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Garrison Stories: Poland in the Imagination of Twentieth Century Western Soldiers

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Introduction:

The myth of Eastern Europe stems from many sources, but study of the myth makers has focused primarily on politicians, philosophers, writers and other intellectuals. This focus overlooks many other groups of myth makers, including soldiers. Soldiers make up a vital resource for studying the myth of Eastern Europe. Military personnel make up a large percentage of “visitors” to Eastern Europe in both war and peace, and their memoirs, memories, and perceptions of Eastern Europe decisively shape the perception of “over there” when they return home. Even more importantly, soldiers imaginations about fighting in Eastern Europe help to shape the popular imagination of the region in a way that intellectuals do not. Most Westerners, particularly Americans, are not exposed to academic works of history or sociology, and don't particularly think about Poland in general. Soldiers are a major exception – their overseas service and concern with international security help to make them at least aware of foreign countries. Common Western perceptions of Eastern Europe – it's endless spaces, the cold, the unending hordes of Russians, and the poverty of its people – largely stem from the experience and imagination of Western and Central European soldiers in the region.

I will examine the changing military myths about Poland during the twentieth and early twenty first centuries by briefly surveying military literature, memoirs, and blogs from Western Europe, Central Europe, and the United States, starting with Austrian and German soldiers

stationed in Partitioned Poland. I will examine how Poland is remembered and portrayed by soldiers from outside the region. After looking at the Fin-de-Siecle, I will move quickly through the World Wars and Cold War, before looking at common representations of Poland among American soldiers today. In the last fifteen years, Poland has become a very positive place in the imaginations of American soldiers thanks to the country's perceived firm support of the US during the Iraq War and recent tensions in the Ukraine. Increased NATO interest in Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic States has resulted in an increasing Western military presence in Eastern Europe, and a correlating growth of military myths about the region. This is a preliminary look at how soldiers experiences and expectations shape Western imaginations of Eastern Europe, but shows that there is much potential in an approach grounded in military imaginations.¹

Habsburg and German Partitions:

By far the largest numbers of “western” soldiers ever stationed on Polish soil was during the Partition period. In the various zones of partitioned Poland, the military was extremely important. Massive garrisons in Warsaw, Przemyśl, Lviv, Thorun and elsewhere naturally were a vital tool for Austrian, German, and Russian security policy, but also for tying local loyalties to the broader state. Several generations of Poles went through German, Austrian, and Russian military training and some rose high in the ranks, particularly in Austria.² For Austria, the province of Galicia was strategically a frontier buffer zone, but the Galicia's political importance,

¹ Patrick Porter's *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) is an excellent example of how the military imagination can influence and be influenced by broader cultural understandings of an entire region and culture – in this case the Middle East, Japan, Mongols, and the Taliban.

² Davis, *God's Playground II*, 270.

demographic significance, and the large number of soldiers rotated through the province gradually made it essential to the Habsburg Monarchy and army.

Three of the Austro-Hungarian army's sixteen corps were stationed in Galicia – 1st Corps in Kracow, 10th corps in Przemyśl, and the 11th corps in Lviv. These corps were kept at a higher state of readiness than others in the Monarchy and maintained the most significant Hapsburg fortifications.³ Eighteen percent of the Austro-Hungarian army was recruited in Galicia.⁴ As a result of the large troop presence and frequent transfers within the army, many of the KuK's officers served in Galicia at one time or another during their careers. In general, Galician service was a negative experience for officers and men. The officers and non-locally recruited men did not care for the province, its people, or the environment. It was regarded as exile, a desolate land with nothing to do except drink oneself into oblivion.

Being transferred to the frontier could come as an unpleasant shock. In his memoirs, Albert Lorenz vividly recalled his reaction as a young Lieutenant when he found out he was being sent to Galicia. Even the word "Galicia" brought Lorenz "optische und akustische Unlustgefühle."⁵ Being stationed in Galicia meant hard work for officers and men. Drill and training took all day, starting with riding practice, drill of troops, inspections and other military duties.⁶ Galicia was a fate equal to exile for many of officers. Cut off from the cultural core of the empire, some described the province as having an oriental culture.⁷ Living conditions were often quite bad – soldiers tell of mud so bad that even enlisted soldiers resorted to using stilts to

³ See Ralph Butler, "The Frontiers of Central Europe and their Defense," *The Geographical Teacher*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (Autumn, 1912), 335-346.

⁴ Jan Rydel, "Galicia Garrison," in Jacek Purchla and Wolfgang Cos, ed. *The Myth of Galicia* (International Cultural Center: Krakow, 2014), 193.

