Unsettling the Empire: Violent Migrations and Social Disaster in Russia during World War I*

Joshua A. Sanborn
Lafayette College

It is counterintuitive, perhaps even perverse, to look for a concise summary of the conditions of modern war from Leo Tolstoy. Nevertheless, his conclusion about the Napoleonic Wars in the epilogue to War and Peace was admirably brief: “The only thing worth recognizing is that the purpose of the upheavals of European peoples is unknown to us, only the facts are known. The murders, first in France, then in Italy, in Africa, in Prussia, in Austria, in Spain, and in Russia and the movements from west to east and from east to west are the facts that comprise the essence and end of these events.”¹

In one sense, Tolstoy’s clear-eyed focus on “murders” and “movements” as the core social processes of warfare is not terribly revelatory. Even the most fleeting acquaintance with military practices is enough to reveal that, at the tactical and strategic levels alike, war plans hinge on moving men into the best positions to kill the enemy. Likewise, the most cursory survey of recent history shows that war has been (and continues to be) one of the primary causes for human displacement by impelling civilian populations to flee, by encouraging internal social and physical mobility through the transformation of the labor force, and by prompting states to engage in schemes of deportation in order to solidify a political community at war.

Still, Tolstoy’s point was not that “murders” and “movements” both happen during periods of war, but that they comprise the “essence and end” of warfare. This passage is a crucial key to the double move Tolstoy performs in War and

* Support for the research of this article was provided by Lafayette College, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University, where the first version of this article was written. Special thanks are due to Anthony Grafton, then the director of the center, as well as to Eagle Glassheim, Stephen Kotkin, Olga Litvak, Michael Reynolds, Gary Gerstle, Stephanie Smallwood, Marcy Norton, and David Abrahams. Thanks also to Adele Lindenmeyer, Paul Steege, and the Villanova history department for inviting me to speak on this theme on their campus and to Willard Sunderland for reading a late version of the article. Research assistance was provided by Stephanie Stawicki, Maria Azimova, and Vasilii Kashirin.

Peace. Interested throughout the book in the conflict between the objective facts of war and the subjective experience of it, Tolstoy tries to integrate the two not by reconciling them but by juxtaposing the individual portraits that take up most of the book with the macrosociological panoramas that dominate the epilogue. Observations or analyses of phenomena that might occupy a middle ground between the beautifully small and the impossibly large (or, in Tolstoy’s words, between the “atom” and the “vastness of the whole”\(^2\)) are treated largely with disdain. As Tolstoy caustically but correctly noted, historians are in fact largely interested precisely with processes that connect (or at least lie between) the personal and the social, and as a result they have been more outraged than inspired by the end of *War and Peace*. Few, in any case, have found it operationally useful as they sat down to write. When studying Russia’s experience in the *Great War*, however, there is a bit of Tolstoy that should be revived.

What I want to borrow from Tolstoy is neither the scorn nor the extremism; historians have taught us a great deal more about all aspects of modern war (the lived experience of it included) than has Tolstoy. Instead, I am interested in the interpretive differences that result when we broaden conceptual categories rather than narrow them. In particular, I intend here to take seriously Tolstoy’s injunction about the centrality of “murders” (*ubiistva*) and “movements” (*dvizheniia*) to warfare. The main effect of Tolstoy’s insistence upon these terms to describe the primary practices of war, it seems to me, is to undermine the notion that soldiers stand outside of societies in practical or moral terms. Instead, they are affected as social beings by the spatial dislocations of war and by the violence they commit, suffer, and witness. Thus it follows that military men should be lumped together with civilians, refugees, and camp followers. If they move, their social patterns are disturbed and rearranged. If they kill, they commit murder.

It turns out that both of those last propositions are deeply controversial. As we will see below, historians of migration have been even less receptive to the notion that soldiers can be analyzed as migrants than historians of armies have been to the idea that soldiers can be analyzed as murderers. For both sets of historians, the subjective context of social acts is the key. If soldiers believe they are not migrants because they think their social lives are suspended by war and because they plan to return home, then they are not migrants. If they believe that they are killing for the cause and if they know they are legally committed to killing rather than legally prohibited from doing so, then they are not murderers.

Pace Tolstoy, there is middle ground between the objective and subjective extremes. One can lend explanatory weight both to the objective effects of

\(^2\) Ibid., 584.
certain social acts and to the subjective world of the people who perform them if one is sensitive to the ways that actions and subjectivities relate to each other and transform each other over time. I shall attempt to do that here by thinking in focused ways about broad categories of social acts, in particular the ways that violence (not just killing, much less the heavily subjective “murder”) and human displacement were dynamically linked. Treating the Russian battle zones of World War I as a social and temporal space of “violent migrations” allows us to better understand the social interactions and social change that the war occasioned and forces us to analyze soldiers and civilians on the same plane. Some of the people located in this space perpetrated violence, others suffered it, and many did both, but all were living within a radically new social and political ecosystem that shaped their behavior in important ways. Further, as we shall see below, this social and political transformation had a direction. Violent migrations progressively unsettled the Russian Empire, unhinging society and emboldening the state that helped direct and manage them.

In order to write the history of the war from this different angle, I have had to challenge three well-established interpretive traditions. It is worth making those challenges explicit at the outset. The first tradition I question is the view of World War I as a static, immobilized, trench-bound experience, a tradition based almost entirely on a certain codified memory of the western front. Historians of the eastern front have been calling attention for some time to the deficiencies of this model, but their call has not really been heard, as the following startling recent statement of the erudite John Keegan shows:

Above all, the war imposed on the civilian populations almost none of the deliberate disruption and atrocity that was to be a feature of the Second [World War]. Except in Serbia and, at the outset, in Belgium, communities were not forced to leave their homes, land and peaceful occupations; except in Turkish Armenia, no population was subjected to genocide; and, awful though the Ottoman government’s treatment of its Armenian subjects was, the forced marches organised to do them to death belong more properly to the history of Ottoman imperial policy than to that of the war itself. The First, unlike the Second World War, saw no systematic displacement of populations, no deliberate starvation, no expropriation, little massacre or atrocity. It was, despite the efforts of state propaganda machines to prove otherwise, and the cruelties of the battlefield apart, a curiously civilized war.3

Even given the rather large exceptions Keegan grants here (Serbia, Belgium, and Armenia), this argument is difficult to sustain for any major region of combat. Several recent specialized studies of the western front have made clear that wartime migration there was significantly more substantial and important

---

than these general works have recorded, even though the front lines were much more static in France than elsewhere.⁴

The situation on the eastern front is simpler: Keegan is just plain wrong. He’s in good company, though. Virtually no general history of the war deals with displacement and migration on the eastern front as a theme needing exploration. The few volumes dedicated to the Russian experience in the war normally have some treatment of the issue, but it always figures as just one of the many pernicious consequences of the war.⁵ Again the specialist literature has run ahead of the general treatments in recent years, as we are fortunate to have a handful of recent monographs that show how important the issue of migration was for civilian and military populations alike during the war.⁶ Indeed, some historians of Eastern Europe are now sufficiently energized that they are explicitly challenging what they call a “sedentarist bias” on the part of the historical profession by urging historians to adopt an “itinerant perspective” on their work.⁷ Nevertheless, I think it is safe to say that the paradigmatic arena and experience of World War I remains safely planted with the poppies on Flanders’s fields. This article is intended to play a part in the larger project to balance the coverage of the war and to show how studying the eastern front leads to rather different conclusions about the long-term impact of the war on Europe’s twentieth century.

The second tradition I challenge here is the literature on migration. There is, of course, a thriving subfield of migration studies that focuses on the intersection of war and human displacement. These scholars have long known that the Great War was an important moment in the development of state-sponsored population movements.⁸ Recent studies have more exhaustively de-

---


⁶ Peter Gatrell, A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I (Bloomington, IN, 1999); Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I (Cambridge, 2000); Alon Rachamimov, POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front (New York, 2002); Eric Lohr, Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I (Cambridge, MA, 2003).


termined the particular state, civic, and military practices that found full flower during the war: the “cleansing” of particular territories of their populations (ethnic and otherwise), the ever-increasing importance of rapid supply and force movement for combat success, the creation of internment camps from Siberia to the Atlantic, and a particular sort of philanthropic/political activism that transformed both domestic and foreign politics. Given this long tradition, part of my project is to tie together related social processes that have been recognized but not clearly connected in previous work, such as the way that forced labor projects were related to plans to draft nomads, to prisoner of war populations, and to mass refugee flows in the midst of the war.

In order to make these linkages, however, it is necessary to dispense with the long-standing predilection of migration scholars to focus their attention on the disadvantaged. Disadvantaged migrants like civilian refugees and ethnically cleansed populations will play a large part in the story told below, but they were not the only ones on the move in violent contexts during the war. So too were a wide range of others, such as nurses, civilian and military administrators, and, not least, soldiers themselves. These people, I will show, experienced the social dislocation of transplantation but also wielded significant power in their new surroundings.

