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Polenberg

Meanings and Memory of the Kostiuchnówka Battle

The year 1915 saw probably the most successful offensive, both in terms of military goals achieved and in terms of organization, in the whole history of the Great War's Eastern Front. Mackensen's push from Galicia eastwards was made possible by powerful and well-orchestrated artillery fire, decisive and consequent drive of the infantry relentlessly following the withdrawing Russians and, last but not least, attention to the basic comfort of the fighting units. To Austro-Hungarian soldiers, who had been through the campaigns of 1914-15, the sight of German field kitchens following the offensive to feed the fighters every night after whole day of fighting must have been striking. This campaign required heroism solely on the battlefield; aside of it efficiency was pushed for and it was delivered. Never before has a military operation on this front been so minutely planned and so consequently realized.

Giving Meanings to a Failure

In Spring 1916, the technological and organizational preponderance shifted to the Russian side. Aleksei Brusilov supported by his chief of staff Vladislav Napoleonovich Klembovski (incidentally a Russian officer of Polish origin and Protestant denomination) paid attention to details such as confusing the enemy's aerial observers with installing false artillery batteries, sending false instructions over the radio (knowing it is being snapped by Austrians and Germans) while he simultaneously profited from a considerable improvement of Russian supply and training.¹ All this resulted in a most disastrous blow to the Habsburg army that absorbed most of the Russian offensive. In June and July 1916, over 400,000 were killed, wounded or taken prisoner by the Russians, another 70,000 being hospitalized in the rear. Some units, notably the 1st Vienna Reserve Infantry Regiment in practice seized to exist. Conrad's adjutant, Colonel Rudolf Kundmann was not

¹ Timothy C. Dowling, *The Brusilov Offensive*, Bloomington, 2008, 25-27.

far from reality when he commented on 10 June 1916: “The whole of Fourth Army has actually been taken prisoner”.²

Searching for responsible for such a dramatic failure occupied the attention of many, including Austro-Hungarian military justice. Understandably, the units most affected in the first days of the offensive were at the center of public attention, notably the Viennese regiment under command of Max Schönowsky-Schönwies. In 1919, upon the rehabilitation of the commander a history of his regiment’s fight near Olyka (in Wolhynia) was published penned by Schönowsky and August Angenetter, an officer of the reserve and journalist. Their picture of June 1916 is that of a heroic fight against “earth-brown, massive monster that pushed forward roaring, banging, and firing”.³ In search for alternative reasons of the breakthrough the authors pointed at inadequate supply and lack of communication, as well as to chaotic decision-making but the bulk of their outrage centered upon the unreliable co-belligerents. This line of reasoning starts already before the battle with critical remarks on Hungarians looting the locals and goes further to the ethnicised description of the way soldiers reacted to the Russian bombardment:

“Numerous Czechs and two Ruthenians – unreliable reservists attached to our unit – grouped apart. Their faces expressed a *mixtum compositum* of cowardice, trickiness, artfulness, fear, Schadenfreude and a secret low hope. It was disgusting to watch these deformed physiognomies. A couple of Poles stack together in a niche goggling so that you could see the white of their eyes and prayed with trembling, grey lips”.⁴

The insinuation Czechs and Ruthenians take the blame for the Habsburg army’s misfortunes formed one of the points of contention between German Austrian and Czech politicians in Vienna. The accusations gained new ground with the news about actions of the Czechoslovak Legions in Russia, especially after the battle of Zborów (*Ukr. Zboriv*) a year later.⁵ The lengthy act of accusation against the Czechs that was presented by a group of German nationalists in the Parliament, in late 1917, represented a wartime climax of this campaign.⁶ Although groundless, as has been repeatedly proven by Czech and Austrian historians,⁷ it was durable. Both wartime diaries and memoirs of the Austro-Hungarian soldiers testify to the popularity of the *topos* of the ‘treacherous and cowardly

² Quot after Dowling, Brusilov, 168.

³ Max Schönowsky-Schönwies, August Angenetter, Luck. *Der russische Durchbruch im Juni 1916*, Wien – Leipzig, 1919, VII-VIII.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 70.

⁵ Ivan Šedivý, ‘Zborov a rakousko-uherská monarchie,’ in Jiřina Švarcová, Jaroslav Roušar, *Zborov 1917-1997*, Praha, 1997, 38-47.

⁶ *Das Verhalten der Tschechen im Weltkrieg. Die Anfrage der Abg. Dr. Schürff, Goll, Hartl, Knirsch, Dr. von Langenhahn und K. H. Wolf im österreichischen Abgeordnetenhaus*, Wien 1918.

⁷ Most recently: Richard Lein, *Pflichterfüllung oder Hochverrat? Die tschechischen Soldaten Österreich-Ungarns im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Wien 2011.

