift and gorged the captured delicacies for a long time. . . . From the town of Cividale, where a huge army magazine was located, partially plundered by the local population, supply officers brought large quantities of chocolate and [other] food commodities.”⁷⁶⁵ Despite that, the soldiers complained. They did not lack meat and wine, but there were no familiar vegetables, particularly potatoes and, even more so, bread. They tried to substitute its traditional composition with corn starch, but such baked pastry was not liked.

Cooks in the field kitchens learned from the locals to cook polenta from corn starch to which they added cheese, or meat sauces, or fruits. This *mamałyga*, as it was labeled by the Upper Silesians, also received little interest.⁷⁶⁶ It is the possible

762 Ibid., p. 204.

763 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 250–252.

764 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 178.

765 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 240–241.

766 Ibid., pp. 250–252.

source of the infamous dish in the Upper Silesia. When corn starch reappeared in the army in the fifties, it was quickly called *mamałyga*.⁷⁶⁷

In November and December 1917, the Upper Silesian, removed from the front's first line, could finally use their vacations which they anticipated for the long time. The fact that some of them travelled home for Christmas was an additional prize. Some soldiers from the Upper Silesian regiments did not visit home for as much as fifteen months.⁷⁶⁸

Those removed from the front spent yet another wartime Christmas Eve at the back of the front near the Piave River, some of them for the fourth time. This time, it was calm. On the afternoon of December 24, a mass for the whole division took place. Designated subunits participated in it. In the evening, there happened traditional meetings around Christmas trees in larger groups, commanders gave talks, and everyone sung Christmas carols. Frontline soldiers received small gifts from home. Already on December 27, the two-week period of rest ended and the division was at command's disposal again so that, in the beginning of 1918, they were directed to the Western Front again.⁷⁶⁹

These few months of fights in the Alps best sums a note by one of the soldiers from the 157th Regiment: "On March 2, 1918, a beautiful stay in Italy ended. . . . The campaign in Italy was the most beautiful period in the entire war, it remained in the hearts of all the soldiers from the regiment who experienced it as a wonderful memory."⁷⁷⁰

Such memories from the Italian front stemmed also from scarce losses, regardless the large offensive in which the Upper Silesian regiments participated. In the 157th Infantry Regiment, at the turn of October and November 1917, just six soldiers were dead and fifty-one injured.⁷⁷¹ In the 63rd Regiment, sixty-eight soldiers were dead and 359 injured.⁷⁷²

In comparison to the situation in Champagne or Flanders, these losses were minimal. Unluckily, this very front – terrible and cursed by all soldiers – was the Upper Silesians' goal in 1918.

767 Ibid., pp. 244–245. In my home the father remembered for many years with utmost disgust the "Soviet *mamałyga*" provided in army in 1953.

768 Ibid., pp. 252–253.

769 Ibid., p. 253.

770 Ibid., p. 256.

771 Ibid.

772 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 194.

VII. 1918: Failed Spring Offensive and Retreat

Last German Offensive

The 1918 change of situation on the Eastern Front after the armistice and after the later Treaty of Brest-Litovsk allowed the Germans to concentrate the entirety of forces for the planned deciding spring offensive. In this way all regiments with Polish soldiers once again moved to Flanders – just like in 1914–1915 – both those temporarily placed in the Eastern Front and those permanently stationed on the Western Front.

What preceded the preparations for the offensive was winter-time rest in 1918, in the hinterland of Flanders. The 22nd Infantry Division received as much as four weeks of rest at the front's supply base in the concentrated barrack "cities" located near the front. As usually, the soldiers were deloused before commencing leisure: visits to "soldier's houses" (soldier's canteen), movie theaters, and theaters. A new form of rest were company feasts (*Kompagniefeste*). In the face increasingly acute food shortages – even on the front – a pig allotted on this day to the "feasting" company was a desirable prize. The soldiers slaughtered and boiled the pig. The main attraction always was a black pudding called *krupniok*; which is how every regiment from the Upper Silesia called this delicacy, regardless of nationality.⁷⁷³

What proved to cause some disturbance during this relatively careless period was the continuation of mandatory political courses for soldiers. Since educational officers were not connected to particular regiments and were not known to soldiers, the lectures – in this case by professor Gehrcke from the University of Breslau, conscripted as a Landwehr officer (this name probably refers to a prominent classical philologist Alfred Gercke) – were at best ridiculed as yet another unwelcome pretext to interrupt leisure. Soldiers pretended to listen only when their commanders were present in the room.⁷⁷⁴

German High Command deemed such courses necessary due to the danger of imported revolution from Russia. More and more often, there appeared leaflets calling for the end of a senseless war; these were treated as a sign of hostile activity and an attempt to spread defeatist attitudes among the German soldiers. Officers usually ascribed the leaflets to German left-wing parties and, thus, commonly

773 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 177.

774 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 237.

labeled them as the Spartacus propaganda; from the Spartacus League, the predecessor of the Communist Party of Germany.⁷⁷⁵ Some supposed that such leaflets appeared after the holidays of so-called unclean elements (*unsaubere Elemente*) for later smuggle to the frontline. What the officers feared in particular was the possibility of direct contacts with Bolshevik agitators,⁷⁷⁶ as they clearly recognized the goals of contemporary Soviet politics and Lenin's desire to spread the revolution to Germany.⁷⁷⁷ After the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the administration sent soldiers released from Russian captivity for retraining combined with ideological indoctrination, which usually lasted two months.⁷⁷⁸

The time of rest ended on January 27, the birthday of the emperor William II, festively celebrated in Germany since before the war. All units participated in a military tattoo and there was a field service for both Catholics and Evangelists on the next day. At noon, the 22nd Infantry Division marched past the local airport while demonstrating the almost forgotten parade march (*Parademarsch*), which announced the preparation for the final offensive.⁷⁷⁹

There began a period of intensive exercise, which lasted until March. After another analysis of previous artillery field actions, the attack rules changed, this time under the influence of Lieutenant-Colonel Georg Bruchmüller. Bruchmüller regarded that the deciding factor was not the number of shot projectiles but the shortest possible time span and the concentration of shelling, meant to shock and incapacitate the enemy. The idea was not to alarm the enemy about the impending attack with long artillery shelling and, thus, not to allow the enemy to mobilize forces on the endangered segment of the frontline. Instead, the sudden forceful fire was to paralyze his actions, "blind" him, and prevent any ability to counteract. This required not only the concentration of fire but also precise shelling at well-recognized targets.

This type of attack allowed the Germans to succeed during the second stage of the war near Riga and Caporetto. Now, this very method was to be utilized on the Western front. The question remains whether its implementation stemmed from a breakthrough in operational thought or from the constant – since the nineteenth century – search for new optimal methods of blitzkrieg, necessary

775 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 211.

776 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 237.

777 R. Service, *Towarzysze. Komunizm od początku do upadku. Historia zbrodniczej ideologii*, Kraków 2008, pp. 109–110.

778 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi*, p. 95–96.

779 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 178.

for Germany in the face of constantly unfavorable balance of forces and means in the situation of a long-lasting conflict on the European continent. Once more, the mere assurance of effectiveness of the method proposed by Lieutenant-Colonel Georg Bruchmuller sufficed, so no one developed a rational alternative; just like in 1914. The breach was to happen on the eightieth kilometer line, where the Germans concentrated about a hundred cannons per each kilometer of the frontline. Never before during this war did such a state of saturation with artillery fire occur.⁷⁸⁰

The change of doctrine had to be transferred to operational and tactical levels. The army began with lectures for officers and non-commissioned officers conducted by staff and frontline officers, which pertained to the previously gathered experiences in positional warfare and the scarce experiences in a successful transfer to maneuver warfare.⁷⁸¹ Soldier exercises chiefly aimed at preparing them for conducting infantry action integrated with different kinds of weaponry and then switching to an attack with shock troops (*Stosstruppen*), thus overcoming the deadlock of positional warfare.

Due to the lack of intensive fights at the time of the campaign in Russia, the Germans could exercise the guidelines of this new strategy: the rejection of frontline attacks in favor of training storm troops that operate in small units on the level of a company or platoon. The Germans developed a few basic rules of operating such units and attempted to implement them as routine actions through repetitive field training. These rules were: attack with an element of surprise, which practically meant that the storm troops took their initial positions before dawn in order to make the reconnaissance more difficult for the enemy; communication with artillery positions with signal flares was deemed the most effective; a green flare informed the artillery and the mortar crew when the army captured enemy trenches and the fire was to immediately move deeper into the well-developed defense; connection with the battalion's command required the storming units to simultaneously set a double cable line in order to ensure constant communication; locking the stormed segment by offloading actions conducted on both flanks so that the enemy could not transfer reinforcements to the endangered segment of the front; new auxiliary equipment of storm troops were flashlights, pistols, sharpened entrenching tools, offensive grenades

780 M. Sontheimer, *Wir hauen ein Loch hinein*, in: *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 232–233.

781 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 178.

with a wooden grip, and oval defensive grenades for locking units.⁷⁸² The army gradually perfected these exercises. Kazimierz Wallis describes them when he mentions the military training in a storm troop: “Assembling a *Sturmgepäck* [storm bag]. A soldier does not take his rucksack for a storm assault in order to move faster. One puts a *Kochgeschirr* [mess tin] with an iron portion on the table, wraps it with a tightly rolled *Mantel* (coat), and then a tent. Everything is fastened together with four straps and hanged on the tape of the *Brotbeutel* [haversack] on one’s back.”⁷⁸³

Infantrymen in the storm troops were equipped differently to enhance their mobility. They were dressed in a new, less restricting type of uniform (*Feldbluse 1915*), still in grey-green. Before leaving the trenches, a soldier stuck a few offensive grenades behind his belt. Instead of a rucksack, he slung on his back a Mauser carbine (*Kar 98*) and an entrenching tool (*Spaten 74*), according to the rules carried in a canvas covering (*Mle 1887*), and a bayonet by the belt.⁷⁸⁴ A submachine gun (the still tested *Bergmann Mp18*) dedicated for such units did not really come into use, as it was developed toward the end of the war. Constructed by Hugo Schmeisser, this gun had a thirty-two round helical magazine with an additional twenty or thirty-two round box magazine. The gun could fire 450 bullets per minute in a small range of seventy meters. It was meant to be used in a direct confrontation in the trenches. Its fundamental advantage was its light weight of only 4.19 kilograms.⁷⁸⁵ However, the time of submachine guns would only come in the next war.

Some of the storm troops received additional equipment to enhance the fire power of a subunit and – even with similar manpower – have an advantage to overcome the defended trench line. These were primarily flamethrowers, utilized by the army since the battle of Verdun. These weapons worked for about three minutes and expelled a flame at a maximum distance of 20–25 meters. They now entered standard equipment of the majority of storm troops. Germans sought the possibility of immediate precise shelling from the first line of emerging pockets of resistance, usually concentrated around machine gun positions, which were difficult to combat without a frontal assault. In such situations, the soldiers employed short-distanced mine throwers and mortars. Mine throwers

782 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 159.

783 K. Wallis, *Dziennik*, 8.02.1917.

784 Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre. Armes, uniformes, matériels*, p. 100.

785 McNab, *Broń strzelecka*, pp. 98–99.

increased their accuracy over time, thus solving their previous shortcoming. In 1916, the production of 7.85 mm mine throwers commenced: they were lighter and easier in operational use by mobile units. Assembled on rotary discs, they could shoot in a full angle range.

The gradual equipment of storm troops with mortars was a breakthrough. First, the German artillery used heavy howitzers and mortars to siege fortresses and break fortified lines of resistance. During the First World War, the 420 mm howitzer called Big Bertha was obviously the most extreme example. The army used it for fortress sieges in 1914–1916. It weighed forty-three tons and was transported to the firing position in parts. Big Bertha's high explosive projectiles weighed 820 kilograms and reached the distance of almost ten kilometers.⁷⁸⁶ Its construction and method of use was strictly confidential, but Poles in the German army witnessed its use a few times.

One of the soldiers from the Greater Poland – at this time on the front near Verdun – mentions it:

They've moved Big Bertha [about] twenty kilometers closer to the front. At the edge of the forest, they've built a solid concrete basis for setting the cannon. In a broad radius around the cannon, they've strengthened the field with concrete. They've led the rails to the cannon to transport its ammunition. The cannon has a monstrous size. Its muzzle can contain an adult person. Its shells, almost as big as a man, are transported with separate trolleys straight into the mouth of the colossus. Next to the cannon, they've positioned strong shelters and traverses protecting the crew from enemy fire. In a distance, they've put faux cannons to disorient pilots. They've masked the entire position with trees and branches. Special experts have already been working on the construction for a few weeks. The work is almost finished, and in two days the shooting will commence. . . . On the designated day, we move to the very edge of the mountain to witness the shelling: it is interesting for an infantryman. A shot rang out! A deep and deaf sound rips the air and a huge cloud of smoke rises up. We plug our ears and open our mouths in order to protect our eardrums from damage. The faux cannons also shoot to disorient the enemy, but only with gunpowder to create similar clouds of smoke. A shot rings out every ten minutes. They cannot fire more often.⁷⁸⁷

In the initial period of the war, the Germans also used different heavy mortars – Austrian ones with 305 mm caliber – regarded more effective than the Big Bertha.⁷⁸⁸ Heavy mortar with 211 mm caliber (model 1916) of 16.7 tons was

786 I. Hogg, *Twentieth-Century Artillery*, London: Grange Books 2001, p. 92.

787 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, pp. 146–147.