The third tradition I question here is Russian historians’ habit of seeking the origins of the Russian civil wars in the revolutions of 1917, especially in the conditions surrounding the Bolsheviks’ October coup. The assumption that the civil wars were the outcome of the revolution has meant that the search for the causes of civil war has simply been folded into the search for the causes of revolution. In contrast, I will argue here that the violent migrations of the Great War laid the preconditions for civil war by producing a toxic combination of a desocialized population and an ambitious political and military elite. Here the relationship between violence and displacement is most clear. Both migration and group violence were sponsored by the state, and both recast social relations, making group ties both more tenuous and more intense. This paradoxical relationship was explained by life-shaking fear and manifested itself in a desperate and brutalized small-group sociability. This shift of socia-

---


10 The period from 1918 to 1921 is traditionally known as the period of the Russian Civil War (in the singular). For reasons that will become clear below, I think it is better to see them as a set of distinct but overlapping civil wars. I borrow this notion from Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

11 Again, the best account of the dramatic impact of the Great War on the ambitions of Russia’s political elite to reshape society through state means is in ibid.
Unsettling the Russian Empire

bility facilitated catastrophic civil war, and it was accomplished by late 1916; indeed one might argue that the massive steppe rebellion of the same year should be understood as the beginning of the civil wars that would both destroy and then reconstitute the Russian imperial ecumene. This conclusion does not imply that the revolutionary events of 1917 were immaterial to the civil wars. Those revolutionary events in fact determined the content of those wars, as the specter of communism mobilized both the supporters and the opponents of the Bolsheviks. But this conclusion does imply that civil war was a likely outcome of the Great War in Russia regardless of what the fortunes of any political party turned out to be. As the rest of the twentieth century would show, devastating civil war was possible without significant revolutionary developments. Conceptually separating civil war from revolution in the Russian case might help us understand both more clearly.

I thus focus here on the Russian experience during World War I as a way of opening up broader questions regarding war and human movement. The narrative begins with an analysis of the various ways that the major migrant communities of the war—both military and civilian—constituted themselves as social entities and then interacted with each other, with the enemy, with officialdom, and with the local populations among which they were living. It then continues with an account of the series of destructive waves of violent migration that started with mobilization in 1914 and finally resulted in the total “unsettling” of the empire in 1917, when the transformation of the imperialist war into civil war, predicted in a different spirit by Lenin in 1915, finally occurred.12

FIRST WAVE: MOBILIZATION

The Great War started with trains, not with trenches. Soldiers knew it as soon as they packed into crowded cattle cars. War correspondents and other observers knew it as they watched those cars stream to the west.13 And, of course, Alfred von Schlieffen knew it: his plan for the two-front war that exploded in the summer of 1914 hinged on the premise that the German rail system would outperform the Russian one. If it was probably excessive of A. J. P. Taylor to claim that therefore von Schlieffen’s “dead hand automatically pulled the trigger” of the war,14 it is not at all outrageous to suggest that the war began well

14 The quotation (and criticism of it) is in Marc Trachtenberg’s “The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914,” in Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War, ed.
before the first shots were fired. Throughout Europe, the lights may have been
going out, but only after an intense hubbub of excitement, grief, and devas-
tating dislocation.

States all over the continent had been planning this mass operation for years. Mobilization plans targeted specific groups of individuals (reservists), arranged for them to have convoys to railheads, requisitioned trains for their transport to new locations, and devised complicated plans for those trains to most efficiently utilize national rail systems. Even in Russia, the Great Power whose capacity for this maneuver was most questioned, the scheme worked effectively. In the first general mobilization of reservists in Russian history, millions of men were taken from their homes, shipped to the edges of the realm, and set to work.

The scale of migration was unprecedented, even for a population that had been very mobile in the prewar years. In the Russian Empire alone, more young farmers, workers, and clerks migrated from their homes to military units in the west of the Empire over a two-week period in the summer of 1914 (3,915,000) than had gone from Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Belorussia, Latvia, and Russia to North America in the entire wave of massive emigration from Eastern Europe in 1880–1914 (3,715,000). These figures do not include the 1.4 million men who were already serving tours of duty in the Russian army or the thousands of officer wives, nurses, doctors, and other auxiliary forces that streamed westward at the outset of the war. By the end of the war, the total number of men mobilized into the active army was 14,923,000, a number that again exceeds the roughly 5,000,000 internal migrants (pereselentsy) who pulled up stakes in the last two decades of imperial rule. This massive and organized uprooting had a profound influence upon the social patterns of both the soldiers and the people they left behind.

These soldiers were migrants, but they have rarely been treated as such by historians or sociologists. Two durable ideal types have precluded investigation into the phenomenon of the soldier migrant. The first is the marginal migrant. The focus of most scholarship on migration and immigration is on those people who leave their homes and enter a social realm in which barriers of language, class, and/or culture inhibit the acquisition of power by new arrivals. It is undeniable that the fact of powerlessness is a structuring feature of life for poor immigrants, but the simple fact of leaving one community of family, friends, and enemies and joining a new one also structures their lives. This

---


shift of sociability is also present among migrants who for various reasons occupy positions of power immediately upon their arrival in a new milieu. These privileged migrants generally do not refer to themselves as migrants or immigrants, preferring instead terms like “expatriate” or “colonist,” but they too experience the social dislocation produced by their physical dislocation. Soldiers certainly feel the pain and fear of separation and alienation quite acutely, but their experiences are almost never compared to those of civilian migrants. Military sociologists, who might have been expected to remind their colleagues both in sociology and in history of the importance of mobility for soldiers and their worldviews, have focused their attention elsewhere. Amid the thousands of articles written in the field of military sociology in recent years on the mechanisms of combat cohesion, the professional attitudes of officers, and the impact of military training on modern political and industrial habits, the number that have explored migration can be counted on one’s fingers.

The second ideal type that has shown significant resilience is that of the peasant soldier. Progressive historians frustrated with the willingness of soldiers to put down revolution or rebellion have been particularly prone to focus on the rugged resistance to change attributed to a nearly ahistorical peasantry. Within the Russian historiography, this general predisposition toward viewing soldiers as peasants was finally explicitly historicized by John Bushnell. The tsar’s soldiers, Bushnell argued, were never de-peasantized, despite efforts of military reformers to transform them into autonomous actors. In his account, young Russian soldiers in the postreform period (after 1874) were divorced only temporarily from their peasant communities, had a brief four-month training period, and spent the rest of their tour of duty (from three to six years

---


17 A search conducted on December 19, 2003, of articles and conference papers indexed by Sociological Abstracts since 1963 reveals 3,203 articles on military sociology, of which a total of nine mentioned either migrants or migration. Only one of these treated soldiers as migrants. Jack L. Hickman and Francis M. Woodward, “Military and Nonmilitary Migrants: Feelings of Community Satisfaction” (paper presented at Conference of Western Social Science Association, San Diego, CA, 1984).
depending on the time period and branch of service) as peasant laborers working in a familiar regimental economy. They were simply “peasants in uniform.”18

Bushnell is certainly right to point to the many shared social facts of Russian peasants and Russian soldiers prior to World War I, but these similarities do not necessarily mean that soldiers were unchanged by their military service. The social experience of soldiers from rural Russia was similar to that of most people around the world; they understood their relationships primarily in a personal rather than an abstractly sociological way. One can certainly argue that the commanding officer occupied a role similar to that of a nobleman or that fellow enlisted men were structurally homologous to fellow peasants back home. But the fact remained that the officer was not the local lord and new comrades in their company were mainly strangers at first, not the boys they had grown up with and built social ties with. An even more striking difference was that, in contrast to the village, there were no women in the regiment. Soldiers might have had flashes of recognition of certain power relationships, but no one confused the barracks with home. Even in peacetime, it was a different life with different social rules.

Regardless of whether the peasant soldier model held true in peacetime, it cannot be used as a model for military society during the war. The constant movement of soldiers during the war meant that no stable garrison economy with its own fields and workshops could exist. Combat and the support of combat soldiers became the primary labor, cultural, and social components of daily life. Movement and violence came to structure the social relations and worldview of the millions of men in uniform. In the words of one Russian enlisted man, the conditions “in constant proximity to the enemy, with equal chances for life and death, brought individuals together into a tight and friendly family. The content of living relationships was suffused by equality and friendship, like in a primitive tribe on the hunt.”19 This “tribe” existed with its own norms and practices, but it did not live in isolation. Instead, it coexisted and interacted with other combatant and noncombatant social groups in a larger war zone social system that included enemy troops, civilians on both sides of the prewar borders, and the wide range of auxiliary forces that helped to feed and maintain the army in the field. The creation of a distinct social group of soldier migrants, complete with “tribal” initiation and defined boundaries with


other social groups, was not unique in the Russian case. Indeed, Eric Leed has argued that this “liminal” experience was common among other combatants and that it provided the framework that soldiers used to understand the war in the west as well.20

Soldiers related to other social groups in a variety of ways, depending on the region and the time period in question. The relationship to conquered populations in Galicia differed quite substantially from the relationship to conquered populations in Anatolia, for instance. In the first year of the war, however, there was a general tendency for soldiers to form a tight military society separate from other social groups. This separation took place even as reservists left their places of residence and marched to the nearest railway station. After induction, local commanders systematically forbade intermingling between soldiers and the families they were leaving. It was common to see a stream of sad civilians walking parallel to their departing relatives and friends, close enough to shout, but not close enough to touch, sometimes even for days on end.21

Whisked away to the front, the only way the mobilized men could keep in touch with their home regions was through a heavily censored, but heavily used, mail system. This interaction with the folks at home varied, of course, from person to person, but it almost always left both parties alienated and dissatisfied. Soldiers were forbidden from indicating where they were or what they were doing in any detail, and many felt in any case that their experience was incommunicable. Their frustrations only increased as the letters from home informed them of the ever-worsening economic conditions there. The massive requisitions of men and livestock at the outset of the war had severely crippled an agricultural economy dependent on muscle power, and as harvests rotted in the fields, goods shortages and rampant inflation further lowered the standard of living. The bad news was upsetting, and soldiers felt the separation deeply. As one soldier complained in late 1916, “we live [at the front] as if we were cut off from the whole world.”22 This alienation was expressed in different ways, as one censor noted: “In their letters, both officers and soldiers devote their main concern to their families and farms. Expressions of love for their wives also occupies an important place; in some letters it is the only theme of the letter. Jealousy is also noticeably growing; the fear that wives

21 Manuscript copy of memoirs of General M. D. Bonch-Bruevich (1931), Manuscript Division of the Russian State Library (hereafter OR RGB), f. 369, k. 422, d. 1, l. 120.
22 Report of military censors of Eighth Army based on letters from October 31–November 15, 1916, Russian State Military-Historical Archive (hereafter RGVIA) f. 2067, op. 1, d. 2937, l. 191ob.
will betray their long-absent husbands plays a large role in the growing war weariness.”23 Deep longing and gnawing suspicion were just two of the telltale signs of the sense of rupture that was felt by separated families.