⁵ Albert Lorenz, *Shattenreiter* (Vienna: Eduard Wancura Verlag, 1958), 239.

⁶ Dorethea Gerard, *The Austrian Officer at Work and Play* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1913), 232-234.

⁷ Lorenz; see Larry Wolff, *The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 2010) for more on Galicia as an Asian hinterland.

cross the streets of small Galician towns.⁸ The locals in Galicia were usually portrayed as filthy, lacking a proper, Austrian, appreciation for food and drink. Monotonous days filled the troops lives, filled with repetitive drills and exercises.⁹ Despite occasional interaction with the locals, boredom prevailed among small garrisons in towns with few amusements.

For Austrian soldiers, the people of Galicia were even more frustrating than the living conditions. During much of Galicia's Austrian administration, the Austrian officers saw Galicia as a disloyal hotbed of Panslavism, liberalism, and general rebelliousness. According to Albert Lorenz, despite Austria giving the province rail roads, infrastructure, and protection Galicia "was a demanding and unthankful acquisition."¹⁰ According to military professional papers, one of the worst things about Galicia was the large Russian influence. The *Armeebblatt* blamed Russian propaganda for poor public relations between the army and civilians in Galicia. The Russians have "made us an enemy to the people in our land through propaganda."¹¹ Jews and other minorities were subjects of particular dislike.¹²

This perception of Galicia lives on in many of the myths about Galicia, as well as much fictional literature about the Habsburg Monarchy and its army.¹³ For example, young Carl Joseph von Trotta memorably spent much of his formative years in *The Radetzky March* on the Russian border; a border where officers gambled with abandon, workers rioted, swarms of tradesmen "lived off of other people's work," an officer's "boring day" is only made bearable by hard liquors, local nobles await the fall of the monarchy, money lenders loom threatening in the

⁸ Gerard, 238.

⁹ Franz Forstner, *Przemysl. Österreich-Ungars bedeutendste Festung* (Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1987).

¹⁰ Lorenz, 240.

¹¹ *Armeebblatt*, "Der unberechenbare Nachbar," 26 February 1914, 1-2.

¹² Willhelm Gruendorf von Zebegény, *Memoiren eines österreichischen Generalstäblers* (Stuttgart: Lutz, 1913), 80-81. Deak, 124.

¹³ Myth of Galicia.

background, and young infantry lieutenants loose faith in their profession, their monarch, and their sense of purpose.¹⁴

In Imperial Germany, the military perception of Poland was tied closely to the identity of the Junker officer class, making the Polish regions much more integral to the ruling classes of the Empire than in Austria. The social makeup of the German officer corps made the German partition much less of a backward frontier for officers stationed in Pomerania, Posen, or West Prussia. For Junker officers, the forests and estates of East Prussia were home.¹⁵ Of course, the changing nature of the German officer corps meant that by the turn of the century, noble Junker officers were no longer the majority within the German army. Despite this demographic shift, the German army remained dominated by an aristocratic leadership that emphasized conservative social values.¹⁶ German soldiers connected abusive officers with East Prussia – in 1904's *The Little Garrison*, the abusive COL von Kronau, when finally forced to resign, packed up and moved back to “the far-away district near the borders of Russia, to which the deposed military autocrat was returning, with the intention of spending the remainder of his days amid the peaceful calm of his carrot fields and haylofts” - hardly the catastrophic fate of Austrian officers sent to Galicia.¹⁷

While there was a large German military presence in the Polish provinces, they did not have the strategic importance of Western Germany, or Galicia to the Austrians. The Germans

¹⁴ Joseph Roth, *The Radetzky March*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel (Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1995). Quotes from pgs. 127 and 166.

¹⁵ James Charles Roy, *The Vanished Kingdom: Travels Through the History of Prussia* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press), 166-167.

¹⁶ Stephen D. Jackman, “Shoulder to Shoulder: Close Control and 'Old Prussian Drill' in German Offensive Infantry Tactics, 1871-1914,” *The Journal of Military History* 68, No. 1 (Jan 2004), 73-77. See also Dennis E. Showalter, “Army and Society in Imperial Germany: The Pains of Modernization,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 4, 583-618.

¹⁷ Fritz Oswald Bilsse, *A Little Garrison: A Realistic Novel of German Army Life of Today*, translated by Wolf von Schierbrand (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1904), 299.

did build significant fortifications at Thorn, Königsberg, and Posen, and stationed six out of twenty Regular Corps in Polish possessions, though several of these were earmarked for the Western front in case of war.