788 Hulewicz, *Wielkie wczoraj w małym kręgu*, p. 43.

standard in the First World War. It fired high explosive shells that weighed 113 kilograms at the distance of eleven kilometers with the elevation angle up to seventy degrees.

Small mortars called grenade throwers (*Granatwerfer 1915*, *Granatwerfer 1916*, *Granatwerfer 1917*) were a breakthrough directly on the frontlines. They were perfect not only for support – as heavy mortars – but also for carrying along with quickly moving units. They weighed only about forty kilograms, with a platform of sixteen kilograms. Grenades 1,85 kilograms each were perfect for attack units due to their blast radius of thirty meters.⁷⁸⁹

This new equipment allowed a soldier to regain mobility. A storm trooper now had his hands free and could effectively hide and crawl. Now he could open fire, often more powerful than in the case of previous, linear use of larger number of infantrymen.

However, unit training and coordination required time, which the Germans increasingly lacked. First, they conducted rushed exercises for particular operations at the company and battalion level and, later, at the regiment and corps level.⁷⁹⁰ The army needed not only purely militaristic changes but also changes in the mindset of soldiers and commanders, because the initial actions from 1914 – stabilizing the front – with time became routine behavior, even without direct orders. Thus, both the possibility of and will to use entire units for conducting a maneuver decreased. It influenced all actions of the German army. Even low command levels gathered too many supplies.

Now, divisions were to be responsible for logistics. The Germans resigned from appointing targets for entire segments of the frontline because – even if since 1916 the attacks were conducted increasingly often by storm troops – they acted under the pressure to attack in a spread line, thus squandering the advantage of surprise. The army now appointed targets for particular storm subunits and – during the exercises – soldiers were supposed to achieve them regardless of the assessment of the entire battalion or regiment. Thus, commanding officers at platoon and company level received a significant amount of independence.⁷⁹¹

The equipment of a second-line soldier did not change so much as that of storm troopers. Only proven guns remained in armories, while the battered ones were changed for new ones and – increasingly more often – captured ones. The army focused greatly on auxiliary equipment: gas masks, guns, flares, communication

789 Bertin, *14–18 La grande guerre. Armes, uniformes, matérieles*, p. 95.

790 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 201.

791 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

means; but it did not enhance combat efficacy whatsoever. The machine gun company and its crew received a separate training focused on shelling methods – at a target or at an orienting point – and on eliminating frequent cases of gun jamming.⁷⁹²

The German commanders eventually understood the importance of integrating the actions of different kind of weapons, particularly artillery, anti-aircraft defense, and anti-tank units. Still, they did not construct their own tanks. Instead, they introduced machine guns on light vehicles, hooked to ammunition cars, which was supposed to ensure the enhanced mobility of such tankettes.⁷⁹³ For the same reason, the commanders sought to minimize the weight carried by infantrymen. They reduced the number of light machine guns carried by particular companies from six to five and the number of heavy machine guns from twelve to six.⁷⁹⁴

Finally, the infantry regiments received supervision over light field artillery units. Every day during exercises – on a specially prepared field with bomb craters and barbed-wire barriers – soldiers trained pulling cannons to the front line and conducting frontal gunfire. Howitzer crews trained in shooting from covered positions for precise transfers of firestorm deeper into enemy defense and to shut off the shelling directed at the attacking infantry. Later, these exercises included mortars.⁷⁹⁵ All of the regiments trained reconnaissance companies, in which soldiers were assigned to particular battalions as scouts.⁷⁹⁶

On the corps level, February exercises aimed at harmonizing unit actions. Its focus was on observing the attack of infantry regiments following a firestorm and air support. Participating soldiers understood well that the entirety of these maneuvers prepared them for the offensive.⁷⁹⁷

The German High Command transferred one million soldiers from the East and, thus, had fifty-two divisions at their command. In March, two largest armies ever used in this war faced each other at the Western Front: 192 German divisions and 178 divisions of the Triple Entente.⁷⁹⁸ The German Spring Offensive – pompously labeled as the emperor's battle (*Kaiserschlacht*) – was supposed to begin at

792 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 208.

793 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 177.

794 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 260–261.

795 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 212–213.

796 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 178.

797 Ibid.

798 Sontheimer, *Wir hauen ein Loch hinein*, pp. 232–233.

March 21. Its aim was to break the frontline near Amiens and march to the north in order to enclose the British forces – about fifty divisions – in the encirclement in Flanders and Artois.

Initially, due to their significant advantage, Germans succeeded in breaking the front for the first time since 1914. In the belt of the break from Artois to the south in the direction of the river Oise at the former French-Belgian border – at the frontline of about eighty kilometers – they concentrated about thirty German divisions in the front line and thirty divisions in the second line. Shelling commenced in the morning of March 21. Once again, they used chemical weapons on a large scale. The infantry started to move at 9:40 am. The British retreated. The 12th Infantry Division from the Upper Silesia participated in this attack as well. They landed on a well-known fragment of the front near Arras – the place nearby memorable fights of Upper Silesians near Lorette. The division occupied the spot on the right wing of the 17th Army that fought under the command of general Otto von Below.⁷⁹⁹

The Upper Silesian division commenced the fight in one of the breaking attacks on March 28, charging in the direction of Arras. A brief drumfire of the German artillery – concordant with Bruchmüller's assumptions – initiated the assault in the morning at 7:30 am. The British responded with the same and concentrated their shelling on the front line while preparing for the German attack at their starting positions. In spite of the barrage, the units of the 12th Infantry Division reached the first line of the trenches. Afterward, a storm commenced, which succeeded in reaching the line of enemy trenches and even its field artillery positions, which they captured. The 63rd Infantry Regiment achieved this as the first from the Upper Silesian division and, thus, found itself under fire from both wings. Other regiments did not succeed in such a spectacular manner. They were stuck, pinned down by fire, because the rest of the division did not move forward at the planned pace. Fights lasted the entire day with unprecedented fierceness. One of this unit's soldier describes it in his memoirs:

My platoon must move on. "Attention! Jump! Forward! Forward." Rushed soldiers rise and quickly move forward half-bent. The English machine gun cuts us terribly, so we throw ourselves to the ground once more. We catch breath, hearts pound with heavy blows, tongues stick to the palate. We must take a breath, since the artillery fire ceased and there is no point in conducting the attack without cover. At any price we must retain communication with our second battalion marching alongside. . . I already try a frontal attack with a small number of my people. We freeze, mouths wide open, everyone, including me, holds a gun firmly in his hands. Forward! We move and shout loudly. One

799 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 200.

more look back, yes – they follow me, they spread into an extended line. “Forward.” At this point our artillery directs a terrific fire at the Brits. Our artillery flushes the “Tommys” out. With a single shot it silences the machine gun that held us close to the ground for such a long time, and we can now breathe with ease. Slightly to the right and without leaving our field of attack, I see many of our soldiers to the right, in the villages of Marlière and Guémappe [about ten kilometers to the south-east from Arras]. Fantastic view, the attack happens in a broad front, we are on the left flank but still without contact with our regiment on the wing. We are maybe about 400 meters from the enemy’s positions, which are on the hill near the road [leading to Arras, today road D939]. Then something terrible happens! Our units, with no possibility of taking cover – there were only loudly rustling weeds and a few shell craters – are captured under a fire barrage. The Brits succeeded in taking the position with reinforcements transferred from behind and their lookout precisely directed the artillery fire. They had to expect the attack, because shots fall now in neat rows, one next to the other. It looks like a chain of soil fountains that rip people apart. Shards plow through the air over our heads, shrapnel spit with their scalding lead bullets, fall down, and the machine gun in front of us – initially far away – gradually and inevitably comes nearer and cuts as if with millions of needles. No one will come out alive from here! We lie for a while on our bellies, we stick our arms under the steel helmets, but we would like to have one more helmet in front of our heads. We are at the brink of madness! In a few minutes, our lying here will change into what is called *Heldentod* [hero’s death]. Each second means only waiting for one of many shells, regardless the caliber. Never during this war had I such a heinous feeling of lying in the open field as a shooting target in close proximity to shooters. And in the ringing rumble of a battle on an unprecedented scale! This attack occurred in an infernal place! All companies disorganized! The enemy still fully ready, barriers at the forefront still good and unmoved, enemy’s artillery – mostly retreated from endangered positions at night – was now hoisted again to the front, and – moreover – the planes! We can’t see our troops at all. And those swine shoot at us from up close, flying low, they “fuck” us with machine guns and throw bombs at us; is this what they called “conquering the world?” No, that is enough, something must be done./“Dembon!” I mutter with dried lips. “Dembon, the 3rd Company swerves to the left, bypasses the hill from the left, but we crawl, no one gets up.” Soon there is humming along the front: “To the left, to the left – bypass the hill.”/Now the attack commences; one which the history of wars hardly ever saw. Not on our feet, no, literary on our bellies! I begin, with tips of my toes, knees and elbows, without raising my corpus, I move forward one centimeter after another, just after me comes August Dembon, my comrade from Upper Silesia, father of three, a Landwehr soldier! After a few minutes, I spot a darker belt of tightly growing leaves of grass. And then – what joy – it is a furrow with water about twenty-thirty centimeters deep, which leads toward the enemy. This way then! Like savages, we work with those few body parts on which we can support ourselves. No one dares to raise their body, not to mention their head. We crawl like bugs, like caterpillars. And now, in this damp deep ditch surrounded with weeds on both sides – which grows here since 1914 – we move quickly forward. Naturally, with a gun in our hand, with cursed hand grenades, ammunition containers, and pistols on our bellies. All of it hinders us, but we will need this

junk, if we will eventually reach our goal, about 300 meters diagonally from us./But now the fire luckily goes above us, along the side of the hill, on which we try to crawl. The enemy sits scared in his hiding, but he has shooting embrasures that shoot over us. It is our rescue and his doom. Someone shouts: "Fire the green light flares!"/"No, damn it, no, don't shoot, we will give away our own position! Forward." Lungs wheeze in desperation, our stuff is plastered with mud, sweat drips from the helmet and the neck to the dirty nose, but with our last strength, we carry on through this salutary ditch with water. We are no further than a hundred meters away from the barrier in front of the English barrette when. . . our artillery fires at the top of the hill, one round after another. Apparently, our observers noticed that the attack broke. So now we lie between our first line and just next to the enemy. If our artillery misfires, we die under our own fire! It is unimaginably tragic! We escaped death a thousand times only to be doomed by our own people. No, damn it, no./I reach for my flare gun. I load it with white signaling powder, I lie on my side and shoot diagonally upward to the right. It sizzles and rises, then the bright flame disperses about one hundred meters above into small stars. I shoot once more. Now those in the back must now that, here, between positions, there are German units. Yes! And now the last struggle. To regroup after this brief interruption that allowed us to get a breather. I mutter to the back "Prepare to attack, put bayonets on." Dembon mutters it to the rest. I wait for another minute and shoot one more white flare, then jump out and rush fiercely through the water ditch for about ten steps, reaching the machine gun from the right, and throw myself into the mud again! My people jump like cats, each time moving a few steps forward. I jump again for a few brief, energetic leaps and lie low under the last barrier. To hell, I've got bad luck. It is densely tangled. So I scream to the back: "Shears to the front!" I fiercely fight to catch breath, I crouch in a fresh crater. After a few minutes, Dembon screams: "Attention, shears."/He throws them into my crater. To the wire then. With both hands, I catch the long ends of shears, I crawl to the edge of the crater and "clank," the first cut wire bounces back, then the second one. But lying in this way I greatly endanger myself. If the enemy throws a hand grenade, I am done. I immediately get a different idea./Back to my crater. I think and act at the same time. I tremble from tension and I unbolt the lids from the grips of my two offensive grenades, then I crouch ready to throw them. I yank away the fusing rope and throw them in a wide arch over the wire barrier. Then I put my head deep into the bottom of the crater. After a few seconds, a well-known singing rumble reaches us as white clouds of smoke appear and fall down. Then I rapidly jump out of the crater and cut the remaining wires. Now it is done! I look to the side, more people jump after me. Just those to the right still lie under the machine gun fire. Naturally there are casualties, but who cares, we can't take care of everyone. August is nearby. I scream: "Hurray!" This is our first hurray in a long time. But then there is no more "Hurray," just a scream, a sort of hoarse gurgling, because our voices refuse to obey us. We are completely exhausted. For a moment, we observe the entirety of enemy's positions. A few steps before us, there is a sand bag construction riddled with bullets and shards. In a single instant, a bunch of surviving company soldiers is beside me. They scream, with bayonets on their tightly gripped guns, with faces reddened from exhaustion and emotions, with sweat running in streams, in disheveled uniforms and helmets slipped over their eyes, thrown to the

neck, or lost altogether – and they storm the hill from the left flank! We jumped into partially destroyed trenches and then we receive dumb machine gun fire directly from the front, nearby. Some soldier who jumped into the trench is shot in the head. I scream to the back: “Don’t run, just crawl! MG fire in the front.” Others fall to the ground, it is not that they understood the order, but they reacted to the bullets cutting everything over the scarp. . . . Above us the English artillery shoots along the hill’s back. We, in the trenches, receive fire from “Tommys” and their Hotchkissons. “Wait, now you will see, you scoundrels.” Noncommissioned officers and all the soldiers throw grenades! Both of the non-commissioned officers throw them simultaneously along the trench, then we jump one or two barbettes to the front, then others throw their grenades. . . . We hear screams in direct vicinity, but also the last shots of the machine gun. I see one of my non-commissioned officers throwing his gun to the side, yanking his entrenching tool from behind his belt and hits an English with it. We are going to help him./At the next shooting position, a drama happens. With an animal howl, a soldier massacres the skull of his enemy with frightening blows. There is no longer a scream, just a single, brief, hoarse gurgle, and the Englishman falls to his side. These are just seconds, but they pass slowly, as in a dream. We get the impression that this happens somewhere else. A tumbled three-legged machine gun lies there; it cost us so much blood! The Englishmen escape from us in a hurry. I push away a non-commissioned officer with a still bloodied tool and shoot the escaping soldiers at their backs. After the first three or four shots the first one falls to his knees, holds his head with both hands and wheezes. I jump over him and fire again, shot after shot, then the second one falls to the ground. I can no longer breathe; I salivate like a dog. My arms tremble. Then a soldier following me grabs me and pushes aside. And this saved me. I could not see this. My eyes were covered in sweat while I, possessed with superhuman tension, observed the struggle as if it from behind a curtain./The escaping Englishmen turned around. Apparently, our right wing reached the top of the hill and spread from the right. The enemy desperately sought an escape route. Anyway, then a «Tommy» came running with a bayonet on his gun. And the soldier, who pushed me aside and pinned to the trench’s wall, fought with him with bayonets. None of them could stab the enemy. They crossed the butts of their guns. Then another of my men jumped to them and crushed the Brit’s skull with the butt of his gun with a hideous crack. What a macabre sight!⁸⁰⁰