The feeling of separateness from civilian communities in the war zone was even more pronounced. Soldiers were told not to have contact with civilians, and civilians were warned against engaging in conversation or trading with soldiers.24 The explicit reasons for group separation were espionage and concern about venereal disease (prostitutes were considered vehicles of both and were the special target of officers’ lectures to their men). These were not spurious reasons, but war planners had other motivations as well. In particular, military trainers wanted soldiers to bond together more tightly than civilians did. In their minds, this required an explicit desocialization in order to resocialize individuals in a new way.25

Some of the changes in sociability that soldiers underwent are peculiar to military migrants, such as the intensive training to kill members of other social groups in the new environment, but many of the social changes that occurred can be seen among civilian migrants as well. As scholars of migration and immigration have shown, moving from one social context to another nearly always requires a process of desocialization and resocialization. This process has a common pattern, and it is instructive to compare that pattern with the experiences of Russian soldiers. Regardless of whether migrants intend to stay in their new locations for good or plan to return home at some point, they depend upon a social network that is anchored at places of departure and arrival and helps individuals negotiate the process of social transplantation. Immigrants, upon arrival, often experience a sense of alienation from their original society, feel distrust and fear toward residents in their new surroundings, and display intense loyalty to the network that sustains them.26 These conditions produce important sources of social capital (in particular a strong but bounded solidarity and enforceable trust) that help both to sustain a migrant social group and to ensure its separateness from other groups in the region.27

23 Report of military censors of Eighth Army based on letters for the week of October 12–19, 1915, RGVIA f. 2067, op. 1, d. 3845, l. 104ob.
24 On trade restrictions, see the case of the Gluzheks, who were arrested for selling soldiers bread and cigarettes in late 1914 and early 1915. State Archive of the Russian Federation (hereafter GARF) f. 217, op. 1, d. 1234; on soldiers being ordered not to have contact with civilians, see V. Mironovich, comp., Iz zapisnoi knizhki voyny (ras-ska z o zhizni na pozitsiiakh) (Petrograd, 1916), 26.
25 See here Joshua A. Sanborn, Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905–1925 (DeKalb, IL, 2003), 166–70.
27 Alejandro Portes and Julia Sensenbrenner, “Embeddedness and Immigration:
Much the same process occurred among Russian soldiers at the outset of the Great War. Military units proved to be networks that provided significant social resources, some of them derived from the migratory process. Though the military unit was neither impermeable nor indestructible as a social entity, the immigrant experience was a formative one for the men arriving en masse at the front. Soldiers felt themselves to be a community separated by a deep gulf from the civilians among which they now lived. Even tentative contacts were difficult to sustain. One soldier, Mikhail Gerasimov, remembered going into the town of Novyi Dvor with his buddies in early 1915 and chatting up the pretty young daughter of a local Jewish shopkeeper. When they returned two weeks later, the store was shuttered and the family gone. Local residents were unwilling to explain why, but their tone suggested that the family had left to protect their daughter. Gerasimov’s friends suspected that they were spies. The deep suspicion that marked social interactions in the war zone led both civilian and military actors to interact cautiously with one another.

The intentional thwarting of military-civilian relationships at the outset of a war that military planners knew would hinge on effective military-civilian integration was ironic, but its effects were felt from the front line to the staff room. Staff officers loved their operational maps with big blue and red arrows and blocks representing the combatant armies. These maps showed roads, hills, and bodies of water, towns, villages, and fortresses, but no people. That said, they also loved the population maps of these regions that they had composed prior to the war, which showed ethnic groups in the region and explicitly judged the reliability of local populations both during war and afterward. But these two sets of maps were never really effectively combined, and when push came to shove, combat planners treated civilian populations as complications that needed to be minimized. Houses were hiding places for the enemy, fields were potential fodder, and individuals were dangerous as potential spies and expensive as potential charity cases. Civilians were, in short, a Clausewitzian friction that introduced chance, disruption, and disorder into a conceptual and physical space that military men spent their lives trying to control in one way or another. Thus the less contact soldiers had with civilians, the less chaos, randomness, and uncertainty would thwart their prosecution of the war.

The situation with civilians in newly conquered areas was structured even more clearly around the fact of social alienation than it was with Russian subjects. Subjects of enemy powers were not to be trusted. Neither, however,
were most of these subjects to be molested. All of the areas occupied by Russian troops were potentially new territories of the empire, with populations that in principle could and should be incorporated into imperial society. That postwar task would be much easier if the occupied populations were treated humanely and respectfully. These twin tasks of security and social calm were not at all antithetical in the eyes of the military administration. An orderly dictatorial regime would produce obedient new subjects and would present no hazards to the army in the field. The easy answer for officials was to keep soldiers and occupied civilians separate. As one military official in charge of the civilian population in the former Austro-Hungarian city of Tarnopol’ explained, “there are a great many people in the city from occupied territories who fled our troops, and per their request, I have given the order to send them back to their residences, but only in one direction—to the east.”

Soldiers to the left, civilians to the right.

The relationship with enemy combatants was in principle the simplest of all. The armies would be separate and hostile in the field; prisoners would be quickly dispatched to the rear where, out of sight, they would be out of mind. Top army officials thus tried to form a military society that would have no external social relations, would focus all its affinities on fellow soldiers, all its antipathies on the enemy, and would stay aloof from everyone else. To the great dismay of army officials, their plan almost immediately broke down. From the start of the war, soldiers in fact engaged in social relationships with all the other social groups in their array, complicating the simple plans of their superiors and eventually producing enough friction to force the question to the top of the wartime agenda.

SECOND WAVE: THE WAR AGAINST CIVILIANS

Lenin was right. World War I did start off as an imperialist war. Nowhere was this clearer than in the battle zones on the eastern front in the first year of the war. With the exception of the initial battles in East Prussia, all of the frontline areas were located in the colonized spaces of Eastern Europe, in places where the population felt itself under the domination of a foreign power and metropolitan authorities agreed. Indeed, eastern front battlefield tourists today need hardly bother with visas to Russia, Austria, Hungary, or Germany. Those sites now lie mainly in Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, and Romania. Include the massive disenfranchised Jewish population in the mix and the colonial situation becomes even more evident.

Letter to the commander of the Seventh Army Regiment from Col. Englehard, August 12, 1914, RGVIA f. 2134, op. 1, d. 534, l. 16.
One of the outcomes of this colonial setting was that military officials and regular soldiers alike, already socialized in their own clearly marked and separate migrant community, had an intense, almost pathological suspicion of civilian populations right from the very beginning of the war. Most of the fighting on the eastern front took place in areas of the Habsburg and Russian empires, and the situation between army and population was much different than that of the German army in the Baltic provinces. Whereas the German occupation scheme and vision was rooted in near-complete ignorance of the territories they controlled, the relationship of Russian and Habsburg troops to occupied territory was based on a conflict-ridden, volatile prewar colonial relationship.31

Thus two very powerful factors combined to form the relationship between the army and the civilian population. First, the basic axis of social differentiation in the area was soldier/civilian. Second, Russian army officials and soldiers shared an ethnicized vision of the world, in which ethnic groups constituted the basic political and social building blocks of the local order and in which tension between ethnic groups predominated. In the prewar period, the entire region saw conflicts not simply between colonizers and colonized but also between different colonized peoples. As a result, there was no simple mapping of “soldiers” onto colonizers and “civilians” onto the colonized. Instead, the arrival of combat troops in the colonial space resulted in an ethnic grid of the region. From the perspective of most Russian military men, all civilians were suspect, but some were far more suspect than others. Germans and Jews were basically irredeemable. Poles, Galicians, Armenians, Kurds, and others were potential allies but also potential enemies.