Like most soldiers in the Imperial German army, Poles harshly treated by the officers. Poles were the victims of anti-Polish language policy and few Poles reached significant rank within the German army. Many of the works of fiction and “real life” exposés of the German army use the Poles as an example of Prussian cruelty and harshness. *My Years in the Kaiser's Army* published in 1916 by an anonymous ex-officer details a wide variety of abuses against Poles by their German superiors. These abuses include forced germanization of adjuncts (resulting in multiple suicides), whippings, and barbaric prisons. Most melodramatically, the book describes the mother of a dying Polish soldier. Sadly, the mother made the mistake of speaking Polish to her son and was “roughly seized” and brutally ejected” by the garrison commandant from her boy's deathbed.¹⁸ As this officer explains, to “the scions of the Brandenburg feudal aristocracy...the mere mention of Poland was anathema.”¹⁹ In this work, Poles appear only as victims – there isn't even the most rudimentary description of the Polish countryside or lifestyle. This denial of any Polish identity is in many ways even worse than Austrian horror at being assigned to the frontier.

WWI, Interwar Visitors and WWII:

Military perceptions of Poland changed drastically during the First World War. Millions of German and Austro-Hungarian troops fought and died in the province. Their stories are

¹⁸ My Years, 42-43.

¹⁹ My years in the Kaiser's army, 38. While this book discusses pre-WWI events and service, it was published during the war, and the author declares that he agrees with Jaures - “the modern German has a thin veneer of civilization, beneath which there lurks the soul of a wolf (pg 95).”

overwhelmingly ones of destruction, disease, refugees, and death. During the war, these militarized perceptions of Poland were absorbed by the civilian population through letters from the front, news, and propaganda – images of wartime destruction were frequently exhibited to civilians at home in order to teach about the barbarity of the Russian army.²⁰ In general, though, Eastern Europe was overwhelmed in the Western imagination by the Western Front and battles like Verdun and Ypres overshadowed Przemyśl and Gorlice-Tarnov.

This trend continued throughout the interwar period, as Poland was generally ignored by the Western powers. Though France did attempt to help increase the combat capabilities of the Polish army, the relationship between the French and Poles was fraught and never particularly enthusiastic from the perspective of the French. During the 1930s, Poland was the site of the inherently militaristic imagination of Adolf Hitler and Nazi propagandists, who called it “a state which arose from the blood of countless German regiments,” a “state built on force and governed by the truncheons of the police and the military,” and “a ridiculous state where...sadistic beasts give vent to their perverse instincts.”²¹ Poland's experience in World War II would dominate popular Western, particularly American, perceptions of the country until today. Sadly, the 1939 quick invasion of Poland and the Holocaust dominate the imagination of American soldiers (on the rare occasions they think about Polish history) rather than the devoted anti-Nazi resistance of the Home Army, or Polish formations in western armies.

Western soldiers encountered some Poles during the invasion and occupation of Nazi Germany in 1945. Descriptions in official US army histories of World War II were generally favorable, using the Poles to emphasize the cruel nature of the Nazis, rather than any deficiency

²⁰ Myth of Galicia, 445-454.

²¹ All quoted by Davis, 393.

on the part of the Poles. *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany* described tens of thousands of displaced persons in April 1945, marching “in the direction of home” along German autobahns. Many wore uniforms, but “Poles and Dutchmen and Serbs wear any kinds of rags...They were surprisingly cheerful, surprisingly orderly...There is much talk about looting [but]...the truth is that the Eastern workers are astonishingly well behaved.”²²

Throughout the Cold War era, German soldiers who had fought in World War II had a significant impact on the Western imagination of Eastern Europe. During the early 1950s, the US Army published the “German Report Series,” – 18 booklets largely written by captured German staff or general officers about the Wehrmacht's experiences fighting the Russians. The series included topics like “Russian combat Methods in World War II,” “Combat in Russia: Forest and Swamps,” and “Effects of Climate on Combat in European Russia” and helped cement German descriptions of the encroaching hordes of Russians and Eastern wastelands in the American imagination.²³ These booklets mostly focused on tactical and strategic considerations, and thus Poland is portrayed only as a stepping stone for Russians - “Poland forms a vast land bridge from [Germany] in the west to the marshy lowlands of Byelorussia (White Russia) and the rich steppe of the Ukraine in the east.”²⁴

Throughout the Cold War, Poland was simply part of the Eastern Bloc in the minds of Western soldiers. My father served in West Germany in the early 1980s as an infantry officer in the US Army. For him and his colleagues, the Poles were just an extension of the Red Army – with inferior troops.

²² Earl F. Ziemke, *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1975), 240.