This attack, suggestively narrated by the officer from the 63rd Infantry Regiment, lasted until dusk and continued on the next day. Decimated and exhausted soldiers – from the regiment and the entire 12th Infantry Division – retreated from the front on the following day. The battle of Arras did not end with a success of the Germans. The Upper Silesians ascribed this primarily to the lack of surprise which could be hardly expected in the face of air reconnaissance at the Allies’ disposal. The English expected the attack and – before it began – forsook the front line just to retransfer to it when the artillery fire was directed at the back

800 Ibid., pp. 202–208.

positions. The German gas attack misfired as well, since gas projectiles headed at the forsaken positions. Moreover, the western wind pushed the gas cloud away from the English positions.⁸⁰¹

Meanwhile, the 22nd Infantry Regiment, which from the first day of the offensive fought to force the Lys River, managed to cross it at their segment. The Allies did detonate the bridge on the road in Bac-Saint-Maur near Sailly-sur-la-Lys during their retreat, but the reserve lieutenant Imiolczyk took advantage of a small sluice and crossed with his unit to the other side, captured the bridgehead, and managed to secure the position. This enabled the organization of the river crossing. Under heavy artillery fire, the regiment concentrated near the demolished bridge and waited for sappers to build a crossing. The plan succeeded, but the enemy's artillery constantly fired at this improvised bridge, also with gas projectiles. Despite that, one battalion managed to cross the river and started to move to the north toward the town of Croix du Bac, two kilometers away; but they did not manage to hold the town. The battalion had to retreat because, without the support of their own artillery, which remained on the other bank of the Lys, it was impossible to defend the position. Thus, the soldiers remained at the bridgehead for two days.⁸⁰²

On April 9, 1918, the second phase of the German offensive commenced, this time in Flanders. At the beginning, they managed to achieve the break near the Lys River as well. Initially, the 157th Regiment and 38th Reserve Regiment succeeded a little near Kemmel. After the 6th Army captured Armentières, there commenced an assault on this fortress, not captured since 1914. Even though the Germans managed to capture a part of this hill range at the end of April, they did not make a decisive break. The situation stabilized, which meant the fiasco of the entire Spring Offensive, even if the repositioning of the front to the West raised the German soldiers' hopes of a prompt end of war: "Probably soon also paris [sic!] will be emptied, and the offensive will soon strengthen when the weather gets better. The offensive in Italy will soon begin as well. In Flanders, they move forward and one can expect that the war will end in summer."⁸⁰³ In this second phase of the German offensive in 1918 participated the units of the 117th Infantry Division, among others: the 157th Infantry Regiment, the 38th Reserve Regiment,

801 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 223.

802 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 235

803 Letters of K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, France, 28.04.1918.

the 22nd Regiment, and the 21st Field Artillery Regiment, which fought between the Lys River and Armientières in the 6th Army's reserve.⁸⁰⁴

There was hardly any optimism in Flanders. After the terrible experiences near Somme and Ypres, the soldiers connected this area to the most tragic period of the war and had little hope to break the Allies' resistance in this place from the beginning. The trenches that they inhabited – just as bad as two years earlier – strengthened their conviction. They could hardly be labeled fortifications. The position occupied by the batteries of the 21st Field Artillery Regiment covered the area of about 200 square meters of a completely flat surface, without any possibility of hiding; there were only scarce tussocks of sallow, where they set the cannons. They located ammunition supplies in flat holes and covered them with either corrugated sheets or tarpaper. Despite draining the trenches surrounding the entire position, supplies were not safe from dampening.

As usually, water appeared everywhere, even in a dugout just tens of centimeters deep. The soldiers built their hideouts just one or two shovels deep, after surrounding them with sacks, they could sit listlessly at best, with no protection over their head. These “rabbit holes” were the only protection of an individual soldier. They protected from machine gun fire but not from mortar grenades or howitzer shells.⁸⁰⁵ The English routinely concentrated their shelling on characteristic points – ruined buildings and scarce sallow tussocks – which allowed the Germans to prevent even larger losses.⁸⁰⁶

In the Upper Silesian Regiments, decimated after the previous fights, losses were large, but not as heavy as during the preceding three years of the war. At the end of June, during the fights near Ypres, just one battalion of the 157th Infantry Regiment – there is no precise data regarding the remainder of the battalions – lost forty-eight soldiers, 116 were injured and eighty missing. Assuming the standard population of a battalion – unreal for long time now as companies had about 60–70 percent of their initial numbers – its numbers fell by 25 percent.⁸⁰⁷ Severe losses forced the Regiment's command to reorganize. On June 15, the 11th Reserve Infantry Regiment was disbanded and some of its units formed a newly established 11th Grenadier Regiment (*Grenadier Regiment Nr. 11*) as the third infantry regiment in the 117th Infantry Division. Some subunits of the former 11th Regiment moved to the 157th Regiment and, thus, compensated the losses

804 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 260–261.

805 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 234.

806 *Ibid.*, p. 235.

807 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 285

from Kemmel. The number of soldiers in companies reached 120–130 people. Both integrated regiments conducted an overview of weaponry and selected only working guns for the further fights.⁸⁰⁸

In very limited fights near the Lys River, in which the 22nd Infantry Regiment participated for just two days, one hundred soldiers died, 401 were injured, and 43 went missing. In sum, the losses amounted to over 5 percent of the initial state.⁸⁰⁹ Data for the entire offensive regarding the 38th Infantry Regiment in March and April shows the true scale of these losses. The Regiment lost 176 soldiers, 623 were injured, and 56 went missing; this amounted to 26 percent of the initial state.⁸¹⁰

The high percentage of the injured – eliminating them from service either for many weeks or permanently – stemmed not only from enemy's actions but also from the unsatisfactory development of military medicine and care for such a high number of wounded and injured. Neither the largest engagement of medical service nor any organizational actions could compensate the lack of doctors, paramedics, stretcher-bearers, and medicaments. The exhaustion of human and material resources of the German army slowly became more visible.

During the fights near Armentières, a doctor from the 22nd Infantry Division described these problems with resignation:

We owed the most to stretcher-bearers and paramedics. They worked tirelessly during the battle, sometimes returning to the field for three or four times, despite the barrage fire and the hail of iron falling on their heads. If shots were fired anywhere in the trenches and there were injured, then they tried to get hold of anything which could put an end to suffering and ensure shelter. Then a call sounded: "Paramedic!" It meant, "stretcher-bearer to the front!" The red cross band did not provide any protection but one still had to quickly reach the injured. . . . Near Armentières, under the heavy fire of English machine guns, the number of injured constantly rose. Doctors in a small field hospital worked under constant fire. When they were informed that the regiment adjutant was injured, four stretcher-bearers immediately launched themselves and pulled him away from under fire, but only after three hours. He lied in a small crater. Despite enemy fire, they crawled and reached him; then they had to wait for dusk to carry him away on a tent canvas. Just in the eight days of the battle of Armentières, in our regiment, one paramedic and four stretcher-bearers died, and five paramedics and eight stretcher-bearers were injured.⁸¹¹

808 Ibid., p. 279.

809 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 192–197.

810 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 235.

811 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 197–199.

The German regiments suffered from increasingly severe supply shortages. Not only the command treated the offensive as final. The Germans were conscious that, soon, they would no longer be capable of challenging the Allies economy-wise, as they already received support from the Americans for one year. The memories from capturing the English trenches show such a frame of mind. Soldiers were mostly concerned with gathering comestible goods; Germans did not witness such an abundance of nourishment for a long time. Near Arras, seeing the heaps of goods, the Upper Silesians supposedly said: “These scoundrels [*Pierunna*] guzzled a whole lot of stuff.” It is no wonder, they uncovered heaps of biscuit cans, canned milk, chocolate, and cigarette boxes in enemy dugouts. Cans with English corned beef were the most popular. The soldiers also valued other items found in the trenches: shaving tools, soap – made “from real fat” as they enviously wrote – uniform parts, and mostly undergarments.⁸¹² When they captured the enemy’s trenches, they scrupulously restocked their food supplies. After crossing the Lys River, Soldiers from the 38th Infantry Regiment concluded with satisfaction:

The field kitchen did not keep up, but due to the offensive’s progress we marched through an area with a variety of supplies. Mostly they stumbled upon English and Portuguese depots and messes. Nobody starved anymore. It could lead to a catastrophe, especially the copious amounts of wine and champagne found everywhere and the large amounts of greasy food, because the people from all units – unaccustomed neither to greasy food nor alcohol, and certainly not to enjoying champagne – unfortunately received too much of it./Already during the stop near Estaires [at the center of the German offensive] the command ordered a strict prohibition of self-willed “requisitions” but, nonetheless, one could witness scenes that we’d rather not witness. It was not pretty and in line with military discipline, but it has to be emphatically acknowledged that these people, deprived of everything for years and really suffering from starvation and thirst, were now suddenly unleashed. They witnessed how much their enemies had at their disposal and how much they squandered. But when the first negative effects of abusing alcohol appeared, order and discipline were quickly restored.⁸¹³

After months of deprivation, even Kazimierz Wallis started to treat the war as the former servicemen from the Thirty Years’ War: “Having returned from positions, many had a lot of undergarments from the English storages and wanted to get rid of their own. Some of it is slightly dirty but one can wash it for a dime, so it is worth taking. . .”⁸¹⁴

812 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 214.

813 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 213.

814 Letters of K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, France, 25.04.1918.

But there were also different, more macabre means of acquiring food by the German soldiers in 1918. According to the memoirs of a Polish soldier from Pomerania. . . they used corpses of the English soldiers lying on the no man's land:

In grassy places, there are human remains. I crawl to such a place. The tussock of dry grass becomes apparent in the dark. I cautiously insert my hand. I feel slimy bones of a corpse. Hugged to the ground I search around the tussock and find a tattered rucksack. I warily lead my hand and search further. I palpate the items. I put into my pocket a glittering object. Then a comb, a fork, a box, and finally the most important: two tins of canned food. I look for my colleagues: they struggle nearby. I move to the next tussock, insert my hand in the grass, and touch the head of a corpse. I manipulate my hand near its rucksack, I rip it apart and – without paying attention to the rest of the items – I take one tin can. And further – to the next tussock.

I put my hand into thick grass, and it sinks in a mass; those are corpses' guts or rotten grass. I wipe my hand, lead it further. These are leg bones. I grasp from a different side. Head – eyeholes and nose. The corpse lied face up. I insert my hand next to the ground and yank the rucksack away. After a moment, I take two tins of canned food. . . . I have five tins, my colleague has four, and another colleague seven – one of them is shot through. This one is naturally not good. . . . We share our tins only with those suffering from hunger. We warm them up over Hindenburg lights,⁸¹⁵ which give such heat as the sun on *Kaisergeburtstag* [Emperor's birthday] and we soon dig in.⁸¹⁶

The Germans attempted more offensive actions, but no longer on such a scale. These were: the third offensive – between Soissons and Reims in Champagne – from May 27 to June 3; the fourth offensive between Montdidier and Noyon on June 9–14; and the fifth offensive near Marne – the so-called second battle of Marne – on July 15–17, 1918. Then, for the first time, they utilized chemical weapons on a mass scale, which proved to be a massive success in the first days due to favorable weather conditions. Karol Małłek, who rode with his battery in the first wave of the offensive, observed the effects of this attack near Picard Laon:

At 1.00 am, a cannonade begins. It turns the silent night into a flaming inferno. The gas drumfire lasted until 5.00 am and then the infantry commenced the storm on Chemin de Dames and the mountain Winterberg. At 5.40 am, we [the battery] galloped forward in battle formation. When moving past the French lines, we saw areas full of gassed French infantrymen and whole artillery teams ready to retreat, gassed as well! They piled up on the roads and on the fields. It was an uncanny sight. We moved for three days and finally the front stopped on the third day in the afternoon. The Frenchmen resisted fiercely.⁸¹⁷

815 A primitive lamp fueled by fat, called after the chief commander of the German Army.

816 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, pp. 90–91.