From the perspective of the occupied populations themselves, the most salient distinction in the war years was also between soldiers and civilians. Some civilians held affinities for one occupying force or another (and this became clearer the higher up the political food chain one went—pro-Russian elites usually tried to depart with the army when it retreated and pro-Austrian elites did the same), but most people wisely tried to keep their heads down, to stay out of danger when they could, and, when all else failed, to run away. Nothing got you on the end of a rope faster than taking sides in a fluid war with an uncertain outcome. Political aspirations and preferences were not absent, of course. Indeed, they were quite lively, especially after a string of promises from both sides in the first year of the war that local regions would be granted wide autonomy, perhaps even independence, by victorious powers after the

31 Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 22; on the prewar colonial situation in Russia’s western borderlands, see Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914* (DeKalb, IL, 1996).
But these were discussions for the future. While the war was going on (and especially when soldiers or civilian officials might be nearby listening), it was much better to keep quiet. So the population was, for the most part, cautious, distant, and tight-lipped. The army was scared, vulnerable, and bordering on paranoid. Throughout the area, ominous and lethal events were occurring. Very quickly the war became internal as well as external.

Initially the internal war was expressed through an inchoate hostility toward local populations. Eventually it would lead to explicit policies of ethnic scapegoating and ethnic cleansing. Rumors, chance sightings, and fear were already rife upon mobilization. One gendarme in the Warsaw district telegraphed darkly to his superiors right after the declaration of war that agents were reporting that “yesterday, in Vyshkov, in the guise of buying horses, two Germans arrived who stayed the night in the barn of the Jew Gurman and then went to Ostrolenka.” Still, some officials remained hopeful that the local population might be favorably disposed to the Russian war effort. The head of the gendarme administration in Groetsk and Blonsk districts in Warsaw Province reported on July 24, 1914, that during mobilization the “local population took the declaration of war with complete calm and enthusiasm.” But invisible saboteurs struck days later, on the night of August 3–4, when a rail line near the village of Iaktorov (approximately thirty kilometers from Warsaw) was destroyed, causing a passenger train to derail, killing one and wounding twelve. Warsaw responded that the local gendarmes should undertake a “secret investigation” with the aim of determining the number of Germans in Iaktorov and whether any of them had earlier been “compromised” and could lead them to the culprits. The locals responded that there were no Germans in Iaktorov, not even any suspicious folks or people labeled “politically unreliable.” The case was unsolved.

See, e.g., the promise of “self-government” (samoupravstvo) made to the Poles at the outset of the war. Appeal of the supreme commander of the Russian army, August 1, 1914, RGVIA f. 2067, op. 1, d. 2878, l. 1. For English translation, see Frank Golder, Documents of Russian History, 1914–1917, trans. Emanuel Aronsberg (New York, 1927), 37–38.

33 Telegraph from Rotmistr Skalon to the Warsaw Province Gendarme Administration, n.d. (but late July 1914), GARF f. 217, op. 1, d. 1152, l. 3.

34 Secret telegraph from the Head of the Gendarme Administration of Groetsk and Blonsk districts to the Warsaw Province Gendarme Administration, July 24, 1914, GARF f. 217, op. 1, d. 1152, l. 8.

35 Secret telegraph from the Head of the Gendarme Administration of Groetsk and Blonsk districts to the Warsaw Province Gendarme Administration, August 4, 1914, GARF f. 217, op. 1, d. 1152, l. 56.

36 Telegraph from Warsaw Province Gendarme Administration to Head of the Gendarme Administration of Groetsk and Blonsk districts, August 9, 1914, GARF f. 217, op. 1, d. 1152, l. 64; reply on obverse, August 14, 1914.
The frustrating lack of scapegoats in the Iaktorov case was unusual. A more common scenario played out when a fire broke out in Tarchin just as an elite squad of Russian troops was passing through on August 18, 1914. Immediately, local residents started muttering that the fire had been set by Jews “with the goal of letting the enemy know where our troops were moving.” These rumors quickly spread to the soldiers themselves, who beat, robbed, and arrested fourteen local Jews, who were quickly “linked” to the blaze. Fortunately for these men, the local police captain actually took the time to investigate the crime and discovered that the fire had occurred because of “incautious handling of a fire” and was not set intentionally. The Jews were released, but apparently not reimbursed, since the gendarme cavalierly noted that the goods taken from them were “not of significant value.” A lame note sent later in the day explained that the incident had been understandable since the “local Polish merchants and peasants” hated the Jews for offering only fifty rubles for cows that were “worth” one hundred rubles each. There was no comment on the fact that it had been soldiers who had done the beating and robbing. Neither, of course, was there any consideration of the impact of war, marauding armies, and military requisitions on the market price of livestock.

Still, the Jews of Tarchin were lucky. The early months of the war were marked by a wave of pogroms carried out largely (but not exclusively) by Cossack units. Shloyme Rappaport (better known by the pseudonym S. Ansky), who would see firsthand much of the devastation to come, was nevertheless made privy to the early actions of the army when he visited Warsaw in November 1914. The city, he writes, was “still reeling” from the German assault in October and swamped by displaced Jews. Thousands of refugees were arriving daily to join the more than fifty thousand already there. The refugees he visited “spoke softly, in a monotone, with stony faces. It was as if these people had lost themselves as well as all hope.” What they spoke of was violence and forced migration. “It was the same story everywhere: Cossacks had ridden in with swords and sticks, driven the Jews out of their homes and ordered them to leave town.”

It did not take long for these ethnicized suspicions and pogroms to have implications for a more organized system of deportation. Russia prior to the war had only very weak judicial protection for those accused of crimes. That protection got weaker still with the imposition of martial law in vast zones of

---

37 Secret telegraph from the Head of the Gendarme Administration of Groetsk and Blonsk districts to the Warsaw Province Gendarme Administration, August 18, 1914, GARF f. 217, op. 1, d. 1152, l. 89; ibid., l. 95.

the empire upon the declaration of war. The Russian General Headquarters (Stavka) assumed control over civil administration in these areas, a massive task added to a plate of tasks for the high command that was already too full. Legal procedures were streamlined, particularly in cases of suspected espionage, treason, or sabotage. The practices prescribed soon after the declaration of war mandated automatic deportation to the interior of the empire for those even suspected of participation in troublesome activities. In some cases, these regulations worked to soften the blows of military justice. Being convicted of many of these crimes meant death; if forced to choose simply between conviction and acquittal, judges would as a matter of course have had to convict and execute a number of people whose guilt remained in some doubt. Deportation offered judges an easy way out. There was no finding of guilt, but also no need to release potential spies back into the combat zone. It was a punishment that was widely used.

It was also, of course, widely abused. Take, for instance, the case of Iosif Kliapchinskii. In October 1914, a Russian counterintelligence agent reported to the staff of the Second Army that he had heard that Kliapchinskii had eagerly awaited the arrival of the Germans and had “joyfully” greeted them when they marched into his hometown of Prushkov. He then allegedly told the Germans where the local factory director had stashed the firm’s money and helped them steal it. This was clearly enough evidence to start an investigation, but every piece of evidence that the gendarmes uncovered contradicted the assertions of the army’s agent. Three signed depositions by local residents convinced even the chief of the gendarmes that Kliapchinskii was innocent. Nevertheless, in the end the Warsaw governor-general erred on the side of caution and deported him for the duration of the war. The number of deportees, unsurprisingly, continued to rise over the winter of 1914–15.

Not all deportees were treated as individuals and given the dubious protection of kangaroo courts, however. Very early in the war, the army began systematically targeting Germans and Jews for exile. Lists of members of suspect nationalities and places of residence were drawn up immediately after the declaration of war. The next stage came quickly. On December 27, 1914, a directive of the Second Army ordered all male German colonists older than fifteen years of age to be deported beyond the Vistula river; a month later the order came to do the same with “all Jews and suspicious people.” The explicit
reason for these deportations was that the “removal of Jews from these places is done with the goal of preventing them from getting definite information for spying.”

The number of people affected by these early deportations is still unclear, but the totals probably reached the hundreds of thousands by the end of the winter. In Warsaw alone at the end of January 1915, about eighty thousand new Jewish refugees joined the demoralized crowds described earlier by Ansky. Later calculations for deported Jews for the war as a whole range between five hundred thousand and one million. The more ambitious effort to cleanse the Jewish population from the Pale of Settlement would not occur until the retreat of Russian armies in the spring, but the process was already well advanced by the time of the military setback. The same was true for the ethnic German population in the region.

Finally, of course, there was extensive voluntary movement as civilians fled the screaming shells and armies on the hoof. These “voluntary” refugees appeared early in the war and never disappeared. In October 1914, for instance, a wave of refugees from the environs of the besieged Austrian fortress of Przemysl nearly overwhelmed other small Galician villages nearby after the Austrians destroyed all buildings within five kilometers of the fortress walls in order to clear their field of fire. The refugees were almost completely ruined, left “without a piece of bread and without any property at all.” Claiming to be “Russian,” they begged for help from the commander of the Twelfth Army Corps, who reported on their “horrible situation” to General Brusilov, the commander of the Eighth Army. Brusilov, in turn, ordered their relocation to the rear under the supervision of a civilian official supplied by the Governor-General of occupied Galicia. Thus did improvisation result in a nascent bureaucratic structure for dealing with the many dislocations of war. Similar patchwork processes were evolving up and down the front throughout 1914 and 1915, but they did not come together as a coherent refugee policy. Despite the lack of an organized policy initiative, however, hundreds of thousands of people had hit the roads in the context of direct violence or barely veiled force. These were violent migrations, occasioned by the war and conducted in conditions of grave peril.

1, d. 437, l. 24; telegram from the chief of the convoy-supply division of the staff of the Second Army to the Warsaw Governor-General, secret, January 24, 1915, ibid., l. 29ob.