Czech' while it was also widely acknowledged by the interwar historiography.⁸ As such, the Austro-Hungarian inner campaign against her own subjects emulated the German nonsensical anti-Semitic attempt at so called *Judenählung* (Jews-count).⁹ The difference was clearly the condition of the army. Severely injured Habsburg military could hardly afford ethnic discord among the soldiers. Alas, it did, with crucial role played by Reichsrat deputies of both nationalities who publicly quarreled about issues as absurd as which of the Prague technical universities had lost more of its students on the front.

Consulting Czech memoirs and historiography further complicates this picture. While the interwar state built its legitimacy on the Czechoslovak legionaries' contribution to the victory of the Entente and cherished the myth of disloyal Czech and Slovak soldiers not willing to die for their Habsburg oppressor.¹⁰ Thus the Austro-German nationalist campaign delivered arguments to the Czechoslovak nationalist narrative of the war fought primarily against Austria (whereas, naturally, more than 90 per cent of the Czechs and Slovaks had fought for the Habsburg emperor and king). Memories of Czech soldiers tell yet another story. The witnesses note, above everything else, exhausting chaos of retreat and counterattack.¹¹ More importantly, in their view both panic and heroism affected all nationalities of the monarchy equally. As noted by a private František Černý, there was nothing typically national in the Austro-Hungarian retreat:

"I repeatedly cached up with regiments whose members took rest on a roadside and you could see that they must have deserted from their positions before midnight. Whenever the road was even, you could hardly imagine the sight of masses of soldiers! The swarm had neither beginning nor end. Everything moved back: infantry, cavalry, trains. I thought: We are so many. Why should we escape? But I followed the others".¹²

The Victory

Whatever the role played by ethnic tensions within the army, German and Czech story of June- July 1916 was that of a defeat. Not so in the case of their co-belligerents: the Polish legionaries. In their

⁸ Cf Jan Dąbrowski, *Wielka wojna 1914-1918 na podstawie najnowszych źródeł*, vol II, Warszawa, 1937. While pointing at the „crisis of trust” in the army, the author notes that, in June 1916, Czechs and Ruthenians “did not express much willingness to fight against the Russians”, 581.

⁹ See Jacob Rosenthal, *Die Ehre des jüdischen Soldaten. Die Judenählung im Ersten Weltkrieg und ihre Folgen*, Frankfurt 2007.

¹⁰ Josef Fučík, *Osmadvacátníci. Spor o českého vjaka Velké války 1914-1918*, Praha 2006, 414-15.

¹¹ Cf František Perna in Pavla Horáková, Jiří Kamen (eds.) *Přišel befeł od císaře pána. Polní pošta – příběhy Čechů za první světové války*, Praha, 2015, 169-172; František Stanislav Petr, *Pod rakouskou orlicí a českým lvem*, Praha, 2015, 105-107.

¹² František Černý, *Moje záznamy ze světové války 1914-1918*, Praha, 2014, 107.

history and, consequently, in the Polish military history the Kostiuchnówka battle, an episode of the Wolhynian campaign, occupies a prominent place as a quasi-victory in the fight against overwhelming Russian superiority.¹³ It is also consequently if, to my knowledge, wrongly assumed that under the impression of the Legiony's heroism in the Summer of 1916 the Germans decided to form the Polnische Wehrmacht in their zone of the occupied Polish Kingdom.¹⁴ The battle abounds in first-hand sources thanks to the specific social character of the Polish units involved (unproportionally high percentage of intelligentsia members, many of the volunteers being Russian subjects which, obviously, increased their familiarity with the enemy). On the top of this all, the leader of the Polish unit and then head of the interwar state, Józef Piłsudski, not only took part in this battle but he also spent part of it in the first line.¹⁵ Some of the testimonies were published shortly thereafter, the majority within the subsequent decades with some appearing as late as 2000s. Interestingly, the time span between events and recollection does not seem to have influenced their perception of the Kostiuchnówka battle. Two aspects of the numerous Polish accounts seem interesting particularly when compared to the aforementioned Austrian and Czech reminiscences of the Brusilov offensive. First of them is the image of the enemy, second: that of the co-belligerents.

The Enemy

Contrary to the Viennese Renner-Buben (the nickname of the 1st Schützenregiment), the Legionnaires actually engaged in a long face to face fight before they were forced to withdraw. This might be the reason behind considerably greater deal of attention paid by Polish authors to the Russian soldiers. In some cases such narratives express compassion. Stanisław Mirek noted that the Russians, contrary to Legionaries, could not hide in trenches during the attack and used their dead and wounded comrades as a rampart instead. "It was shocking, I couldn't stop thinking how barbaric the war is".¹⁶ A similar sense of pity for dying enemy is traceable in Marian Kukiel's description of the Russian cavalry charge on the Polish position, a slaughter in equal marks heroic and futile.¹⁷ Many Legionaries spoke fluent Russian which allowed them to communicate with the enemy and thus to better understand his actions. Yet, they rarely depict them as individuals referring instead to the mass (albeit a mass capable of communicating with the Polish defenders). Sławoj Felicjan

¹³ Cf Przemysław Waingertner, *Kostiuchnówka 1916. Największa polska bitwa I wojny światowej*, Łódź, 2011; Stanisław Czerep, *Kostiuchnówka 1916*, Warszawa, 1994.