817 Małłek, *Z Mazur do Verdun. Wspomnienia 1890–1919*, p. 241.

Even though the Spring Offensive proved to be moderately successful, its success was perceived as vital, due to the stability of the front until 1918, but these victories had no strategic impact. Both the attempt to cut the British off in the north-east and the second after 1914 attempt at encircling Paris from the north ended in a fiasco.

Some of the positions occupied by the Germans were worse than their starting ones. The 157th Infantry Regiment – part of the 4th Army at this time – filled the positions near Ypres captured from the English. But there were no communication trenches, barriers were too weak and, instead of pit-houses, there were only holes in the ground clumsily covered with corrugated sheets. The entire area was a crater-covered battle aftermath of the former field between positions. There was not a single shrub in the field of vision. One can hardly imagine a more depressing sight showing the result of four years of war than this battlefield in Flanders:

The entire area behind the first line for eight-nine kilometers – due to heavy fights conducted here – changed into a single monstrous field of communication trenches. There was not a single tree, not a shrub from former parks, forests, and hedgerows, which used to encrust the once monotonous Flanders scenery. Where there used to stand beautiful castles and abundant villages, now remained only ruins and rubbles of former houses. There were some places where wooden plates informed of a village's location. Only ruined places, nothing but ruins, as far as one can see. The old trenches, destroyed and desolated, crisscrossed the territory. Millions of bullets ploughed the soil so that no ascent was to be seen. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of shell craters, filled to the brink with muddy, gas-poisoned water rendered any moving through this terrain impossible. Only some roads and a few paths remained, on which one could move only by foot, taking advantage of the planks put over craters and handles allowing to cross a plank without falling into water and drowning. But that is precisely where the enemy concentrated their artillery fire at night, when it was the most crowded, thus causing enormous casualties.⁸¹⁸

The lack of belief in winning the war spread in the German regiments. Despite the advantage on many frontline segments, the failures always stemmed from the same cause, repeating since the battle of Somme. The increasingly visible logistic and technological superiority of the allies was not everything; what was more dangerous was the fatigue of utterly exhausted units. Hopes for a victorious end of the conflict died along with the fiasco of the March Offensive. When the Germans moved part of artillery away from Flanders in order to commence an offensive in Champagne – the Germans could gain advantage at the segment of

818 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 282.

planned break only by weakening different parts of the front – the dominance of the English fire was overwhelming and they did not find any means of effective counteraction. From that point onward, the 157th Infantry Regiment was constantly under heavy artillery fire. Painstakingly built trenches and pit-houses were almost immediately completely ruined, with no casualties for the Allies. Artillery fire lasted even at night, thus making safe movement at the backline impossible. Scarce supplies reached the Germans even less regularly.⁸¹⁹

The passivity of the German aircraft was equally discouraging for the German soldiers. No one could negate the air superiority of the Allies in 1918. Although there still occurred sporadic aerial duels with German fighters, each time they were glaringly outnumbered by the French and the English. At Easter, April 1, the German soldiers from the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment gloomily observed such a duel over Lorette. Thirty-five allied planes, despite anti-aircraft artillery fire, shot down German scouting balloons with impunity and forced their crews to jump with parachutes; an event undefended by scarce German fighters.⁸²⁰ Several days later, on April 12, on a sunny windless day, the English flew with no reaction of the German airforce whatsoever. They moved in compact squadrons protected by fighters and bombed the marching columns at the backline.

After throwing down one load of bombs and grenades, they disappeared and soon returned with a fresh supply.⁸²¹ English planes shooting at night from machine guns at marching German columns and their concentration points constituted a new method of air warfare in 1918. First, the pilots unloaded flares hanging on parachutes and then conducted a precise fire targeting any place where they spotted movement.⁸²²

The doubt of a soldier of the Upper Silesian 22nd Infantry Regiment of the fights in Flanders reveals the sense of doubt among the German soldiers: “Constant artillery duels and aircraft bombings fatigued us very much. Moreover, we were forced to wear gas masks for long hours. This purely physical exhaustion was accompanied by depression and bad mood, which is why we could no longer continue the offensive commenced on April 9 toward Calais. Could it be the first time when we sensed fear and asked whether we could end this war with a victory? These are the worst thoughts for a soldier.”⁸²³

819 Ibid., p. 275.

820 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 207.

821 Ibid., p. 213.

822 Ibid., p. 240.

823 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 202.

These clear signs of incoming collapse made many Poles in the German Army to desert. Regrettably, we do not have much of precise information about Poles' shift to the other side of the front survived. The general estimate of desertions in the German Army until 1917 equaled around twenty thousand. They mostly escaped to neutral countries like Switzerland, Denmark, or the Netherlands. However, this phenomenon gained in intensity after the failure of the Spring Offensive in 1918.⁸²⁴

A decision to desert – or even surrender – was neither easy nor safe in the frontline's environment. During the fights near Loos, in September 1917, soldiers from the 1st battalion of the Upper Silesian 157th Infantry Regiment did not want to surrender despite encirclement. They organized an improvised perimeter defense and succeeded in keeping the enemy at 600 meters distance. The company's commander decided to surrender only when he discovered that there is no more ammunition and the next counterattack is impossible: "We destroyed our weapons so that no one could use them anymore, we burnt all of documentation, and we sent a peace envoy with a white flag and a written declaration. In this way, three companies of the regiment surrendered." After the war, the British *Daily Chronicle* reported on this event more precisely: "German officers – at whom surrender demands were shouted – continued to shoot their guns and later attack with knives. Ten hours from the attack and the English entry to Loos, some German subunits with their officers held on to their positions and continued their desperate defense."⁸²⁵

Both sides heard of crimes committed on prisoners of war. An English pilot, captured in Flanders in November 1917 by the soldiers of the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment, was astounded by the fact that he was not shot on the spot. He told that in his squadron everyone was convinced that the Germans are capable only of "pillage, rapes, and immediate shooting of captives."⁸²⁶ However, Kazimierz Wallis writes in his letter that prisoners of war he saw treated captivity as a kind of salvation from imminent death.

The captives only feared German brutality of which they read in propaganda texts: "All the time, injured and captives came from the positions. I spoke with two of them. One was from a hand grenade unit and came from the Spanish border. The other was an infantryman and came from Cambrai near Somme.

824 S. Storz, *Krieg gegen den Krieg*, in: *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 77–78.

825 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 73.

826 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 197.

Both were glad that the war will soon end for them, but they were afraid of beatings in German captivity.”⁸²⁷

During the war, information conveyed by the captives partially verified these spine-chilling tales of repressions in prisoner-of-war camps. Poles who still served in the German Army could learn about their colleagues’ fate thanks to the Red Cross. It served as an intermediary in delivering correspondence over both sides of the front. Such letters were not intercepted by the German command, even in the case of Polish soldiers. This is proven by information conveyed by Wallis. In November 1917, he received letters from his battalion colleagues, who were taken captive in Flanders: they informed that they are already in France and calmly await for the end of the war.⁸²⁸

Crossing the frontline was rare, as it was dangerous and – as one of the Poles talking with A. Wroński soberly observes – it could pose a threat for soldiers’ families even after the war: “When Germans discover that we willingly crossed, they will consider us deserters, and when we return from captivity they will imprison us or execute without providing maintenance to wife and children. My poor wife, my poor children, what would they do.”⁸²⁹

Hence, the French propaganda failed just like the one described near Loret or the one after the creation of the Polish Army in France. The French used astounding methods to convince Poles from the German regiments to changes sides:

The French send a dog to our ditches with a bundle of newspapers and a letter strapped to its back. The gasping dog popped in the ditch and started to fawn on us. It’s a sign that the French have dogs to help them in the front ditches. Dog’s skin is somewhat cut and newspapers are jagged – probably from barbed wire. We seize this unusual shipment, but alas – we cannot read it. Where is Molier? He will read it. Molier is an Alsatian, who is perfectly fluent in French. . . . Come on – tell us what they write – we harass him – for we are very curious. Molier is somewhat incredulous. He takes the newspapers, skims through the headlines and dates. Eventually, he believes in our words and starts to translate the letter first. “Do you know that Italy declared war on Germany! . . .”, “Do you know that Germans win battles in Russia only by betrayal? . . .”, “Do you know how many thousands Germans fell during the war? . . .”, “Get out from there – otherwise we will oust you in eight days, or come to us, we have white bread, meat, and plenty of wine.”⁸³⁰

827 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France, 6.05.1917.

828 Letters of K. Wallis to his brother Stanisław Wallis, France, 30.11.1917.

829 Wroński, *Pamiętnik nieznanego żołnierza*, p. 76.

830 *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114.

In this case this attempt missed, and – as ordered by the German command – the soldiers sent the dog back to the French trenches with German propaganda strapped to its back.

The Retreat

The lack of a deciding victory in the Spring Offensive had a detrimental effect on soldiers' morale, but it did not discourage the German High Command, which intended to continue offensive action. They prepared the next offensive in Flanders, near Ypres, under the code name of "Hagen" with the use of, among others, the 117th Infantry Division.

As usually, it started with exercises to integrate the recreated regiments. The 117th Infantry Division stationed near Bruges for three weeks. They tried to implement an anticipatory tactic of attacking pockets of resistance and strengthened positions on a terrain adjusted to battlefield conditions: foreground covered with shell craters, crossfire of machine guns, artillery shelling. The German High Command finally noticed the real threat of tanks and tried to prepare an infantry attack with simple anti-tank weaponry; mainly machine guns and grenades. Once more, the army exchanged and repaired infantry weapons and supplied regiments with vehicles needed for a mobile war. From mid-July, the army already conducted great division and corps exercises, during which they tried to again harmonize the use of different kinds and types of weapons: machine guns, artillery, mortars. However, they had to abruptly interrupt this training to concentrate on a more pressing matter: the counteroffensive of the Allies, so they switched to practice active defense.⁸³¹

Already much earlier, after experiences from 1916, the Germans abandoned the rule of holding the trenchline at all costs. Thus, in 1918 this continued model of defense relied not on segments with rows of shooters but on pockets of resistance surrounding machine gun nests. Behind them, in the second line, were combat groups (*Kampfgruppe*) introduced to the battle at the moment of transferring the barrage to the back. Both the training of this tactic and the preparation of communication trenches and positions strengthened with machine gun nests became the main task of German regiments in the second half of July 1918.⁸³²

831 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 286–287.

832 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 203.

The 22nd Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment prepared for it as well. It stationed under the Kemmel hill, where both sides suffered from massive losses during the Spring Offensive. The position captured on August 1 was on the western slope of the mountain. The task of the regiment was to hold it. Despite its small height – 156.7 meters above the sea level – Kemmel provided domination over the Plain of Flanders and, thus, enabled far-reaching artillery fire. In order to protect the hills captured by the Germans, the 22nd Regiment prepared an echeloned defense and trained retreat from the first line under a fire storm. During the Allies offensive, the regiment kept the hill until the end of August.⁸³³

Despite these preparations and local successes, preventing the expected Allied offensive on the entire front was impossible for the exhausted German army. The attack near Amiens on August 8, 1918, with tanks and aircrafts, was decisive. “The darkest hour of the German Army” meant the collapse on the segment of almost twenty kilometers in many places of the German frontline. Stationed several kilometers to the south-east of Amiens, the 157th Infantry Regiment participated in this disastrous first day of the battle. The description of the fights of August 8–10 indicates how weakened were the German units in comparison to the British ones:

On August 8, the 2nd and 3rd battalion fought and tried to stop a flanking tank attack, but were encircled, and the soldiers had to break through toward the retreating units. The enemies continued their attack. At 10:30 am, they captured a nearby town of Wiencourt. Communication with the regiment’s headquarters was interrupted. There was a threat of encirclement to the entire regiment and the losses continued to grow. The Germans defended against the British attacks mainly with light machine guns. At noon, the English attacked again with a massive use of low flying airplanes and tanks in unprecedented numbers. The planes shot machine guns and threw grenades, thus combatting our light machine gun nests; we managed to bring down four planes. We repelled the tanks as well and destroyed many. Despite that, on the north wing, [at Amiens’ side], the surrounding enemy’s army moved deeper into the territory and numerous tanks invaded deeply into the battalions’ backside, circling in characteristic loops. We only managed to prevent the British onslaught with a large number of casualties, around 3:00 pm, and create a new, temporary line of resistance before 5:00 pm. There, we defended against the next attack in small, separated groups commanded by officers and noncommissioned officers. The enemy’s dominance in tanks, artillery and aircraft was enormous.⁸³⁴

The tank attack near Amiens proved to be decisive. Differently than in 1917, the infantry did not manage to stop it with anti-tank weaponry at their disposal:

833 Ibid., pp. 204–205.

834 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 291–292.