43 Telegram from staff of Second Army to Warsaw Governor-General, n.d., ibid., l. 30.


45 See reports of commanders of the Twelfth Army Corps and of the Eighth Army, both on October 28, 1914, in RGVIA f. 2134, op. 1, d. 1153, l. 6, 8.
The situation on the eastern front prior to May 1915 was thus marked by rather more soldier-civilian interaction than military planners had hoped or anticipated. This interaction was marked in some places by outright brutality, as in the case of the Jews and Germans, and in other places by earnest compassion, as with the “Russian” refugees in Galicia. Even a mix of these two relationships in the same village setting was not uncommon. But everywhere a condition of mutual dependence was arising. The war had completely transformed the economic lives of all individuals in the war zone. Soldiers, now completely divorced from economic production, relied fully on the military supply system for survival. That supply system, in turn, depended heavily on local populations for goods and services ranging from bread to shoes to local cart transportation. That the home economy could not produce and supply sufficient materials was evident from difficulties planners had in providing those few goods—ammunition and military hardware in particular—that they were unable to acquire in the zone of military occupation. The Russian army literally ran out of guns and shells in 1915, and only a concerted effort led to improvement in this area over the next year. Likewise, the occupied areas did not have enough resources to fully supply the army either. The result was an army that drew grain, clothing, and many other necessities both from the center of the empire and from the war zone.

For their part, even civilians from nonscapegoated ethnic groups found their traditional economic practices completely disrupted. Large portions of the labor force were drafted into the army, both the urban and rural economies saw rapid ownership transfers (and shutdowns) as the result of the ethnic nationalization of what had been a multiethnic community of property owners, and the vibrant international market for labor and goods in these borderland regions came to a halt.46 The new economic system was completely dominated by the army, which acted as a monopoly consumer in many respects. Prices were fixed for goods and labor throughout the economy, and supply officials occasionally had to resort to forced requisitioning to meet the demands of the millions of men in their care. These requisitions were almost always accompanied by compensation, but this was often insufficient, not only because of low fixed prices and inflation but also because the value of the last horse on a farm dependent on animal power for operation was much higher than the value of one horse among ten. Finally, as we saw above, the army was the welfare organization of last (and sometimes first) resort for people ruined by the war. A system of near complete codependency had developed, a situation that mysteriously escaped the attention of military planners.47 The destruction

---

46 The process of economic nationalization during the war is dealt with in depth in Lohr, Nationalizing the Russian Empire.
47 The appalling lack of knowledge of how large-scale economies and societies func-
of the soldier-civilian relationship in 1915 would lay the basis for military disaster, humanitarian tragedy, and eventually civil war.

**MASSIVE DISLOCATION—THE GREAT RETREAT**

The position of the Russian army was quite good as the spring of 1915 arrived. The tsar’s forces occupied the Austrian cities of Przemysl and Tarnow, controlled the major mountain passes of the Carpathians, and seemed poised to strike deep into the Hungarian plains over the course of the summer campaign. The fear of imminent Habsburg collapse prompted the German high command to send emergency help to their allies in order to keep them in the war. Quickly transferring German troops southward, Ludendorff and Hindenburg chose to attack the Russian Third Army with General Mackensen’s Eleventh Army near the town of Gorlice, which was located between the Vistula and San rivers about one hundred kilometers southeast of Krakow. On April 19, they began pounding insufficiently protected Russian trenches with artillery, a massive barrage that lasted all day and well into the night before combined German and Habsburg troops attacked along a thirty-five-kilometer front. In a few areas manned by recently mobilized home defense forces, troops broke through. The Russian commanders failed to use their reserves effectively to stop the breakthrough, and within days the small breach in the lines had widened sufficiently to force a general retreat.  

Panic soon set in among soldiers, commanders, and civilians alike. A new wave of violent migration had begun. The initial impulse of army commanders when faced with the prospect of immediate retreat was a disastrous one. Reasoning that the fields, factories, and military and civilian labor capacity of the population were resources that could not simply be handed over to the enemy, officers in the field began to implement a scorched-earth policy. Top staff officers had already introduced the notion of “cleansing” war zones of populations earlier in the year, when Stavka had ordered several military districts “for reasons of military security” to carry out a “complete cleansing” of all German, Austro-Hungarian, and Turkish subjects in areas under martial law.  


49 Stavka used the word *ochishchenie*, from the Russian *chistit’*, “to clean.”

50 Telegram from Stavka to the Commander of the Dvinsk Military District, January 9, 1915, GARF f. 217, op. 1, d. 1147, l. 100.
the chief of staff for the supreme commander Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, used the same language when informing army commanders in February 1915 of the further tightening of his paranoid security regime. “The Jewish population, regardless of age or sex, in the region of military activity, is to be expelled to the side of the enemy. Regions occupied by rear units of the army are to be cleansed of all suspicious and unreliable people.”51 When the order to retreat came, top officers deployed the notion of population cleansing again, convening a special meeting at Stavka on June 23, 1915, with the express purpose of determining “measures for the cleansing of several places on the northern and southwestern fronts by our troops.”52

The procedure differed for the various army groups involved, and implementation of these measures varied widely, but on the southwestern front the orders were sweeping. General Ivanov, the commander of the front, had his chief of staff order the evacuation of all men aged eighteen through fifty on May 24 and personally gave the order two weeks later to send “the whole population by whatever means necessary” to the rear in the midst of the retreat.53 These hasty orders produced panic and a patchwork tableau of deportation and terror. Some villages were swept clean, while others, lying in the path of a different army corps, were left with residents and food supplies. Though many of the details of this chaotic period are still unknown, the broad strokes are clear. German troops entering the region found the population cut by more than half in some provinces.54 At the same time, relief organizations started counting the displaced in the millions. More precisely, officials counted over 3.3 million refugees by the end of 1915, and the most careful calculation of registered and nonregistered refugees at the start of 1917 had the number nearer to six million.55

Residents subject to evacuation were given a short period of time to collect whatever belongings they could carry and to leave their homes. Upon their departure, soldiers often first looted what was left and then burned homes and fields before following behind the slow-moving, dispirited, and vulnerable people they had uprooted. The scenes in war zones were painful and perplexing. As one soldier in the Russian army, Richard Boleslavski, remembered, orders to evacuate their position, burn the village in which they had been staying, and retreat one hundred kilometers to the east came suddenly. The

51 Ianushkevich order cited in telegraph from General Alekseev to the Commander of the Eighth Army, February 20, 1915, RGVIA f. 2134, op. 2, d. 542, l. 88.
52 Letter from Ianushkevich to P. L. Bark, RGVIA f. 2005, op. 1, d. 42, l. 105.
53 Telegram to Stavka, August 26, 1915, RGVIA f. 2005, op. 1, d. 42, l. 170.
54 Liulevicius, War Land on the Eastern Front, 20.
55 Gatrell, Whole Empire Walking, 3.
order came in the morning, and the village was to be destroyed by nightfall. Residents were confused. One nervously smiling woman thought at first that the soldiers were playing some sort of cruel joke. “Why do you have to burn this house?” she asked. “It’s my house.” “It’s orders,” was the simple response. Still unconvinced, she asked whose orders they were with a “plaintive, pitiable defiance in her voice.” The soldiers answered again that they had orders from above, but the woman was uncomprehending. She returned to her cooking. Boleslavski understood the confusion. “We had been friendly with these people,” he remembered. “They had treated us as well as they could. Their stock of potatoes, which was all the food they possessed, had been buried to keep during the winter, but they had dug the potatoes and shared them with us. We had given them salt and canned salmon and buckwheat. Now we told them that they would have to collect what they could and move anywhere they wanted to, preferably to the east. They could not understand. They did not want to understand; they did not want to believe.” Finally, as night came, the cavalry saddled up, and the painful reality set in. “One by one they dribbled out, still not quite believing: in couples, in threes and fours, moving slowly away and disappearing under the trees in the evening shadows.” Boleslavski and the rest of his platoon then gathered straw and lay a combustible path from house to house. A single match was enough to set the whole village aflame. As the platoon mounted up and moved on, they passed the villagers, “sitting on the ground, or standing about, facing the crimson flare. All of them, especially the women and children, were sobbing.”