¹⁴ See ie Jan Snopko, *Finał epopei Legionów Polskich 1916-1918*, Białystok, 2008, 21; Michał Klimecki, *Legiony Polskie na Wołyniu 1915-1916*, in *Niepodległość i Pamięć* 15/1 (27), 107-123, here 115.

¹⁵ Tadeusz Alf-Tarczyński, *Wspomnienia oficera Pierwszej Brygady*, Londyn, 1979, 48.

¹⁶ Stanisław Mirek, *Opowieści Legionisty. Wspomnienia – nie tylko frontowe – spisane przez uczestnika walk w Legionach Piłsudskiego*, Pruszków, 1994, 47.

¹⁷ Quoted in Stanisław Czerep, *II Brygada Legionów Polskich*, Warszawa, 1991, 145.

Składkowski compared the battle scene to the theatre where 30 meters divided the Russian 'actors' from the Polish 'audience':

"A brownish swarm of Muscovites rushes or better to say: pretends to rush against a narrow blue line of our company. Their faces aren't cruel, rather surprised and exhausted. They mince obviously in an attempt to avoid running forward and keep crying with a sad, protracted voice Uraaa! Uraaa! Our lads laugh and shoot at the Muscovites... But their numbers keep growing... The whole swarm moves clumsily in barbed wire. New masses keep pushing them from behind. A red-haired peasant takes off his coat, lays it in the wire and helps one of his colleagues to go over while half-jokingly crying [in broken Polish] "Don't shoot, pan!" .¹⁸

Some other participants of these events follow a similar trope seeing the battle as a struggle between a Polish 'pan' and a Russian 'peasant'. Waclaw Lipiński, historian and soldier, pushed this contrast to the extreme:

"They waited a moment with a kind of thoughtless passivity till a hand-grenade thrown in the throng moved them around... And there are swarms of them. In the bushes of Kostiuchnówka, under the barbed wire, in the scarce grain, wherever you look – light-green blouses and red sweat faces. We keep shooting straight into their muzzles, accurately, with cold cruelty. They respond sparsely but they keep throwing hand-grenades into our trenches. And they keep on dying without a word, with a kind of dull, thoughtless indifference".¹⁹ Lipiński describes further another phase of the battle that took place on a bridge over a minor stream: "Giant Russian peasants have been dragged into the swamp, they lay down on the bridge... The noble figure of Narbutt [an officer of the Legiony] with a shiny browning attracted my attention at the moment when I joined the line. It is a fight for life and death. It is a boorish, embittered passion... I see lieutenant Hajec beating into peasants' faces with a riding drop while they cry 'surrender'. With butt-ends into their heads, into their arms, firing straight into face. Till we pushed the crowd back".²⁰

Co-Belligerents

Given the tone of such descriptions it seems not utterly superfluous to note that in the end even the Poles were forced to withdraw together with Austrian and Hungarian units. The blame for the break of the defense though was typically attributed to non-Polish units. The Honvéds occupying so called Polenberg (the name given in respect to the Legiony's contribution to the 1915 campaign in

¹⁸ Sławoj Felicjan Składkowski, *Moja służba w Brygadzie. Pamiętnik polowy*, Warszawa, 1990, 357.

¹⁹ Waclaw Lipiński, *Walka zbrojna o niepodległość Polski 1905-1918*, Warszawa, 1931, 88.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 451-452.

Wolhynia) were claimed to have been repeatedly forced and led by the Poles to take back their abandoned positions.²¹ According to Lipiński one could expect nothing good from these “pathetic beggars, shaggy tramps”.²² Three weeks after the Kostiuchnowka battle, in absence of the Polish units, 99th and 93rd IR “collapsed immediately”, as he noted not without satisfaction.²³ In general terms, as put by Marian Dąbrowski, “It was universally assumed among the Legionnaires that we are always used to halt the panic of Austro-Hungarian units until Bavarian or Prussian reinforcements arrive on endangered positions”.²⁴

One particular scene of the Kostiuchnowka battle reappears in several Polish memoirs giving this general claim a particular flavor. During retreat various Austro-Hungarian units succumbed to panic, cavalry, trains, and infantry fell on each other making any reasonable maneuver unlikely. At this point a small Polish unit appeared led by aforementioned Aleksander Narbutt-Łuczyński:

“Sharp Narbutt’s voice commanded ‘fix bayonets’ and soon rifles directed towards Austrian and Prussian officers started to slow down the flee. The wall of bayonets separated us from them so that nothing in the world could tear apart our column... Then, our close bayonet-spiky, calm column started to sing and this loud singing finally did the trick. Artillery and cavalry began to halt their horses, panic stopped. A Prussian officer run to Narbutt on the head of the column. He talked, congratulated, finally he wanted to shake hands with him. But Narbutt slowly hid his hand into his pocket”.²⁵

Other relations add some interesting details to this picture. The marching Poles were singing “Hej strzelcy wraz” a battle song of the 1863 uprising , the most celebrated of all insurgencies in the interwar Poland. Some witnesses even claim this very song to have somehow calmed down the situation.²⁶ Such details, though not necessarily fake, subscribed to the mythologized history of the Kostiuchnowka battle in interwar Polish state. Every year in July state celebrations took place at the battlefield which became carefully preserved open-air museum. This attachment to reality did not refer to Polenberg. The hill was artificially elevated to dominate over the battlefield.²⁷

Conclusion

²¹ Waingertner, Kostiuchnowka, 57.

²² Lipiński, Walka zbrojna, 85.

²³ Ibidem, 93.

²⁴ Marjan Dąbrowski, Z cyklu: Żołnierze 1 Brygady. Kampanja na Wołyniu (2 IX 1915 – 8 X 1916 r.), Warszawa, 1919, 109.

²⁵ Lipiński quoted in Waingertner, 94-5.

²⁶ Ferdynand Pawłowski, Wspomnienia legionowe, Kraków, 1994, 81.

²⁷ Franciszek Sękara, Na Wołyniu, in Kostiuchnowka – Polska Góra, [Łuck], 1928, 41-2.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the official memory of the Wolhynian campaign became matter of the Polish ex-belligerents alone. Hence, neither Austro-Hungarian and German allies nor Russian veterans have ever been part of it. As a matter of fact their presence at Kostiuchnówka celebrations would be rather disturbing. As shown by their published accounts of the Brusilov campaign their story was that of a panicky retreat and painful losses, not that of victorious heroism. But it would be a mistake to reduce the Polish interpretations of the 1916 campaign to the post-war history politics. Given the nature of the sources quoted above, many of them written immediately or not too long after the battle, they testify to atmosphere that permeated the Polish units within Austro-Hungarian forces. Kostiuchnówka, the last meaningful battle before many of the legionnaires became interned by Germans or transferred to other Austro-Hungarian units, facilitated identity-building process of this particular group of young nationalists. Two aforementioned aspects of this process are worth noting.

Perhaps less importantly, specific perception of the Russian enemy seems to indicate shift in Legionnaires' class identity. Though predominantly left-wing in their political sympathies and members of a unit carefully guarding internal democracy, in face of the Russian offensive they restored the stereotype connecting Polishness in the East with nobility as opposed to Russian, Ukrainian or Belorussian peasantry. Soon, in the border wars of 1918-21, such social-ethnic stereotypes shall be frequently used by all sides of the conflicts. Not only Bolsheviks will define their Polish enemy as "pan"; the same strategy will be used by Ukrainians or Lithuanians struggling to mobilize peasantry against Poland.

The second and by far more important process that can be traced down in Polish sources (and that differs greatly from the way Czechs or Austrians had seen this case) is delegitimization of the military and political alliance on the fundament of which the Legiony had fought until 1916. Notably the recurring picture of the Polish unit breaking through panic and singing national song has symbolic value. Given the facts that followed, this scene seems to symbolize the breaking point of imperial loyalty and beginning of a new, purely national war. Density of the Polish memory of that particular battle allows insight into the psychological processes that ultimately led to dissolution of the imperial armies. Before they were torn apart along ethnic and sectarian lines mental distance between uniformed nationalities had had to amass up to the point of no return. Kostiuchnówka seems to mark one of such turning points.

A tiny fissure on their monumental statue might be the fact, usually absent or marginalized in the battle accounts. One of the memoirists describing the scene with Narbutt's soldiers goes back to the moment when the panic began. The havoc in the Austro-Hungarian rows had started with a push from a Polish cavalry unit which, followed closely by the Russians, retreated in disarray to finally fell

upon Austro-Hungarian trains.²⁸ This initiated the avalanche that was finally stopped by Narbutt. According to this enlarged version of the story, Polish freedom fighters were not only the force which recovered discipline; they had been also responsible for breaking it. Yet, ironic as it is, this particular episode of the fight has not been given any special meaning. But, perhaps, irony and nation-building simply do not belong together?

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²⁸ Pawłowski, *Wspomnienia*, 81.