The enemy fully succeeded in their surprise attack. Storm groups and tanks appeared on starting positions shortly before the attack. The preparation for the attack was not noticed by the German air force, because the Allies dominated in the air. There was only one report from the air force concerning the appearance of numerous tanks. . . . This report and reports of frontline units about motors' clangor did not lead to conclusions regarding the gravity of the impending tank offensive. For the 2nd Army, the course of the attack was a complete novelty as well. At 5:20 am, there commenced hurricane artillery fire directed both at the front and back positions. At this time, infantry and tanks moved to the starting positions. At 5:23 am, artillery shelling changed into a firestorm moving from the frontline to the back, and simultaneously a mass of tanks started to move from the 4th English Army: 360 heavy tanks, ninety-six light tanks, and sixteen armored vehicles, which invaded the German trenches accompanied by infantrymen. We were not prepared for such a rapid attack. In many places, the German infantry did not manage to leave their hatches in time, since communication failed in the hurricane fire and the flares were invisible in the fog. The enemy covered our artillery positions – previously spotted from the air – with drumfire, so that only few of artillery crewmen managed to transfer to barrage in time. . . . The British dominance in tanks was more severe, because the German side lacked effective means of anti-tank defense and one could not expect it anytime soon.⁸³⁵

In order to combat increasingly better armored tanks, the Germans still shot at them with machine guns. They also tried to set enemy machines on fire. At this point, there were anti-tank cannons (*Tankabwehrgeschütze*) and anti-tank rifles (*Tankgewehre*) available, but they were relatively scarce, while cannon crews needed training in this new method of battle to effectively stop the wave-like attacks of British tank squadrons. In August 1918, they lacked the time. A substantial factor limiting the efficacy of anti-tank action was – once again – problems with logistics. Insufficient ammunition – both for machine guns and rifles – linked with constant fire often meant infantry shooters could only combat tanks with hand grenades.⁸³⁶

Kazimierz Wallis, who was at this front at that time, writes discouraged:

From 19 to 24 of the last month, we were supposed to hold the French march on Soissons [Aisne department in Picardy], which was already at full speed. On the 19 in the afternoon, we moved in a shooting line toward Villedontoire. We encountered the enemy there. Having driven him out of the village, we entrenched ourselves on the hill in front of the village. That day, the enemy attacked five times during the day with cannons and tanks. But each time, we pushed them back. The night was calm. On the 20, at 5:00 am, the French started a strong artillery fire. After an hour of shelling, they

835 Ibid., pp. 293–294.

836 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 255.

moved forward protected by their cannons. They broke through the 79th Regiment to the left and popped at our back. Our captain, orderlies, operators, signalers etc., everyone from the headquarters was taken captive. When no one thought of rescue anymore, in the nick of time, I jumped down the mountain's slope.⁸³⁷

After two days of such battle, the exhausted 117th Infantry Division was relieved. At the turn of August and September, the Germans decided to abandon the newly captured territory on the other bank of the river Lys. On August 29, they separated from the enemy after detonating the dugouts in trenches. Only patrols remained, which delayed the march of the English, who captured Kemmel on August 31.⁸³⁸ The retreat toward the Somme and Argonne commenced. It meant the definite loss of territorial gains from the Spring Offensive. The division fought their last battles Moselle line, in a symbolic place, where the war trail of the Upper Silesian regiments began in 1914.

The 12th Infantry Division participated in a similar battle, near Cambrais in October 1918. Here, there also happened a collapse on both flanks and a hurried retreat of the German troops. The lack of ammunition was the crucial reason in this instance as well.⁸³⁹ The division reached the vicinity of Lille in September and found itself in the Army's reserve. Its commander, general Arnold von Lequis became a commandant in Metz, while general major Georg Pohlmann replaced him.⁸⁴⁰ During the retreat in August and October 1918, one could observe the first signs of the German Army's dissolution. Supply shortages, particularly of food – when collecting loot from opulent English magazines was no longer possible – was very severe and led to pillaging. However, this did not afflict the civilians.

The Upper Silesian regiments retreated through Flanders and – rightly or not – the Flemish was considered to be German sympathizers; at least according to the Germans, who spent their brief holidays there or stationed in the back of the front and spent time “in local pubs or in *Soldatenheim* with a pint of beer.”⁸⁴¹ The Flemish sometimes participated in feasts, contests or sport competitions organized by the regiments. Thus, during the retreat, there were no problems with keeping discipline, but it is hard to believe in a situation described in by the 21st Field Artillery Regiment, which presents nearly a fraternization

837 Letters of K. Wallis to his father Łukasz Wallis, France, 6.08.1918.

838 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 206–207.

839 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 254–256.

840 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 233.

841 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 241.

of occupants and the occupied: "Local populace partook in holidays and feasts organized in battlefront towns. It was no different than in our little homeland. A school keeper received port wine for his silver wedding from the Germans, which shows how fine were the relations of locals and the "Huns." And when the retreat eventually happened, a parish priest from Hoorebeke chased the soldiers to give them photographs of their former quarters."⁸⁴² Even though these memories were written down after the war, their specificity may prove that they are more than just the author's imagination.

Relations with the French and the Walloons were hostile throughout the whole war. Now, at the back of the retreating German army, in a chaotic atmosphere, the German soldiers behaved as ruthlessly as they did in 1914. For example, loitering bands of soldier plundered the huge German food supplies. Scarce German quartermaster services tried to oppose them, but they were dispersed and only the engagement of the Upper Silesian 38th Infantry Regiment in the protection of this huge army supply, with the help of a heavy machine guns company, put an end to this pillage.⁸⁴³

The ones plundering the magazines in Cambrai justified their behavior with the necessity of abandoning the Prussian drill.⁸⁴⁴ It was a symptom of a visible change in the soldiers' attitude to fighting for the Emperor. Raised in conservative monarchist traditions, the professional officers in the Upper Silesian regiments ascribed this sudden loss of discipline to "republican-revolutionary agitation;" they did not notice the disillusionment and the lack of faith in victory among soldiers. Thus, during the retreat, professional officers tried to separate the soldiers from hostile propaganda's influence, which was often present in the Belgian towns. Earlier, at the front, there appeared leaflets distributed by the English and the French with slogans: "Republic means freedom and peace!" (*Republik bedeautet Freiheit und Frieden!*). But, up to that point, the soldiers treated them merely as part of a defeatist propaganda. Now, such calls fell on fertile ground, not only among soldiers and non-commissioned officers but also among reserve officers, particularly those with bourgeois background, for whom fidelity to the Hohenzollerns was not a marker of patriotism.

For Poles in the German Army, such calls were a visible sign of Prussian monarchy's disintegration. The leaflets dispersed by the Allies at the front claimed that – in case of desertion or captivity – the password "Republic" would

842 Ibid., p. 243.

843 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 261.

844 Ibid.

suffice as an act for the sake of future Germany. Rare before the summer of 1918, escapes to the other side of the front became massive beginning July. In the first half-year of 1918, forty thousand German soldiers deserted and, from July to October, as much as two hundred thousand.⁸⁴⁵

Poles serving in the Upper Silesian regiments knew perfectly well about the existence of general Haller's Polish Army in France.⁸⁴⁶ This made desertion even easier, more so that the French promoted this army and – at least to a certain extent – acknowledged the Upper Silesian regiments as partially composed of Poles. Leaflets dispersed at the turn of June and July 1918 in Flanders prove this. The history of the 22nd Infantry Regiment mentions them: “Hostile propaganda, visible mainly through leaflets dispersed from special planes, increased also in our segment. We saw how good of a job did the enemy's intelligence did when, on June 23, just five days after we captured a new front segment, they spread leaflets in Polish.”⁸⁴⁷ Desertion very often concerned a very specific group in the Army, which emerged due to the recent addition of freed prisoners of war from the Russian camps in 1918. They returned home after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk but many were mobilized again and sent to the Western Front in the summer of 1918. In the 38th Reserve Infantry Regiment, which in mid-September received such “support” of 350 people, they were treated as spreaders of Bolshevism.

The large number of desertions was acknowledged: “The fact that they escaped from the front and even deserted was even good, they did not harm the units, but became increasingly dangerous at the back.”⁸⁴⁸ The Germans were no longer able to counteract these disturbing phenomena. In this context, the lectures attempted by educational officers appeared comical, as no one wanted to hear them.⁸⁴⁹

In November, when the Upper Silesians retreated toward Brussels, which they entered on November 9, the regiments were decimated both by war losses and desertions. Moreover, there appeared the fatal results of the Spanish flu epidemic, only recently in Germany. Even though the Germans managed to limit its spread in the army, the number of soldiers incapable of service in summer and spring was significant. It amounted to as much as four hundred cases in some regiments, such as 157th Infantry Regiment.⁸⁵⁰ They excluded sick soldiers from

845 Storz, *Krieg gegen den Krieg*, p. 78.

846 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 233.

847 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 203.

848 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, p. 261.

849 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 286–287.

850 *Ibid.*, p. 287.

service and sent them to medical points for isolation: this meant a reduction of the number of soldiers per unit by a few hundreds, for two to three weeks.⁸⁵¹ The command could not amend these gaps in numbers.⁸⁵² When the 1st Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment entered Brussels, it was merely “a small unit.”⁸⁵³

At that time, there basically happened a revolution in the army. At the back of the 12th Infantry Division, when the last reinforcements arrived on November 7, the command wanted to send these 400 young, inexperienced, and untrained soldiers directly to the front. At this point, some of the older soldiers present there refused to be transferred and a revolt commenced. It was avoided with difficulty and only at the cost of concessions that guaranteed a temporary resignation from immediate deployment to the frontline.⁸⁵⁴ There disappeared the sense of a community of shared interests between front officers and soldiers (*Kameradschaft*), shaped in the first years of the war in the German regiments. Once again, there emerged caste divisions between professional officers and soldiers who were no longer willing to stick their necks out – as the Poles called it – “for Willy.” In the 21st Field Artillery Regiment, where this division was particularly apparent since artillery belonged to elite weaponry, gunners had no intention of residing with their officers, not to mention listening to them. In Brussels, when one of the officers wanted to join the servicemen in an inn with a pint of beer but had to withdraw because ordinary soldiers around the table addressed him in a hostile manner.⁸⁵⁵ On November 10, information about the Emperor William II’s abdication and the outbreak of a revolution in German cities reached Brussels. Riots and fights between pro-revolutionary and loyalist soldier occurred on the streets of the Belgian capital. The 1st Upper Silesian Infantry Regiment belonged to the latter group. Its soldiers captured the Main Train Station and patrolled the streets. They left Brussels only on November 17 to march toward the border near Lüttich.⁸⁵⁶

On November 11, 1918, the soldiers enthusiastically welcomed the information about the ceasefire and the announcement of peace talks. Before noon, the regiments read the Emperor’s farewell to the army and his decision to abdicate along with the address of his successor and marshal Hindenburg. Flags and small banners of Belgium and allied Entente nations almost immediately appeared on

851 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 228.

852 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 250.

853 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 216–217.

854 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 263–264.

855 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 267.

856 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, pp. 216–217.

buildings. In the evening, the German soldiers created a firework show with flare bullets. There were no signs of animosity between Belgians and Germans. There dominated a general joy of returning home.⁸⁵⁷

Soon after 11:00 am, all units received a command: “Today at noon military action is suspended” (*Heute 12 Uhrmittags sind die Feindselligkeiten einzustellen*).

857 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 267.

Postwar Epilogue

From the beginning of the Western front retreat up to the dismantling in the garrisons, the fate of the soldiers of all the regiments described in this book, regardless of their corps, was largely similar.

In November and December 1918, the columns of returning German soldiers stretched endlessly on the Belgium-Germany border. One of the German soldiers crossing the border on November 13 recalls that his column was numbered 600,000 men and 72,000 vehicles. The locals from the border region of Rhineland who, for the past two weeks, were watching how the well-drilled German troops marched in front of them, could not believe that they lost the war while having so many soldiers.⁸⁵⁸ In fact, over time this led to the idea of the “knife [struck] in the back” of the German army which later resulted in the involvement of some veterans in Nazi structures, which glorified the service in the imperial army.⁸⁵⁹

However, not all Poles who suffered through the horror of positional warfare returned with the German regiments to their original units. A large part was in internment camps in the West as prisoners of war, and about 17,000⁸⁶⁰ fought under a different banner altogether – that of the Polish Army in France. The Poles moved there either through front-line desertion (much more seldom) or, through Allied internment camps. On June 4, 1917, under a decree issued by the President of France, the formation of the Polish Army began. The soldiers were recruited from the Polish prisoners of war from German and Austro-Hungarian armies, but also from volunteers from the USA, Canada, and Brazil. Initially, the unit consisted of about 35,000 soldiers and officers, but toward the end of the war, the number increased to almost 70,000.⁸⁶¹

Already during wartime interrogation of prisoners, both French⁸⁶² and English officers enquired about nationality⁸⁶³ and usually separated those who

858 Hamann, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 342.

859 M. Węcki, *Losy górnośląskich nazistów podczas I wojny światowej*, in: *Górny Śląsk a I wojna światowa*, eds. J. Raciński, M. J. Witkowski, Katowice 2015, pp. 176–192.