The situation only worsened with time. Russia’s transportation infrastructure was thin and easily overburdened. Local authorities were unable to deal with the crisis with their limited experience and even more limited resources. More than two hundred thousand refugees had come through Vitebsk province alone by August 30, 1915. Diligent officials there tried to organize feeding stations and housing, but they were unable to do so on this scale, given the fact that they had only 129,615 rubles at their disposal and only a few people who could work full time. The provincial government had organized fifteen sanitation and feeding stations in the area, but this still left refugees with hundreds of kilometers to traverse without help. Starving refugees stripped all edible materials from a swath of territory several kilometers wide along the roads they were using. Not surprisingly, a cholera epidemic was developing, though

its scale was unclear because there was no one present to register or treat the fleeing families.\textsuperscript{57} An “enormous quantity of corpses” lay rotting alongside roads and at train stations, unburied because there was no one to do the work.\textsuperscript{58}

Cleansing turned out to be extremely dirty work, and it did not take civilian and military authorities long to realize what an enormous mistake they had made. The pressures of refugees and retreating armies overwhelmed the capacity of transport officials to deal with them. The mobility of the army slowed to a crawl; far from simplifying the conduct of war by clearing battle areas of civilians, the retreat and evacuation policy of the military authorities had severely complicated their tasks. Already by late June 1915, the very conference established to “cleanse” areas had realized that full deportation was counterproductive. Orders correspondingly went out informing army commanders that, with the exception of the persecuted communities already targeted for deportation before the retreat, only draft-aged men were to be “cleansed.”\textsuperscript{59}

This directive was too little, too late. The wave had already begun, and there was no reversing its course now. Desperate troops continued to ravage the countryside. With the supply system in a state of crisis and the local economy in cinders, methodical pillaging was becoming not only a habit but a necessity as well. Like “locusts or the army of Tamerlane,” soldiers and refugees swarmed eastward, devouring everything in their path.\textsuperscript{60} As General Alekseev sadly noted in September 1915, refugees were still continuously complaining that they had been “forcibly, against their will, required to leave their homes and move out ahead of the troops, and if they didn’t leave, their villages were simply burned. There are reports that this was to hide looting on the part of certain military men and groups.” He again urged that commanders inform residents that they should stay in their homes and not join the wave of disruptive sickly people dragging themselves westward.\textsuperscript{61} These weak pleas were ineffective.

Even in places where the Russian army was not forcing civilians to evacuate, many were leaving of their own accord. As General Gulevich reported in

\textsuperscript{58} Telegram to Stavka from Count N. A. Tolstoi, August 22, 1915, RGVIA f. 2005, op. 1, d. 42, l. 138.
\textsuperscript{59} Telegram from Ianushkevich to Prince Shcherbatov (MVD), July 21, 1915, RGVIA f. 2005, op. 1, d. 42, l. 75.
\textsuperscript{60} This was the characterization given at the time by A. V. Krivoshein, the minister of agriculture, in a closed meeting of the Council of Ministers on August 4, 1915. Michael Cherniavsky, Prologue to Revolution: Notes of A. N. Iakhontov on the Secret Meetings of the Council of Ministers, 1915 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1967), 46.
\textsuperscript{61} Telegram from Alekseev to the Commander of the Western Front, September 5, 1915, RGVIA f. 2005, op. 1, d. 42, l. 220.
August 1915, the shifting front was enough to prompt much of the movement. Villages were being destroyed by enemy artillery, and rumors that the Germans were “brutal” occupiers led many to take their chances on the road. In any case, the order to take or destroy all reserves save a one-month food supply per person made staying put nearly as unattractive as leaving even without the extra factor of an invading army. At present, Gulevich claimed, “only force would compel the population to remain in place.”62 In the space of two months, the army’s policy changed from forcible deportation to thoughts of forcible detention.

In the meantime, events of a different sort on the Caucasian front had unleashed a massive refugee crisis there as well. The Ottoman high command, consumed with many of the same problems and paranoias that the Russian military leadership possessed, undertook its own scheme of war-induced ethnic cleansing in a “vortex of Ittihadist nationalism, resentment against the Armenians, and mobilization for war” in the spring of 1915.63 The Armenian population living under Ottoman control was disarmed in February and deported from their places of residence beginning on April 8, 1915. In contrast to the Russian deportations, which did not have extermination as their goal, the Ottoman leadership used forced marches as an explicit “death warrant to a whole race.”64 Most of the Armenian population was captured and driven to death. When Russian troops later occupied Turkish Armenia, one official commented (with a sense as much of possibility as regret) that “Turkey has left us an Armenia without Armenians.”65

The genocide sparked a wave of emigration to the Russian Empire. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians fled across the border before Ottoman troops could round them up. After two years of poverty, disease, war, and persecution, there were still 153,762 Armenian adults and 12,435 Armenian children on the refugee rolls in the Caucasus region alone. And the refugee crisis in the Caucasus was not limited to Armenians. An exceptionally complicated situation was developing in the region, as uprooted Turks, Greeks, Kurds, and Armenians fought local populations and each other for resources and homes.

---

62 Telegram from General Gulevich to General Alekseev, August 24, 1915, ibid., l. 255.
64 These are the words of Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador to Constantinople, cited in Leo Kuper, “The Turkish Genocide of the Armenians, 1915–1917,” in _The Armenian Genocide in Perspective_, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New Brunswick, NJ, 1986), 48. There is, as Naimark has rightly stressed, a very fine line between forced deportation and genocide, but the line does remain important.
65 Report from Prince Gadzemukov (chief of Dersim district) to General Iudenich (commander of Caucasian army), March 14, 1917, RGVIA f. 2168, op. 1, d. 274, l. 2.
The Russian army, bewildered, was unable to successfully maintain order and defuse the deadly interactions between these groups. Armed militias formed among all the major ethnic groups, which rapidly began terrorizing each other and civilian populations.66

The disasters of 1915 focused the attention of military officials on the problem of population movement, and migration became a top priority for civilian leaders as well. As one official noted in September 1915, “the victims of the war—refugees—currently represent no less an awful occurrence in Russian life than the war itself.”67 Very quickly the question of refugees and of forced deportations became one of the major issues in the politically volatile summer of 1915. In closed and open meetings alike, the newly invigorated mass politicians who sought control over the destiny of the nation and the war effort lambasted the tsar’s bureaucrats and his military staff for their inhumane policies. As the chairman of the council of ministers complained to Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, the supreme commander of Russia’s armed forces, “the daily inquiries in Duma commissions regarding the actions of civil and military authorities in the zone of military activity, primarily in regard to measures to help refugees, have put the government in an exceedingly difficult position.”68

By August, even moderate ministers were warning that “the naked and hungry spread panic everywhere, dampening the last remnants of the enthusiasm which existed in the first months of the war. They come in a solid phalanx, trampling down the crops, ruining the meadows, the forests... The second great migration of peoples arranged by Headquarters is dragging Russia into the abyss, into revolution, and into destruction.”69 These were heartfelt and prophetic words.

Despite these bitter recriminations, both civilian and military officials worked hard over the summer of 1915 to devise a workable bureaucratic structure that could deal with the refugee problem. Army commanders soon realized that cash was among the most important assets they could utilize. Their troops needed meat and supplies; refugees needed a way to make their cumbersome and easily stolen assets more portable. As a result, requisitions, which had stirred local residents to anger in the first year of the war, suddenly became more popular. Indeed, many civilians now begged army officials to requisition

66 For numbers, see “Svedeniia o kolichestve bezhentsev na 1-oe marta 1917 na Kavkaze i v mestnostiakh Turtsei i Persii, zaniatykh ruskimi voiskami,” RGVIA f. 2168, op. 1, d. 288, l. 25.
67 Order of the main commander for the relief of refugees on the Northwestern Front, September 15, 1915, RGVIA f. 2005, op. 1, d. 42, l. 284.
68 Telegram from Goremykin to Nikolai Nikolaevich, July 22, 1915, RGVIA f. 2005, op. 1, d. 42, l. 59.
69 Comments of A. V. Krivoshein at August 4, 1915, meeting of the Council of Ministers. Cherniavsky, Prologue to Resolution, 46.
their goods (at fixed prices now higher than the unstable wartime market could provide). When the front line stabilized in the late summer of 1915, it became possible to organize a circle of transportation. Food and weapons came west, and the empty wagons filled with refugees headed east. The upsurge of civic activism that had accompanied the war and had initially been thwarted by anxious conservative monarchists now focused itself on a new social problem that the government and military authorities were unable to handle on their own. Public organizations largely took over the relief, sanitation, feeding, and medical efforts aimed at refugees. This new constellation of forces changed Russian politics for good. It ended the autocracy’s monopoly on power and brought the war home in a tangible way. The fact that the new political structure arose in response to massive population dislocation also had important implications. Whatever else changed in Russia after the Great Retreat, the possibilities for organized population movements now expanded greatly. Having proven in 1914 that they could move millions of soldiers across the empire in a matter of weeks, they showed in 1915 that it was also thinkable, if more problematic, to do the same with civilians.

RUSSIA’S NEW VERKEHRSPOLITIK—1916

In his recent work on German occupation policies in the Baltic provinces during World War I, Vejas Liulevicius stressed the importance of Verkehrspolitik, or “movement policy,” for the German administration. In his account, the German advance in 1915 prompted Ludendorff’s staff to devise a “startling, modern vision of controlling the land totally, by commanding all movement in it and through it.” They composed a spatial and categorical grid that they then imposed upon the newly conquered areas in an attempt to end the disorder that marked the initial period of conquest, to maximize the now scarce natural and labor resources left behind by the Russians, and, eventually, to “make the land over in their own image, moving towards final possession through colonization.”

Russian military administrators shared with their German counterparts a desire for order and a pressing need to mobilize resources in territories that all the combatant armies had done so much to destroy. One of the outcomes of the scorched-earth policy was that the Russian army deprived not only the German and Austrian armies of supplies and labor but deprived themselves as well. This result was surprisingly unexpected, and it came into sharp view in

70 See telegram from Podpolkovnik Nikandrov to Polkovnik Adzhiev (General Staff), August 5, 1915, RGVIA f. 2106, op. 3, d. 168, l. 52.
71 Gatrell, A Whole Empire Walking, esp. 49–72.
72 Liulevicius, War Land on the Eastern Front, 89.
1916. The population in the regions in which the front stabilized in September 1915 was much depleted, and a Russian counteroffensive in Galicia in the summer of 1916 succeeded in recapturing some of the territory that had earlier been surrendered in the region. Combined with the accelerating economic collapse of the country under the strain of the war, this left Russian troops marooned in a desert of their own creation.

