Muscovites in Lisko – the first Russian occupation of Lesko based on chronicles and contemporary diaries

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ABSTRACT

It seemed to be lazy and calm Sunday morning on the 28 of June 1914 and nothing announced the approaching of the European drama. However, during that very day in Sarajevo, the parochial town located in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, an heir to the throne of Danubian power, archduke Francis Ferdinand along with his accompanying wife Sophia Chłostek, were murdered in the assassination. The shots that took the life of Francis Joseph First’s nephew, did not only kill the would-be Habsburg anointed, but mainly broke a thin "web of the peace" in Europe. At the same time, it also ended the stabilization on “the old country”, immersing it in the depths of the most tremendous war that has ever occurred. Contradictions between dominating powers of Europe exploded now with the intensified strength. Vienna (Austria) declared war on Serbia exactly one month after the assassination in Sarajevo, at the same time regarding this country as the main culprit of the assault. This event caused the chain reaction in the form of declaring war on Russia by Germany on the 1st of August, then on France on the 3rd of August. Then the following day the war on Germany by England was declared, whereas on the 6th of August Austro-Hungary declared war on Russia. The tragedy of the World War One has just started.

Keywords: History of Lesko, World War I, Lesko's occupation, Moscow in Lesko
1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the WWI, Lesko was a small Galician town lying on the outskirts of Danubian monarchy. In spite of hundreds of kilometers separating that town from the capital city of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lesko was also touched by "the echo of shots" spreading from the Balkans. The residents of that small town and the majority of subjects of Francis Joseph I equally felt uncertainty and fear associated with the first approaching weeks of conflict.

The mayor of Lesko, Ferdinand Moszczeński, appealed to the residents from the window of the town hall to remain calm and stand by their emperor, at the same time resembling them how much the Poles owe to him.

The speech was heard with attention, but it did not cause a special mobilization. Simultaneously, the inhabitants of the Lesko district - Poles, Russians, Jews, on the day of announcing the general mobilization on Saturday, 1st August 1914, were obliged to appear in their supplementary commissions or military units. Mobilized and trained men form Lesko and its district, initially aged up to 42, were usually incorporated into the 18th infantry regiment from Przemyśl (called “Lundszturm”) as well as to the the 10th and 45th infantry regiment (the latter stationed near Sanok).

At the same time, for the needs of military service, so-called “forszpan” were established. They were two-horse carts along with the full kit which were previously approved for the transport tasks in the army. The cart driver of such a vehicle usually became its owner, being at the same time a reservist, over 42 years old and considered by the medical committee as unable to serve in the front-line duties.

Photo 1. Lesko, 3rd May Square with the view of the chuch and the tower (1910)
2. DISCUSSION

The aged Emperor Francis Joseph I, wanting to stimulate his subjects for the dedication and sacrifice for their own country (who has just begun the last war), issued a special message – “To my people”. The content of this message appeared on numerous posters and in the press throughout the country and it was possible to read in it as following: It was my longed-for wish to devote the years that God is willing to give me to work for peace and to protect My people from being the victims of the war and its hardship. (...) Intrigues of the opponent which is full of hate, are forcing me, according to their years of peace, to grasp for the weapon to defense my monarchy, its gravity and its superpower status. (...) Serbia rejected moderate and fair demands of my Government. (...) By the use of force of my army, I must, therefore, create the essential conditions that could give my States a guarantee of internal order and a lasting peace outside. (...) In this critical hour, I have a full awareness of the entire significance and responsibility of My decision before the Almighty. (...)

I put all my trust in My People who, in the most violent shock, have always been faithful and have always gathered around my throne, being at the same time ready to bear the most serious sacrifice in defense to the honour and the power of the Homeland. I believe in the valour of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces, always full of devotional zeal, and I also believe that the Almighty God will lead my army to the victory.

During the first days of mobilizations, the Polish railway stations in Uherce, Olszanica and Łukawica experienced the real “siege” of conscripts who started their way to the front there. Although the trains ran practically every hour, there were a chaos and overpopulations of passengers at the stations. However, the atmosphere among the men going to start a war at that time, seemed to be optimistic. An eyewitness of this phenomenon during those summer hot days, count August Krasicki, gave a testimony in his diary under the date 2nd August 1914.

At the station [Uherce] crowds of mobilized men and escorting them their families, rape and lamentation. The train is late, nobody knows when it is going to come. Finally, it arrives at around 11 o’clock, filled up to the last seat with mobilized men... The crowds of mobilized men are hurrying up enthusiastically to their troops, like going to the Holy War. It turns out that Austrija was able to bring up its citizens in terms of military service.

The population of the district of Lesko, as well as in the town itself became, involved in help for the Polish shooting squads in the ranks of which, among others, there were two commissioners of Lesko District Starosty: Różankowski and Morawski. The local ladies prepared underwear, clothes and food for them and Countess Izabela Krasicka donated a part of her jewellery to the Polish Legions fighting under the aegis of the Supreme National Committee.

People from Lesko and its district who set out for the fight for the independence of their homeland in 1914-1916 were as following: Antoni Bal, Antoni Bar, Stanisław Charzewski, Tadeusz Charzewski, Józef Dobek, Władysław Domaradzki, Jan Grzybowski, Jan Janas, Antoni Józefczyk, August Krasicki, Józef Kwiatkowski, Aleksander Kwieciński, Józef Kwieciński, Władysław Magrysiewicz, Jan Malarz, Lesław Nowakowski, Tadeusz Osiecowicz, Jan Pohłudka, Michał Proc, Wiktor Robel, Michał Skarbowski, Stanisław Skibiński, Stanisław Smoliński, Stanisław Śmietana, Eugeniusz Ulaniecki, Michał Kulig, Kazimierz Wisz, Marian Wisz, Karol Wisz, Jan Zieliński.