860 S. Zagoła, *Górnoślązacy w armii Gen. Hallera*, in: *Jednodniówka Chorągwi Śląskiej Związku Hallerczyków*, Katowice 1926, pp. 13–16.

861 J. A. Gawrych, *Armia Gen. Hallera na tle dziejowym*, in: *Jednodniówka Chorągwi Śląskiej Związku Hallerczyków*, Katowice 1926, p. 11.

862 Mazurkiewicz, *Los żołnierza*, pp. 98–99.

863 Drygas, *Czas zaprzeszyły. Wspomnienia 1890–1944*, p. 261.

did not identify as German. This pertained not only to Poles but also Danes and Alsations. The English did not recruit to Polish units, considering that this would constitute a breach of international conventions.⁸⁶⁴ However, after 1917, it became possible to be transferred to French internment camps where, in turn, one could move to one of the Polish boot camps in, among others, Tours, Montluçon, Calais, Amiens, Le Havre, Montville, Bras, Lessay, or – the largest one – Le Puyen Velay.

Previously, soldiers usually stayed in transit camps, in questionable conditions. Conflicts often erupted and divisions grew. Often, they stemmed from ever-present gossip or differences among the various regions of Polish lands. The Silesians and Masurians were viewed with considerable mistrust and belief that they had succumbed far-reaching Germanization, sometimes even irreversible. When he ended up in a camp dominated by the Silesians, Stanisław Drygas felt as alien as if he was in a German camp:

After entering the camp, I discovered with great disappointment that it was not Polish at all. The entire camp staff consisted of German non-commissioned officers, regulations on walls were in German. Everyone spoke German. “But this is a great misunderstanding,” I thought to myself. Where are the Poles here? Only Krauts! Despair gripped me when my friend from Poznań asked: “Is this supposed to be the camp you spoke of?” It turned out that at our request to move to an exclusively Polish camp, the English command conducted a survey among all the existing internment camps asking which one has the largest number of Poles. The prisoners who came forward were the ones from the Silesian regiments. It meant all Silesians, even the ones who did not speak Polish, yet were born in Silesia. All of them were grouped here. In this way, I found myself in a hundred percent Polish camp, although the only language used was German.⁸⁶⁵

The relations in training camps under French command were also not always judged positively by many Polish volunteers from German regiments, particularly the camp in Lessay, in Normandy. There was no problem with training; unlike the volunteers from the Polish diaspora in America, the experienced German soldiers were quick to adopt new drills and equipment.⁸⁶⁶ Most viewed that the problem stemmed from French officers’ incompetence and abuse, even misappropriating of food funds. In any case, that is how Stanisław Drygas describes it:

864 Bułhak, Stawecki, *Początki armii polskiej*, p. 178.

865 Drygas, *Czas zaprzeszły*, pp. 271–272.

866 *Ibid.*, pp. 294–296.

The camp commandant and battalion commander Kozierawski was of Polish descent. However, he was born and raised in France. He knew neither the history nor the language of his ancestors and never felt any bond with the country whose sons were under his command. He was a Frenchman through and through, yet he wore a *rogatywka* [a traditional four-pointed field cap] with the Polish eagle. I got to know him better when I was assigned to the company staff headquarters. For just a part of the money allocated for food for famished soldiers, he offered them cress gathered from ditches, while he and his sergeant spent this money on “chocolates, cakes, and liqueurs to properly receive the “ladies.””⁸⁶⁷

Despite these quarells, members of the Polish National Comitee (Komitet Narodowy Polski; KNP) viewed the process of training and formation of the Polish Army as positive. Soldiers from the German units quickly achieved positive reviews from their French superiors, while Roman Dmowski wrote about them with pride: “They were cultured, well-trained soldiers with a strong national consciousness, hardened by the experience in the fight for Polish identity. . . . While visiting the units of our army, I constantly met soldiers from Poznań, Pomerania, and Silesia and my soul rejoiced at the sight of such a potent force in our small army.”⁸⁶⁸ After the training in French camps, the Polish volunteers swore an oath of allegiance to the Polish nation and – although they were to fight in French uniforms so they would be later referred to as “Blue Army” – they did so under the Polish banner and with Polish military insignias. Thanks to the detailed report left several years after the war by Stanisław Zagoła – responsible for recruitment – we have precise data about these units’ composition. At the moment of the Army’s formation in early 1917, the estimates were that the internment camps held about 15,000 Poles from Pomerania, Greater Poland, and Upper Silesia who were nonetheless forbidden to join the Polish army by international conventions. Only the decision of the superpowers to recognize the independence of Poland after the war removed this obstacle. Recruitment in the camps began in the autumn of 1917 and the first thousand soldiers with volunteers formed the 1st Rifle Regiment, the core of which were soldiers from Silesia, Pomerania, and Greater Poland. Familiar with arms, they were quickly sent to the front. The increasing number of applicants to the training camps has

867 Ibid., pp. 292–293.

868 R. Dmowski, *Polityka polska i odbudowanie państwa*, Warszawa 1926, p. 296; qtd. after Teresa Kulak, *Postawy społeczeństwa polskiego na Górnym Śląsku*, p. 22.

led the French authorities to organize a recruitment camp that covered almost the whole country beside the so-called “front-line operational zone.”⁸⁶⁹ From the total number of 21,000 Poles in French camps, 15,000 volunteered to join the Polish Army. Most of them were people from Poznań, Pomerania, and Greater Poland. The division was as follows: 6500 from Poznan, 5500 from Silesia, 2500 from Pomerania and East Prussia, the rest from Lesser Poland and other parts of the country. To this should be added the recruitment of prisoners of war from the Lesser Poland region (about 25,000 people). In addition, 15,000 Poles from English camps were also engaged, 3000 from the former Prussian partition. Before returning to Poland, more than a dozen became officers and several hundred non-commissioned officers.

The final shape, uniforms, and commandment of the Army was a subject of lengthy and detailed Polish-French negotiations, which finally concluded with the signing of the military convention with the KNP at the beginning of 1918. Initially, the commander of the Polish Army was a French officer General Louis Archinard. It was not until October 4, 1918, that General Józef Haller assumed the command. This former commander of the Second Brigade of the Polish Legions left for France after the Battle of Kaniów and became a member of the KNP in Paris. Some Polish units partook in the final phase of the First World War on the Western Front. The 1st Sharpshooters Regiment fought in Champagne at the turn of July and August 1918, while the 1st Sharpshooters Division in October 1918 ended their campaign in Lorraine. On September 28, 1918, on the basis of an agreement between the French government and the KNP, the Polish Army in France was granted the status of an independent allied army. In April 1919, the Army transported to Poland, where it participated in the fights with Ukraine and the Soviet Russia.

The Poles remaining in the former German army returned with their regiments to home garrisons, creating the foundations of Polish military units in the former Prussian district. In Poznań, there was established a soldier's council after the November Kiel mutiny in Germany. The rebellion in the Poznań Citadel and stripping German officers of distinctions and decorations on the streets of cities were also a sign for Poles in the German army that there was a long-awaited, unique opportunity to rebuild the Polish state. The city quickly filled with Poles returning from the front, often with complete equipment – in uniforms, carrying gear, and sometimes even with weapons – as they were discharged directly from transports passing through this important node. A Polish recruitment office was

869 Zagola, *Górnoślązacy w armii Gen. Hallera*, pp. 13–16.

established, with units in individual districts, in charge of registering the soldiers who would then swear allegiance to Poland. In many cases, this was a spontaneous act, nonetheless greatly effective, as it led to the formation of new Polish units in which training already employed Polish drills.⁸⁷⁰

The result of these activities in Greater Poland was extraordinary. As Bogusław Polak precisely calculates, before the outbreak of the uprising in Poznań, the new Greater Poland Army (*Wojsko Wielkopolskie*) had already numbered 5000 volunteers, and it gradually increased its numbers to reach 32,000 at the end of February and almost 100,000 in June 1919. The area covering 15 percent of the total territory of the later Third Republic of Poland, there emerged nineteen out of ninety-two infantry regiments, three out of twenty-eight cavalry regiments, and six out of forty-two artillery regiments of the Polish Army.⁸⁷¹

The regiments returned from the western front to Upper Silesia in stages. In the middle of November, the 22nd Infantry Regiment crossed the Belgium-Germany border on foot, and then reached Dortmund by train. On November 21, once again boarded onto transport convoy, the regiment departed to home garrison, which it reached within three days.⁸⁷²

Upon the arrival on the train station in Gliwice, the regiment received an official welcome and demobilized. There was another reserve unit in the barracks (*Ersatz Bataillon*), however the units were not merged. The soldiers returning from the front did not hold the reservists in high regard: “a horde loitering in the barracks with which we do not want to have anything to do.” The commander of the regiment, Gebhard von Schulenburg, bid farewell to the troops on December 30 and left for the fusillier regiment (*Füsillier-Regiment Nr. 90*). Simultaneously, soldiers born between 1890 and 1895, that is, young twenty-year-old men, were dismissed from service. From the remnants of the Upper Silesian units, the skeleton 12th Infantry Division was formed, which was in January transferred to Łambinowice to guard the Russian prisoners of war. In winter at the turn of 1918 and 1919, there were attempts to recreate the regiment, albeit with recruits from the interior of the German Reich; intended for frontier fights in the East.

On November 9, these freshly formed companies (twelve; each with thirty to fifty soldiers) were sent to the border with Czechoslovakia, near Prudnik. On

870 Fiedler, *Mój ojciec i dęby*, pp. 176–179.

871 B. Polak, *Siły zbrojne byłego zaboru pruskiego – Wojsko Wielkopolskie 1918–1920 – organizacja i zjednoczenie z Wojskiem Polskim*, in: *Wojsko Polskie 1914–1922*, Vol. 2, ed. B. Nowak, Koszalin 1986, pp. 39–40, 42–43.

872 Schulenburg, *Das Infanterie-Regiment Keith*, p. 217.

May 4, at the onset of manifestations against the initial decision to incorporate the Opole province (*Opole Regierungsbezirk*) to Poland, the regiment was transferred to the Polish border near Syców where it was included in the 24th Infantry Brigade (*Infanterie-Brigade Nr. 24*). At that time, the already restructured regiment dismissed the Germans from the former Austrian lands (actually, from Sudetenland, as they joined the unit when at the Czechoslovakian border) who then formed a separate battalion "Sudetenland."⁸⁷³ After the Treaty of Versailles, the regiment was transferred to Lubliniec, where it served as border guard (*Grenzschutz*) and, later, as part of *Reichswehr* (although reduced to cadre of four companies), where it was renamed to *Reichswehr-Regiment Nr. 15*. After the Allies entered, the regiment had to leave Upper Silesia.⁸⁷⁴

After the ceasefire, the 62nd Infantry Regiment marched from Mons area to Germany and crossed the border on November 25, 1918, in Mützenich, west of Eupen. After boarding a train to Upper Silesia in Monschau and passing through Nordhausen in Thuringia, the regiment came into conflict with the local soldiers' council, which is a testament to the moods in the unit at that time. This led to a firefight when the commanders of the regiment demanded the right of passage and access to provisions. In both garrison towns – Koźle and Racibórz – the train station and streets were decorated with flags and garlands. In Koźle, the welcome was even grander, and a monument to the fallen in the First World War was later erected at the place. It was also here where the younger soldiers were released from duty and the remaining troops were merged with the 12th Infantry Division in Łambinowice in December 1918. Afterward, the regiment was used to protect the border with Czechoslovakia and Poland, stationed successively in Byczyna, Oleśno, and Kluczbork. At that time, however, due to the dismissals of reservists and lack of conscriptions, the ranks of the regiment were significantly reduced. On July 26, 1919, the regiment was dissolved according to the truce. Only one of its companies was incorporated into *Reichswehr* as the 9th Company of the 4th Infantry Regiment (*Reichswehr-Regiment Nr. 4*).⁸⁷⁵

Also on November 27, 1918, the 63rd Infantry Regiment departed eastward of Eupen area, reaching first Cottbus via Brunswick and then Wrocław, on November 29. From here, the 1st Battalion was directed a day later to the garrison town in Opole, while the rest were sent to their home garrisons a few days

873 Ibid., pp. 218–220.

874 Ibid., pp. 221–222.

875 Ciupek, *Aus der Geschichte des Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 7–8.

later.⁸⁷⁶ Some of the soldiers from younger age groups were immediately released and, on December 5, the remaining soldiers and reinforcements were deployed in the Racibórz district to protect the border with Czechoslovakia; among others in Nowa Cerekiew, Tworków, and Głubczyce. Before Christmas, the regiment was ordered to enter the Hlučín region.