The response of the high civilian and military command was to attempt to organize a massive and militarized repopulation of the war zone. Army officials were allowed by law to requisition labor as well as goods in regions under military authority, and they had done so from the very beginning of the war. Road construction, railway repair, bridge building, trench digging, tree felling, and carting were just some of the tasks that civilians performed. These were burdensome demands even in 1914, since frontline areas had instantly become labor poor as a result of military conscription. After the Great Retreat of 1915, these labor requisitions became even more onerous. With only a fraction of the prewar population remaining, the voluntary labor pool was drying up, which meant that the forced labor pool had to be expanded. The new dynamic was clear, as Stavka noted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in January 1916. “In view of the insufficient number of workers . . . willing to work for wages on different projects for military needs, predominantly of a defensive character, military authorities . . . have recently resorted very frequently to the requisition of labor from the local population.”

The military’s demand for labor quickly outran the supply. They could not simply devote more troops to the effort, having already devoted a great deal of their own manpower to these rear activities and having suffered heavily from battle casualties and desertion. As it was, the military was being lambasted at home by critics who were upset by the wasteful attitude toward manpower that the army displayed both at the front and in the rear. A painful series of new mobilizations had shaken the society and political system in 1915, and future demands for new drafts were sure to be met with skepticism. Further requisitions on the pattern of the first year and a half of the war were also problematic. The compression of the zone of military authority that the massive retreat caused meant that forced laborers were being drawn from a relatively small band of territory. The vast southwestern front took all its men from just two provinces (Chernigov and Poltava). As a result, the commander of that front petitioned Stavka early in the year to allow him to make a “broad interpretation” of the notion of the war zone and to begin drawing laborers from provinces not under martial law like Kursk, Kharkov, Kherson, and

73 Letter from General Alekseev (Stavka) to B. V. Shtiurmer (MVD), January 21, 1916, RGVIA f. 2005, op. 1, d. 51, l. 2.
Citing illegality and the baneful effect on the upcoming agricultural work cycle, Stavka refused, but the problem remained. Bridge construction on the Dnieper River alone was occupying the labor of nineteen thousand civilians, five thousand of them in forced brigades. Even the voluntary workers were exhausted and unhappy. By March, the problem was being raised by Mikhail Rodzianko, the chairman of the Duma, in his conversations with the emperor.75 By April, Stavka had polled the front commanders and had discovered that the total figure of workers needed was an astonishing one million.76

The high command began searching its statistical tables for possible manpower resources. The first group it wanted to target was the enormous prisoner-of-war population. All armies on the eastern front lost significant numbers of troops through capture, and a great many men on all sides looking to desert did so by surrendering voluntarily to the enemy. Over the course of the war, about 3,343,900 Russian soldiers were taken prisoner, and Russia, for its part, took nearly two million in return.77 Given the exceptional labor needs of total war economies, POWs were quickly put to work. POWs were another of the important migrant groups of the war, and they too are only slowly being rescued from historical oblivion.78 Their importance was not only as a labor force but also as an enormous captive population that had to be housed and organized. Russia, as well as other major combatant powers, created a vast network of labor camps in order to deal with the challenges and opportunities that the POW population represented. It may be too much to claim, as Peter Pastor has, that the Russian camp system was a Gulag Archipelago avant la lettre, but one can understand the archipelago reference with a brief perusal of a map he provides of the more than 250 World War I POW camps strung out from Minsk to Vladivostok.79

74 Letter from General Ivanov (Commander of Southwestern Front) to General Alekseev (Stavka), January 6, 1916, ibid., l. 8.
75 Alekseev response to Ivanov, January 30, 1916, ibid., ll. 10–11; telegram from Mavrin to the chief of military communications at Stavka, February 2, 1916, ibid., ll. 12–14; telegram from Rodzianko to the Emperor, March 16, 1916, ibid., ll. 15–15ob.
76 Report from Court Councillor Lodyzhenskii (assigned to Stavka) to MVD, May 1, 1916, ibid., ll. 47–48.
77 Rossiia v mirovoi voine (v tsifrakh) (Moscow, 1925), 4, 41.
79 Peter Pastor, “Introduction,” in Essays on World War I: Origins and Prisoners of
Indeed, the prisoner population was so large and so important that it had already been fully tapped by military and civilian authorities alike for a variety of economic tasks. In Russia, about eight hundred thousand POWs worked in internal regions, mostly in the agricultural sector. About one million more were in the battle zones working on “front” and “other” projects. When Stavka asked the ministries of agriculture and war for one hundred thousand POWs for labor in the war zone, it was promptly told that all POWs were already involved in crucial tasks. For the next month, army officers tried to calculate which domestic populations could indeed be located, boxed into trains, transported to the front, resettled, provisioned, and set to work on military tasks.

Finally, two meetings of the Council of Ministers on May 3 and 6, 1916, were devoted to the issue, at which a wide range of possibilities was considered. Some came directly from Stavka, such as the suggestion to draft about 120,000 men who had failed their induction medical exams and eight hundred thousand refugees. Some were raised for the first time at the meeting: a draft of Finns (who paid a special tax rather than submit to conscription), a draft of home guardists over forty years of age, a draft of enlisted naval sailors not yet mobilized, and a draft of Mennonites (who performed forest service rather than military service). All of these either posed tremendous political risks (the Finns), promised too few people (the naval draft), or simply targeted people who for reasons of age (home guardists), documented disability (the medical exam rejects), or a lengthy period of starvation and illness (the refugees) were unfit even for labor service. At this stage, the fateful suggestion was made to draft all the remaining exempt ethnic groups in the Asian part of the empire. The plan to draft over three million as yet untapped men struck a chord with many members present even as it worried the two ministries with the most knowledge about the subject of ethnic exemptions: the ministry of war and the ministry of internal affairs. Momentum grew swiftly to use the human resources of Russia’s Asian colonies to protect its European colonies.

On June 25, 1916, Tsar Nicholas II and his war minister D. S. Shuvaev issued an order to draft nearly all the ethnic groups previously exempted from military conscription, most notably Muslims in the Caucasus region and in Central Asia. These previously exempt ethnic groups were not to be drafted into the armed forces with rifle in hand but were drafted into militarized labor battalions. They would formally be members of the armed forces but would

---


80 Rossiia v mirovoi voine (v tsifrakh), 40–41.

81 See here telegram from General Ivanov (Stavka) to Mikhail Rodzianko (Duma), March 18, 1916, RGVIA f. 2005, op. 1, d. 51, ll. 23–24.

82 “Osobyi zhurnal Soveta Ministrov 3 i 6 Maia 1916 goda,” ibid., ll. 50–58.
be assigned to work in “the construction of defensive fortifications and military communications in frontline areas and also for any other work necessary for state defense.”83 Determining the procedures for the draft was left up to the ministries of war and internal affairs, and formal discussions on this topic took place among all the governors and governors-general in Central Asia over the next few days. The forthcoming draft was announced to the local population between June 30 and July 8 depending on the region and the whim of the governor in question.

Violence began almost immediately, with an outburst in Khojent on July 4 and in Samarkand district on July 7. Over the next few days, rioting swept across the region from Uralsk to Ferghana, culminating in a large demonstration in Tashkent on July 11. By July 13, some Russian garrisons had effectively been besieged and railway tracks and telegraph lines were targeted for destruction. On July 17, the entire Turkestan region was placed under martial law. The Russian army’s old Asian hand A. N. Kuropatkin was called away from the German front and placed in command of the pacification effort on July 21.

The disorders among the sedentary populations of Turkestan, centered around the cities of Jizak and Tashkent, cooled by the end of July, but they flamed even higher to the north and east as the nomads inhabiting the Kazakh steppe erupted into revolt. These areas had rumbled in July after the initial announcement, but organized opposition began only in August. By the end of August, the situation was tense, as bands of Kazakhs as large as fifteen thousand were riding the steppe threatening Russian settlers that they would kill them and burn their houses to the ground. A punitive expedition on the part of the Russian army proved successful, and the movement died out without massive ethnic war by the end of November.

More bloody events took place in Semirechie in early August and did not let up until the end of the month. In Pishpek district, and particularly in Przhevalsk district, massive ethnic warfare did occur. Natives attacked Russian settlements, massacring the inhabitants and burning the villages. Similarly, Russian colonists and army troops adopted a policy of seizing and lynching any natives they could get their hands on. It was only late in the month that Russian army troops gained the upper hand, mostly by forcing Kazakh refugees across the border into China and driving the remaining rebels into the mountains to die of starvation over the winter. The final stage of the rebellion took place in

the Transcaspian region, where serious violence started in September and lasted into early 1917. It was not until the middle of January that Russian officials felt that they had the situation under control, not just in Transcaspia but throughout Central Asia.