²³ Robert M. Kennedy, *The German Campaign in Poland (1939)* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1956) contains a partial list.

²⁴ Kennedy, 48.

Westerners in Poland Today:

For Western soldiers today, Poland is no longer seen as a frontier wasteland, or Soviet launch pad. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Poland has become increasingly integrated into the broader Western European narrative, and this is reflected in American soldiers visiting, and occasionally discussing the country. American officers and soldiers quickly began to see Poland as a test subject for mentoring and assistance for the entire region. Army Chief of Staff GEN Reimer expressed these sentiments in 1997 after a visit to Poland and the Czech Republic. He described how these two nations had to grow up to join the proper, western mold – along the American model. “The Polish Army ... see[s] us as a valuable role model to follow as they chart their paths to the future and they eagerly seek opportunities to learn from us.”²⁵ Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary joined NATO in 1999, further increasing the region’s military interactions with westerners.

Today, American soldiers generally see Poles as key allies against a resurgent Russia.²⁶ Poles are portrayed on American soldier blogs as strong, reliable, and loyal allies – often in contrast to the imagined hippy, environmentalist, liberal, pseudo-communist rest of Europe. This attitude became increasingly pronounced during the Iraq and Afghanistan war, when according to the *A Soldier's Perspective* blog, the UK, Spain, Bulgaria, Australia and Poland were some of the very few countries “which have stood by our side during the Iraq conflict.” Those countries that did not help the US in Iraq should turn to France for help when dealing with a famine or

²⁵ Dennis J. Reimer, *Soldiers Are Our Credentials: The Collected Works and Selected Papers of the Thirty-third Chief of Staff, United States Army*, ed. James Jay Carafano (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 2000), 134.

²⁶ LTCOL P, “Back From Leave,” posted 15 September 2006, OP-FOR blog, http://op-for.com/2006/09/back_from_leave.html

epidemic.²⁷ These sentiments are not uncommon on the US right, and similar statements can be found by Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity and others.

American soldiers also incorporate Poland into the broader experience of the War on Terror. After September 11, many soldiers searched for historical precedents and were happy to include Poland in the broader narrative of Western fighters against a hostile Muslim world. For example, in the OP-FOR blog, LTCOL P wrote “Remember also 11 September 1683, in which King Jan Sobieski of Poland led his army to the rescue of the city of Vienna, and broke the Turkish siege. Be sure to thank a Pole if you know one. There are several here aboard USS Eggers, and I will be thanking them profusely.”²⁸

Today’s resurgent Russia has resulted in even more NATO activity in Poland – as well as a significant number of Western soldiers cycled through the country. 2015 will see around 70 combined and international exercises involving Western, NATO troops and the Polish military, more than any previous year. A spokesman for the Polish Armed Forces General Command explained that not only would these exercises (part of Operation Atlantic Resolve) would help to “discourage a potential aggressor from interfering in our day to day existence,” since “Poles feel much more secure, and Polish soldiers feel much more confident having U.S. boots on Polish

²⁷ CJ Grisham, “Wishful Thinking,” *A Soldier's Perspective*. 3 August 2005.

<http://asp.tacticalgear.com/wishful-thinking/>. France is a common subject of disdain among American soldiers.

²⁸ OP FOR blog, “11 Sep 2009,” posted 10 September 2009. http://op-for.com/2009/09/11_sep_2009.html#ixzz3W931IePx

soil.”²⁹ Many American soldiers are happy to see a greater commitment to Europe. One soldier blogger exclaimed, “That’s the US Army I know and love, and flashes of the old NATO too!”³⁰

Conclusions:

Though this is a preliminary examination of the militarized imagined eastern Europe, it is clear that soldiers have a distinct view on the region which is reflected in at least some corners of broader society. Austrian soldiers suffering on the frontier have been a staple of Habsburg memory for years and the German army was extremely tied to the society and structure of the East. As Poland becomes an increasingly important and active theater for NATO forces, Western soldiers cycling through will have the chance to experience the country first hand and tell their stories back home. So far, these stories have been quite favorable, and have helped to create a positive image for Poland in sectors of American public opinion and popular imagination.

²⁹ Sgt. Christina Dion, “Operation Atlantic Resolve enhances Polish Armed Forces training, operations,” [www.army.mil/article/145197/Operation_Atlantic_Resolve_enhances_Polish_Armed_Forces_training_operations/]

³⁰ OP FOR blog, “1,100-Mile Trek through Six Countries,” <http://op-for.com/2015/03/1100-mile-trek-through-six-countries.html#ixzz3W910FAUg> 31 March 2015.