All units returned on January 2, 1919, and after disbanding some of the companies, the regiment continued to protect the border with Czechoslovakia. On May 7, the units underwent a transformation into Border Guard, some of them later entered the *Reichswehr* as a battalion of the 16th Infantry Regiment (*Reichswehr-Regiment No. 16*). These units were stationed near Olesno. On July 18, an order to dissolve the regiment appeared.⁸⁷⁷ Later, its traditions were partially continued by the *Reichswehr's* 16th Infantry Regiment in Opole and Brzeg.⁸⁷⁸

At the end of November, marching from Belgium through Luxembourg, the 157th Infantry Regiment crossed the border with Germany and traveled as a convoy from Koblenz through Dresden to finally reach Wrocław and Koźle. It was in this garrison and not its home garrison in Brzeg that the regiment stayed until 1919 as a unit of the Border Guard (*Grenzschutz*).⁸⁷⁹ Initially, the 1896–1899 cohorts were immediately relieved and the number of soldiers was reduced; three companies were merged into a single one, while three battalions formed two more with smaller than regulatory ranks. In total, twenty-three officers and 279 soldiers remained in the regiment, partly supplemented by volunteers. The regiment was extensively deployed to fight against Poles in 1919, also during the first Silesian Uprising. For the first time it happened on December 13 in Orzesze, when the regiment was protecting the border already as *Grenzschutz*. At that time, there were concerns about the escalation of the Polish-Czechoslovak conflict over Cieszyn Silesia and its spread to Prussian Upper Silesia. The regiment was then relocated to various quarters in villages of the counties of Pszczyna (Pszczyna, Murcki), Katowice (Katowice, Mysłówice), Bytom (Bytom, Brzeziny Śląskie, Chropaczów), Zabrze (Zabrze, Mikulczyce), and the town of Gliwice. When the state of siege was lifted in Upper Silesia on May 1, 1919, and mass demonstrations began, the soldiers of the regiment were despised so much in these areas that they “could not show themselves in the streets.”

876 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 237

877 *Ibid.*, pp. 241–242.

878 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

879 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, pp. 318–319.

As the 117th Infantry Division was transformed into a *Reichswehr* brigade, the regiment was officially disbanded on May 25, but some officers and staff were assigned to the *Reichswehr's* 64th Infantry Regiment (*Reichswehr-Regiment Nr. 64*) and the 3rd battalion of the regiment was permanently incorporated into *Grenzschutz*. These were the soldiers of this regiment who served in Mysłowice and fired at demonstrators when the First Silesian Uprising began. After the uprising, they were sent to the quarters in Bogucice. On February 1, 1920, the regiment left Upper Silesia, finally reaching the garrison of Brzeg.⁸⁸⁰ Along with the gradual reduction of *Reichswehr's* ranks, the regiment ended as part of the garrison in Opole, first as the 3rd Battalion of the 16th Infantry Regiment and then as the 1st Company of the 7th Infantry Regiment.⁸⁸¹

The Reserve 38th Infantry Regiment departed from Brussels to the German border on November 12, which it reached near Bonn after two weeks of a rather leisurely march. On November 29, the regiment entered Cologne in the midst of a revolution, where a conflict erupted with the local soldier's council regarding the supply of the regiment. It was then that the first soldiers from Rhineland and Alsace-Lorraine were released from the regiment. Next, traveling in a transport column through Berlin and Frankfurt (Oder), the unit arrived in Wrocław on December 21, where it was welcomed by a military band but without any official meeting with the social democratic authorities of the city or the soldier's council. The regiment was dissolved on December 28, 1918.⁸⁸²

After leaving the frontline near Antwerp, the 21st Field Artillery Regiment first marched to Lüttich and then entered Eupen, where the local Germans gave it a warm welcome. After the soldiers from the left bank of the Rhine were released, the unit reached Legnica via Cologne and Magdeburg, from where they were sent to the garrisons in Nysa and Grodków. During the journey through Germany, there often occurred conflicts with local military and workers' councils at the railway stations. The regiment arrived at its destination in the night of November 29 and 30.

In Grodków, the arrivals were received graciously: on December 1 artillerymen received official welcome from the mayor on the town square and, in the evening, they were hosted at the town's expense.⁸⁸³ At first, the administration demobilized cohorts born after 1895 and the horses. The remaining soldiers

880 *Ibid.*, pp. 321–326.

881 *Ibid.*, p. 327.

882 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 283–285.

883 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preussische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, p. 271.

were incorporated into the Border Guard. The unit was strengthened with new conscripts and volunteers. It is likely that some of them were completely coincidental men, as problems with maintaining discipline began.⁸⁸⁴

The regiment initially served on the Czechoslovak border (Głucholazy, Głubczyce, Racibórz, Stare Kotkowice). This service was entirely peaceful and only entailed combating smuggling. Only once were the batteries placed on the pass over Karniów, but they shelled no one. At the beginning of May, the regiment's staff was moved to Kluczbork and the batteries were deployed in Lubliniec, Pawonkowo, Lubeck, Koszęcin, Syców, and Oleśno. In July 1919 the regiment was merged with other units and transformed into the 8th Light Artillery Regiment (*Leichte Artillerie-Regiment Nr. 8*), only to be disbanded on August 1, 1919, exactly five years after the beginning of the war. The regimental traditions were continued by the 15th Horse Battery of the 3rd Artillery Regiment (*Reichswehr Artillerie-Regiment No. 3*) stationed in Szprotawa.⁸⁸⁵

All of the above regiments suffered immense losses. Below, I present data about the killed, but these numbers are sometimes still much higher than the initial values. And so, during the entire war, the 62nd Infantry Regiment lost 2300 soldiers (70 percent),⁸⁸⁶ 63rd Infantry Regiment lost a horrendous number of 4307 soldiers and 108 officers, which makes the whole of its initial cadre and 33 percent of the reinforcements.⁸⁸⁷ Similar losses were suffered by the 157th Infantry Regiment. In each of its three battalions, losses of 1400–1500 soldiers and officers were recorded, with the initial state of a thousand soldiers in an infantry battalion.⁸⁸⁸ The Reserve 38th Infantry Regiment recorded losses of 2943 soldiers and fifty-eight officers (91 percent).⁸⁸⁹ Only in the Upper Silesian 21st Field Artillery Regiment the losses were much lower, due to the type of service, and amounted to thirty officers and 300 non-commissioned officers and soldiers.⁸⁹⁰

On the basis of very general estimates, the scholar Paweł Parys appraises that former soldiers from the Kaiser's army in the Polish insurgent units in Upper Silesia ranged from 35 to even 70 percent, depending on the department, which

884 Ibid.

885 Ibid., pp. 271–272.

886 Ciupek, *Aus der Geschichte des Infanterie-Regiments*. pp. 7–8.

887 Kaiser, *Das Königl. Preuß. Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 251.

888 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 44.

889 Hasselbach, Strodzki, *Das Reserve-Infanterie Regiment*, pp. 290, 371.

890 Jancke, *Das Kgl. Preußische Feldartillerie-Regiment*, pp. 273–274.

applies to those best trained and outstanding in weapons handling.⁸⁹¹ Therefore, it is unsurprising that the description of the incident from the first Silesian Uprising, during which the 157th Infantry Regiment clashed with the insurgent Poles in Mysłówice, reads: “a German soldier . . . near the school in Mysłówice, while searching passersby for weapons, was unexpectedly fired at by a man with a pistol; the bag of this Polish insurgent held an EK [Eisernes Kreuz; Iron Cross], 1st and 2nd class, which he had earned on the battlefield.”⁸⁹²

However, in Upper Silesia, like in Wielkopolska, there formed no regular army, although Polish officers made such attempts after 1920. Many of them had a period of service in the Kaiser’s army and then in the Polish Army in France. According to unpublished calculations by Jarosław Rolak, not only 5400–5500 soldiers from Upper Silesia served in the Polish Army in France but also about 600 soldiers from Cieszyn Silesia.⁸⁹³ The author of the monograph on the third Silesian Uprising even supposes that the experience gained by these officers and non-commissioned officers in the Kaiser’s army – with its attachment to regular actions based on precise staff plans – could negatively impacted the final effect of military action in 1921, which occurred in conditions of mobile warfare without a fixed front line.⁸⁹⁴ In my opinion, this is an unfair assessment. The commander of the largest insurgent unit in the third Silesian Uprising, Jan Ludyga-Laskowski, underwent his military training in the German army. We find many similar to Ludyga-Laskowski among the insurgents, who gained their military experience and knowledge in German barracks.

The soldiers and officers from the Kaiser’s army had to play only a minor role in the Polish Army. The reason for this was mostly the lack of educated officers in this group. Candidates for the German Academy of General Staff were carefully selected, and Poles were never considered. There were difficulties even in directing cadets to schools. Therefore, after 1918, there was no staff officer from the former Prussian district in the Polish Army and few line officers.⁸⁹⁵ As Waldemar Rezmer states in his study, there were only 503 Polish officers in the

891 P. Parys, *Wojenne losy późniejszych powstańców śląskich*, in: *Górny Śląsk a I wojna światowa*, p. 4.

892 Suhr, *Das 4. Schlesische Infanterie-Regiment*, p. 325.

893 Parys, *Wojenne losy późniejszych powstańców śląskich*, p. 8.

894 W. Ryżewski, *Śląskie formacje powstańcze*, in: *Drogi do niepodległości. Materiały z sympozjum naukowego 14–15 października 1988 roku*, eds. J. Figura, K. Filipow, p. 69.

895 W. Rezmer, *Polacy w korpusie oficerskim*, p. 143.

German army in 1921: 233 in the infantry corps, fifty-nine in the cavalry, 147 in the artillery, thirty-seven in the technical army, twenty-five in the rolling stock.⁸⁹⁶

In the interwar period, the most characteristic military rank associated with the German army tradition remained a non-commissioned officer. He was well-trained, well-prepared to lead his men, but rarely advanced in the military hierarchy. This was not only due to the lack of qualifications, which one could easily improve. As the peasant's son Wawrzyniec Skorupka soberly notice right after the end of the First World War: "I knew that it was one thing to be promoted in the army during the war and another in peacetime. It was at that time that I witnessed how officers with incomplete qualifications, honest and useful people on the front, were dismissed because they already fulfilled their duty, while there is another officer's staff in peacetime."⁸⁹⁷ There were not many volunteers for professional service in the Polish Army from among the veterans of the German army from the time of the Great War; therefore, the memory of their service was also quickly forgotten.

The Second World War finished the job. The memories that several hundred thousand Poles served in the German army were blurred or increasingly expelled from the Polish collective historical consciousness. The graves scattered all over the Eastern and Western Front remain. Somewhere there is also Kazimierz Wallis. He disappeared on the Western Front on September 27, 1918, at Havrincourt near Arras in the department of Pas-de-Calais, where he fought in the composition of the 77th Infantry Regiment of Hanover. His body was never recovered.

896 *Ibid.*, pp. 146–147.

897 Skorupka, *Moje morgi i katorgi*, pp. 132–133.

Annex

Corps of the Imperial German Army in which Poles constituted the majority in Regiments during the First World War

2th Army-Corps Stettin (Pommerania)

Army Corps, Commanders	Divisions	Commanders	Order of Battle on mobilisation 1914	
			Brigades	Regiments, Battalions
1909–1915: General of the Infantry, Alexander von Linsgen 1915–1919: Lieutenant General Richard von Kraewel	3. Infanterie-Division, Stettin	1912–1914: Lieutenant General Kurt Eduard von Trossel	5. Infanterie-Brigade, Stettin	- 1. Pommersches Grenadier-Regiment „König Friedrich Wilhelm IV“ Nr.2
		1914–1915: Lieutenant General Gustav Frhr. von Hollen		- 2. Ostpreußisches Grenadier-Regiment „König Friedrich Wilhelm I“ Nr 3
		1915–1916: Lieutenant General Hermann von Staabs 1916:Major General Paul Grünert 1916–1917: Lieutenant General Richard von Kraewel	6. Infanterie-Brigade, Stettin	- Pommersches Füsilier-Regiment „Königin Viktoria von Schweden“ Nr.34 - 5. Pommersches Infanterie-Regiment „Prinz Moritz von Anhalt-Dessau“ Nr.42
		1917–1919: Major General Friedrich W. von Sydow	3. Feldartillerie-Brigade), Stettin	1. Pommersches Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr.2 Vorpommersches Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr. 38-
			Neumärkisches Dragoner-Regiment „Freiherr von Derfflinger“ Nr. 3 Pommersches Pionier Bataillon Nr. 2	
	4. Infanterie-Division, Bromberg	1912–1914: Lieutenant General Günther von Pannowitz 1914–1918: Lieutenant General Erich Freyer	7. Infanterie-Brigade, Bromberg	-3. Pommersches Infanterie-Regiment „Graf Schwerin“ Nr. 14 - 6. Westpreußisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 149

Army Corps, Commanders	Divisions	Commanders	Order of Battle on mobilisation 1914	
			Brigades	Regiments, Battalions
			8. Infanterie- Brigade, Gnesen	-6. Pommersches Infanterie Regiment Nr. 49 - 6. Westpreußisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 140
			4. Feldartillerie- Brigade Bromberg	- 2. Pommersches Feldartillerie- Regiment Nr. 17 - Hinterpommersches Feldartillerie- Regiment Nr 5
			2. Brandenburgisches Dragoner-Regiment „von Arnim“ Nr. 12 Pommersches Pionier Bataillon Nr 2	

5th Army-Corps Posen (Posen)