As Kuropatkin wound down the first stage of the pacification campaign, he visited Semirechie. There he came to realize the full extent of the ethnic animosity that had been engendered by the brutal violence. His reaction was to devise a plan of mass ethnic deportation similar to those that he and his fellow generals had conducted against Germans and Jews in Europe in 1914 and 1915. He decided that in the Issyk-Kul region, where “Russian blood had flowed,” he would forcibly deport all ethnic Kazakhs southwest to Naryn and effect a similar deportation of ethnic Russians from Naryn north to Issyk-Kul, thus creating ethnic cantons in the region. This project, as 1917 dawned, was still in the planning stage, but even absent this attempt at “ethnic cleansing,” the situation on the steppe was shocking. Three thousand five hundred European settlers lay dead and about nine thousand European homesteads lay in ruins. Losses among the native population were even greater. In just the region of Semirechie, population losses reached 20 percent. The total number killed or displaced, though never precisely measured, probably exceeded one million.

The year 1916 was thus marked by a progressive unraveling of the social, political, ethnic, and economic relations within the empire. One of the last bastions of social cohesion was the army in the trenches, especially on the Caucasian and southwestern fronts. Over the course of the year, the supply system had noticeably improved. Russian soldiers wrote home that they now could match their enemies in firepower and hoped to turn the tide of the war. General Aleksei Brusilov, one of only a very few Great War commanders to change his practices in response to what he was learning in the war, launched a successful counteroffensive in the summer of 1916 that drove Austria-Hungary back to the Carpathians and nearly drove them out of the war. Meanwhile, Russian troops in the Caucasian theater were conducting a surprisingly effective combined naval and ground offensive along the Black Sea coast that forced Ottoman troops to abandon many of their eastern provinces. Bitter and envious infighting and a lack of direction at General Headquarters meant that no anal-

---


85 These statistics are taken from Edward Dennis Sokol, The Revolt of 1916 in Russian Central Asia, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, series 71, no. 1 (Baltimore, MD, 1953), 158–60.
ogous attempts were made to drive Germany back in the bloody summer of 1916, but the mood among the soldiers in the advancing armies was surprisingly good. Censors reported that the tone of letters was “hearty, patriotic, and martial,”86 in contrast to that of the previous summer and, of course, the year to come.

But the situation was much different in the rear of the army, where military socialization was weaker and the malaise much deeper. Desertion was always higher from troops in the rear than from units in the trenches; their mood, according to censors, was much darker. Indeed, from as early as September 1914, there were reports from commanders that a phenomenon of “wandering soldiers” was becoming evident in areas removed from the front.87 By January 1917, though, these soldiers had become so common that they formed, in the words of one officer on the northern front, a “special type.” These soldiers had developed “their own way of life, their own habits, mores, and methods.” They were not only “useless” for the army but positively harmful, since “they have begun to form gangs that conduct murder and robbery.”88 Perhaps worst of all was the situation in garrisons in the rear. As Allan Wildman has argued, Petrograd garrison units by 1917 had given up all but the pretense of separation from the civilian population. Short on space, the government had housed some troops in workers’ districts in the cities and had detailed about 10 percent of the total garrison force to maintain security in armament factories.89 These men were now in a position in which they were not fully part of military society but also not really integrated into the fractious urban environment either. Ripped loose from virtually all social ties, they had become unpredictable, undisciplined, and, as tsarist officials would soon learn to their horror, unreliable. Over the course of the war, many of the tsar’s soldiers, uprooted and brutalized, had made the transformation from peasant to soldier and then from soldier to highwayman.

On the eve of the February Revolution, then, the Russian Empire was thoroughly unsettled, as millions of depressed, desocialized migrants struggled desperately to survive among a native population itself stricken socially and economically by the loss of its healthy men and plagued by goods shortages and runaway inflation. All of the tsar’s subjects, migrant or not, found themselves targeted by military and civilian officials increasingly emboldened and

86 “Svodka otchetov voennykh tsenzorov 8-i armii za period s 31-go oktiabria po 15-e noiabria s.g.” report of military censorship division of the Eighth Army, November 14, 1916, RGVIA f. 2067, op. 1, d. 2937, l. 187 (on mood), l. 188 (on sufficient arms).
87 Lemke, 250 dnei v tsarkoi stavke, 1:357–58.
88 Report of Major-General Shavrov, January 1917, RGVIA f. 2031, op. 2, d. 555, l. 35.
adept at massive population planning, in which the highest government organ in the land could seriously discuss the displacement of millions of people and expect to pull it off in a short period of time. Meanwhile, the army itself had gone through a painful process of alienation, tentative reintegration with the civilian community, and sudden, brutal realienation. Combat troops had sufficient social resources to resocialize with one another one last time, but the well had run completely dry in the rear, where demoralized reservists intermingled but did not really integrate with the fractured, anomic population bound together socially only by suffering and politically only by the desire to blame someone else for their travails. Even before the momentous February days in Petrograd, the nation was on the verge of civil war. When the army finally turned its rage upon itself after the abdication of the tsar, bloodshed was the predictable result; violence exploded, especially in the western borderlands, in the summer and fall of 1917.\footnote{Sanborn, \textit{Drafting the Russian Nation}, 173–74.} The seizure of Petrograd by radical Bolsheviks in October thus did not start the Russian civil wars; internecine violence was already well underway. The rise of Lenin’s party to power simply marked a point of no return and a moment in which the conflict crystallized. In this context of utter social and economic collapse, violent socialization took center stage. Deserters, marauders, and rapists ravaged the land, swarmed around each other to form bands, then aligned with the Red, White, and Green warlords. They marched, killed, and displaced populations across the expanse of Eurasia for another four years until just one warring party was left standing, still unsated.

\textbf{EPILOGUE}

The ending date of Russia’s Great War is harder to identify than its beginning. Russia entered the war in July 1914, two years after the Great War began in the Balkans; no such neat event marks the waning of violence and the drastic slowing of migration. For the sake of argument, though, two events might legitimately be seen as the end bracket to the period: the mass evacuation of the “White” General Wrangel’s army from the Crimea in November 1920 and the even more massive demobilization of the Red Army after the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, when over 3.7 million men (of a total of five million) were sent home in less than a year.\footnote{Iu. I. Korablev and M. I. Loginov, eds., \textit{KPSS i stroitel’stvo vooruzhennykh sil 1918–41} (Moscow, 1959), 190.} Even after these events, though, the war was in many ways still present. The Russian wreckage was evident not only in the broken lands that the Bolsheviks tried to repair but across the world as
well. From New York to Shanghai to Belgrade to Paris, Russian refugees tried to deal with the fact of their displacement and to join their new societies.

V. A. Obolenskii was one of these new immigrants. Living in Constantinople (the destination of the Wrangel armada), he responded to the start of the new year (1921) by beginning a journal, which he entitled “The Diary of an Emigrant.” This was his first entry:

I’m starting my diary in the second month of emigration. In my homeland I lived a life that I will say without modesty was exceptionally interesting, full of dramatic events that I was a participant in or witness of. And I never wrote anything down. But now, separated from life, I sit at my diary and hope to record accurately my impressions as an emigrant. I do so with an empty soul, and therefore those impressions are dull and aren’t interesting to me or to anyone else. But I’ve got a lot of free time. How else will I spend it? To this day I don’t really know what happened. I know that I’m not in a condition to understand all of the tragedy. Emigrant! Vaterlandloser, sans patrie, and something even more humiliating—“bezhenets [refugee].” For how long? Maybe forever.92

It is not hard to see signs of depression here even from one of the most fortunate of the Russian refugee population. Obolenskii was a prince, had means, had escaped with his life and family, and did not have to scramble to survive. Still, refugeedom was incredibly painful, alienating, and depressing. Millions more throughout Russia and throughout the world were experiencing the same psychological trauma and the same difficulty rebuilding the human relationships that form the basis of any society.

Nor was the problem limited to Russian citizens. Hundreds of thousands of Central Power POWs were trapped inside Russia as a captive labor (and military) force during the years of the civil wars. Hundreds of thousands of Russian POWs remained in camps as European governments struggled to come to terms with the question of how to repatriate prisoners to a place where the European states in question did not recognize a legitimate government. Fridtjof Nansen, the League of Nations refugee specialist extraordinaire, visited many POWs in Soviet Russia and in Europe over the course of 1920 and described their condition in the following way:

Most of these prisoners had been in captivity for a period varying from four to six years. . . . The sufferings of these men have been far greater than I can describe to the Assembly. Not only have they undergone the ordinary privations and the ordinary mental anguish of the prisoner of war, they have also suffered in almost every conceivable way from cold, hunger, disease, neglect, and overwork. The conditions of the camps in many parts of Russia were, during part of the last 4 years, almost too terrible

to think of, and the mortality among these prisoners has been almost inconceivably
great. I have every reason to believe that in some of the epidemics which took place
in many of the camps more than half of the prisoners actually perished and great
numbers were permanently enfeebled.

Nor does the suffering involved in the captivity of these men end with themselves.
It is also necessary to take account of the anxiety and deprivations suffered by the
millions of women and children throughout Central Europe, whose fathers, sons and
brothers have been separated from them for so long and for so trying a period. If the
Members of the Assembly could read some of the many, many letters which have
reached me and which still continue to reach me from the parents and relatives of
prisoners who have failed to regain their homes, they would realise how slowly hope
dies but how great is the misery of prolonged and uncertain separation.93

The waves of violent migration occasioned by the Great War left permanent
scars for individuals, for national communities, and for European society as a
whole. The mechanisms that people used to adjust to the misery of the rootless
world and the mechanisms that states devised with the experience of wartime
population transfers in mind would help define the century to come.

93 “Draft Report to the Assembly by Dr. Fridtjof Nansen on the work undertaken in