Army Corps, Commanders	Divisions	Commanders	Order of Battle on mobilisation 1914		
			Brigades	Regiments, Battalions	
1911–1914: General of the Infantry Hermann von Strantz 1914–1915: General of the Infantry Adolf von Oven 1915–1917: General of the Infantry Hermann von Strantz 1917–1919: General of the Infantry Eduard von Below	9. Infanterie- Division, Glogau	1912–1915: Lieutenant General Eduard von Below	17. Infanterie- Brigade, Glogau	- 2. Posensches Infanterie-Regiment „von Courbière“ Nr.19 - 3. Posensches Infanterie-Regiment Nr 58	
		1915–1916: Lieutenant General Ferdinand Max Noeldechen		18. Infanterie- Brigade, Liegnitz	1916: Lieutenant General Hermann von Staabs 1916 : Major General Johannes Rogalla von Bieberstein
		1916–1919: Major General Erich Weber	9. Feldartillerie- Brigade, Glogau		- 1. Niederschlesisches Feldartillerie-Regiment „von Podbielski“ Nr.5 - 2. Niederschlesisches Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr. 41-
			Westpreußisches Ulanen-Regiment „Kaiser Alexander III. von Rußland“ Nr. 1 Niederschlesisches Pionier Bataillon Nr. 5		
	10. Infanterie- Division, Posen	1912–1914: Lieutenant General. Robert Kosch 1914–1915: Lieutenant General Alfred von Larisch 1915–1917: Lieutenant General Max Schwarte 1917–1919: Lieutenant General Otto Frhr von Diepenbroick Grüter	19. Infanterie- Brigade, Posen	- 1. Westpreußisches Grenadier-Regiment „Graf Kleist von Nollendorf“ Nr. 6 -1. Niederschlesisches Infanterie-Regiment „Graf Kirchbach“ Nr. 46	

Army Corps, Commanders	Divisions	Commanders	Order of Battle on mobilisation 1914	
			Brigades	Regiments, Battalions
			20. Infanterie- Brigade, Posen	- Infanterie Regiment „König Ludwig III von Bayern“ Nr. 47 - 3 Niederschlesisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 50
			10. Feldartillerie- Brigade, Posen	- 1. Posensches Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr. 20 - 2. Posensches Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr. 56
			Regiment Königs-Jäger zu Pferde Nr. 1 Niederschlesisches Pionier Bataillon Nr 5	

6th Army-Corps, Breslau (Silesia)

Army Corps, Commanders	Divisions	Commanders	Order of Battle on mobilisation 1914	
			Brigades, Regiments	Regiments, Battalions
1911–1915: General of the Infantry Kurt von Pritzelwitz 1915–1916: General of the Cavalry Georg von de Marwitz 1916–1917: General of the Infantry Julius Riemann 1917–1918: General of the Artillery Konstanz von Heineccius	11. Infanterie- Division, Breslau	1914–1916: Lieutenant General von Webern 1916: Lieutenant General Arthur von Eisenhart-Rothe 1916–1917: Lieutenant General Roderich von Schöler 1917–1918: Major General Günther von Etzel 1918: Lieutenant General Walther Frhr. Schmidt von Schmidtseck	21. Infanterie- Brigade, Schweidnitz	- 1. Schlesisches Grenadier-Regiment „König Friedrich Wilhelm II” Nr.10 - Schlesisches Füsilier- Regiment „General- Feldmarschall Graf Moltke“ Nr. 38
			22. Infanterie- Brigade, Posen	- 2. Schlesisches Grenadier-Regiment „König Friedrich III” Nr.11 - 4. Niederschlesisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr.51 - 2. Schlesisches Jäger- Bataillon Nr.6
			11. Feldartillerie- Brigade, Posen	- 1. Schlesisches Feldartillerie-Regiment „von Peucker” Nr.6 - 2. Schlesisches Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr. 42-
			Jäger-Regiment zu Pferde Nr. 11 Schlesisches Pionier Bataillon Nr. 6	
	12. Infanterie- Division, Neisse	1913–1915: Lieutenant General Martin Chales de Beaulieu 1915–1916: Lieutenant General Karl Fouquet	23. Infanterie- Brigade, Neisse	- 2. Oberschlesisches Infanterie-Regiment „von Winterfeldt” Nr. 23 - 3. Oberschlesisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 62

Army Corps, Commanders	Divisions	Commanders	Order of Battle on mobilisation 1914	
			Brigades, Regiments	Regiments, Battalions
		1916–1918: Lieutenant General Arnold Lequis 1918–1919: Major General Maximilian von Funcke	24. Infanterie- Brigade, Brieg	-4. Oberschlesisches Infanterie Regiment Nr. 63 - 4. Schlesisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 157
			12. Feldartillerie- Brigade, Neisse	- 1.Oberschlesisches Feldartillerie-Regiment „von Clausewitz” Nr. 21 - 2. Oberschlesisches Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr. 57
			Schlesisches Ulanen-Regiment „von Katzler“ Nr. 2 Schlesisches Pionier Bataillon Nr. 6	

17th ArmyCorps, Danzig (West Prussia)

Army Corps, Commanders	Divisions	Commanders	Order of Battle on mobilisation 1914	
			Brigades, Regiments	Regiments, Battalions
1908–1914: General of the Cavalry August von Mackensen 1914–1916: General of the Infantry Günther von Pannowitz 1916–1918: Lieutenant General Paul Fleck 1918: Lieutenant General Axel von Petersdorff	35. Infanterie- Division, Thorn	1910–1914: Lieutenant General Otto Hennig	70. Infanterie- Brigade, Thorn	- 4. Pommersches Infanterie-Regiment „von Borcke“ Nr.21 - 8. Pommersches Infanterie-Regiment „von der Marwitz“ Nr. 61
		1914–1915: Lieutenant General Gustav Frhr. von Hollen	87. Infanterie- Brigade, Thorn	- Kulmer Infanterie- Regiment Nr 141 - 9.. Westpreußisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr.176
		1914–1918: Major General Johannes von Hahn 1918: Major General Albert von Kemnitz	35. Feldartillerie- Brigade, Graudenz	- Feldartillerie- Regiment „Groß Komtur“ Nr.71 - Thorner Feldartillerie- Regiment Nr. 81
		1918: Major General Max Wohlgemuth	Jäger-Regiment zu Pferde Nr. 4 Pionier Bataillon Nr. 17	
	36. Infanterie- Division, Danzig	1913–1916: Lieutenant General Konstanz von Heineccius 1916–1918: Lieutenant General Karl von Kehler 1918–1919: Lieutenant General Arnd von Leipzig	69. Infanterie- Brigade, Graudenz	- 3. Westpreußisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 129 -8. Westpreußisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 175
			71. Infanterie- Brigade, Danzig	-4. Ostpreußisches Grenadier- Regiment „König Friedrich I“ Nr. 5 - Danziger Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 128

Army Corps, Commanders	Divisions	Commanders	Order of Battle on mobilisation 1914	
			Brigades, Regiments	Regiments, Battalions
			36. Feldartillerie- Brigade, Danzig	- 2. Westpreußisches Feldartillerie- Regiment Nr. 36 - Feldartillerie- Regiment „Hochmeister“ Nr 72
		5. Husaren-Regiment „Fürst Blücher von Wahlstatt“ Nr. 5 Pionier Bataillon Nr. 17		

20th Army-Corps, Allenstein (East Prussia)

Army Corps, Commanders	Divisions	Commanders	Order of Battle on mobilisation 1914	
			Brigades, Regiments	Regiments, Battalions
1912–1915: General of the Artillery Friedrich von Scholtz 1915–1918: Lieutenant General Viktor Albrecht	37. Infanterie- Division, Allenstein	1910–1914: Lieutenant General Otto Hennig	73. Infanterie- Brigade), Lyck	- 2. Masurisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr.147
		1914–1915: Lieutenant General Gustav Frhr. von Hollen		- 2. Ermländisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 151
		1914–1918: Major General Johannes von Hahn	75. Infanterie- Brigade, Allenstein	- 1. Ostpreußisches Jäger-Bataillon „Graf Yorck von Wartenburg“ Nr. 1
		1918: Major General Albert von Kemnitz		- 1. Masurisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr 146
1918: Major General Max Wohlgemuth	37. Feldartillerie- Brigade, Allenstein	- 1. Emländisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr.150		
		- 1. Masurisches Feldartillerie- Regiment Nr.73		
				- 2. Masurisches Feldartillerie- Regiment Nr. 82
			Pommersches Dragoner-Regiment „von Wedel“ Nr. 11 Pionier Bataillon Nr. 26	
	41. Infanterie- Division, Preußisch Eylau	1914: Lieutenant General Leo Sonntag 1914: Major General Alfred von Böckman	72. Infanterie- Brigade, Osterode	- 1. Posensches Infanterie-Regiment „von Grolmann“ Nr. 18 -4. Posensches Infanterie-Regiment „Hiller von Gärtringen“Nr. 59

Army Corps, Commanders	Divisions	Commanders	Order of Battle on mobilisation 1914	
			Brigades, Regiments	Regiments, Battalions
		1914–1917: Lieutenant General Heinrich Schmidt von Knobelsdorff	74. Infanterie- Brigade, Marienburg	- 5. Westpreußisches Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 148 - Deutschordens Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 152
		1917–1918: Lieutenant General Ernst Gräser	41. Feldartillerie- Brigade, Preußisch Eylau	- 1. Westpreußisches Feldartillerie- Regiment Nr. 35
		1918–1919: Major General Walther von der Hardt		- 3. Ostpreußisches Feldartillerie- Regiment Nr 79
			Ostpreußisches Dragoner- Regiment „König Albert von Sachsen“ Nr. 10	Ostpreußisches Dragoner-Regiment „König Albert von Sachsen“ Nr. 10

Source: Histories of two hundred and fifty-one divisions of the German Army which participated in the war (1914–1918) compiled from records of Intelligence Section of the General Staff, American Expeditionary Forces, at General Head Quarters, Chaumont 1919; [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsches_Heer_\(Deutsches_Kaiserreich\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsches_Heer_(Deutsches_Kaiserreich)) (25.03.2020)

Afterword to the English Edition

When my book about Poles serving in the German army during the First World War was published in 2014, there was little knowledge available about the subject. In Polish historiography, there have long been extensive studies on the fate of Poles fighting in 1914–1918 alongside Austrians or Russians, especially the formation under the command of Józef Piłsudski (Polish Legions) in the Habsburg monarchy. Poles from Prussia and, from 1871, from the German Empire remained on the sidelines of these interests.

Where did this gap in Polish historical awareness come from? First of all, during the First World War, there were no cohesive Polish units in the German army. There were no separate “Polish” regiments or divisions, as in the Russian and Austrian armies. Poles in the Kaiser’s army served as soldiers, non-commissioned officers, rarely as officers, but always in German units. The Polish second half of the twentieth century forgot about the Poles who served in the German army also due to the deliberate erasing from the memory of the history of Poles who served in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War.⁸⁹⁸ This resulted in the historical “amnesia” of an entire generation of Poles about the service of their fathers and grandfathers in German troops in both World Wars.

The memory survived only in a simplified, often mythologized intergenerational family record, which I also experienced, as I was born and raised in Upper Silesia. I was surprised that I did not find this familiar story on the pages of scientific history books. When I later wrote a book about Poles in Kaiser’s army, I felt a bit like the protagonist of one of Umberto Eco’s novels, the antiquarian Giambattista Bodoni, who remembered his true past with difficulty and simultaneously confronted childish notions with school knowledge about the First World War; or, rather, the lack of knowledge in this regard. Reading monographs on the history of the Greater Poland and Upper Silesian regiments became an opportunity for me to go back in time, as if “time had stopped, or rather, no, it had gone backward, like a clock whose hands have been turned back to the day before.”⁸⁹⁹

At the center of my book’s narrative, I deliberately placed an ordinary soldier, a Pole, who had to survive – if he was to survive at all – during the four years

898 See my other book about Poles in Wehrmacht: R. Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, Warszawa 2011.

899 U. Eco, *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, New York 2004, p. 225.

of service with no certain ideals for which he would fight, sometimes doubtful about his own actions and the duties he was to fulfil. I tried to follow this soldier, from the moment he found himself in a German regiment until his demobilization or desertion in 1918, to restore the memory of the fate of this soldier and his colleagues during this terrible war.

Already after the publication of this book in Poland, the hundredth anniversary of the First World War resulted in the publication of many books and scientific articles, which changed the state of knowledge about Poles in Kaiser's army. However, the history of Poles fighting in the German army is still very little known – or unknown at all – in Western Europe. This prompted me to prepare an English edition of my book, so as to contribute to the discovery of this history also outside Poland. The text of the original Polish edition from 2014 has been preserved in its entirety.

I thank a number of institutions and people who contributed to this project. The book would not have been published without the co-financing of the Polish Narodowy Program Rozwoju Humanistyki (National Humanities Development Program). Equally important was the initiative of Peter Lang Publishing House, especially Mr. Łukasz Gałecki, who coordinated the whole project. I would also like to express my thanks to my Polish publishing house Wydawnictwo Literackie from Krakow, which kindly agreed for me to use the Polish edition in the preparation of the English version without additional financial costs. However, the most significant work did the translator of this difficult publication, Dr. Mikołaj Golubiewski, who had to utilize both linguistic and historical competence. I am deeply obliged to Mr. Golubiewski for his work, as I am to the team of editors at Peter Lang Publishing House for preparing the final version of the book for printing.

Ryszard Kaczmarek
March 2020

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