The first signal of the war approaching to Lesko was the appearance of a huge number of fugitives in a town at the end of August 1914 coming from the Eastern Galicia. Among them
there were mainly the teachers from Brzeżany, Stanisławów and Rochatyn districts who were evacuated before the entry of Nicholas II’s army. The town was supposed to provide them a refuge, help and, with given time, also work.

At the turn of August and September 1914 there were large amounts of Austro-Hungarian troops from various nationalities and caring different types of weapons, marching through the town, which was closer and closer to the approaching front. On September 4, 1914, the Eastern Legion on his way from Lviv to Sanok, was passing through Lesko and resting there. The Legion was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Haller. The townspeople welcomed their countrymen very hospitably by quartering the soldiers from this unit in the nearby castle and on Posada. On the same day, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Haller along with his officers including: Captain Kozicki, Drobniewicz and Skarbowski were invited for a formal dinner at the castle. In Count August Krasicki’s stead, his father-in-law, Stanisław Wodzicki, played the role of the host, proposing a toast in honour of the officers and the Polish army.

In connection with the rapid progress of Russian troops into the depths of Eastern Galicia and Małopolska, a resolution was passed to postpone the beginning of the school year to October 15 which took place at the meeting of District School Council in Lesko in August 1914. The school buildings in the town were occupied by the imperial and royal units since September 10. As a consequence, it resulted in the devastation of classrooms and teaching aids (especially from physics and chemistry).

Despite the beginning of the conflict, the military authorities of the Habsburg monarchy started to practice very brutal methods of behaviour towards Poles and Ruthenians (also called as Moscophiles). Very common practices, among others, were: unjustified arrests, executions by the gendarmerie without investigations and judgement or mistreatment of those who were suspected of espionage or treason. The victims of these kind of treatments were, for example, the parish priest from Lesko, Teofil Dzierżyński, and curate-in-charge, Karol Pernac – they both were kept under guard for 24 hours.

The same situations happened also in the neighbouring towns of that region as the Austro-Hungarian military authorities took similar actions against the people suspected of favoring Moscow.

Simultaneously, intensive struggle between the Austrian and Russian continued at the southern section of the Eastern front. The prelude of that struggle was connected with the successful activities of imperial-royal troops just on this direction of their operational actions. Faster mobilized corps of the aged Austro-Hungarian emperor crossed the border of Congress Poland and then marched towards Lublin and on August 23-25, 1914 they won the battle near Kraśnik. Subsequent fighting in this area brought an another success of the army under the yellow-black banner, for example in the clash near Komarowa at the end of this month.

At the beginning of September 1914, however, a counter-offensive of several Russian armies took place, which was not expected by the Austrian high command. As a result, the imperial-royal formations were pushed to the west and the south, reaching in this way a quick retreat to their initial position and giving even the capital of Galicia without a struggle.

The occupation of Lvov by the Russians on September 3 in 1914 aroused growing fear and anxiety among the people living in Lesko mainly because of the possibility of occupation of the town by Muscovite regiments going east. The Cossacks, well-known for their robbery and brutality, aroused special danger among the civilian population of Galicia and Małopolska. The main stimulants of the arousing anxiety which infected effectively not only numerous
residents of Lesko were: the ongoing war, army marches, transports of the injured, press illustrations and the news from the east.

The district office and all other offices were evacuated from the town even before 14th September 1914. Numerous families of the local intelligentsia, wealthy merchants and office workers had to leave the town beginning their war wandering. Among the multitude of refugees were among others: district administrators from Poherecki family, head of the court Kazimierz Oborski, Jewish merchant Fleisher, official of the District Council Czerny, forest manager Eugeniusz Ulaniecki, Stefan Nanowski, countess Izabela Krasicka along with her family as well as many residents of Lesko of the Jewish faith. After 16th September 1914 only a small group of the town’s intelligentsia remained there. Out of the Lesko refugees, many civil servant along with their families, found a refuge in the remote parts of the Danube monarchy. The main places of their involuntary stay were: Baden, Vienna, Prague, Pardubice, Hradyszcza, Dobrowa and others. The fate of wanderers was not simple. They were often deprived of means of support and suffered from great deficiencies, relying on the help of the Viennese government and the kindness of the locals.

In fact, the inhabitants of Lesko found out the real face of the Great War in the third week of September. For this period, there was a special intensity of marches of the retreating imperial-royal troops. Wagons with the injured men and artillery teams, which were mixed with the retreat of infantry and cavalry units, filled up each street and road of the town. Conquered armies of Francis Joseph I retreated to the south and west arousing more and more great fears amongst the townspeople of Lesko for the future of their families, their town and the area, and even the reigning dynasty of Habsburg.

The reality of the war of that front-line small town began to show more and more clearly the heartlessness of the imperial gendarmerie. Its accidental victim was Antoni Filipczak living in the clearing “under the pear”, who at night with a lighted flashlight left the house to the stable, where his cow was calving. He was arrested the same night under the charge of giving light signals to the enemy and by the verdict of the military court, he was executed by firing squad. The same fate met the inhabitant of Postolów near Lesko, Michał Kapanajko, who built a fire at night during the grazing of his horses.

In this period, a very “uninvited guest” appeared in the town – Asian cholera. This extremely contagious disease was probably brought to the described town by the troops passing through the local roads of that place. Soon, it began to spread in that small town, collecting a terrible harvest among its citizens (by the end of this month about 200 people had died, mainly of Jewish faith).

Austrian units, which then were quartering in Lesko, were the units of Divisional General, Feil-Grossler and Colonel of the 8th regiment of hussars. Many high-ranking officers of the imperial-royal army also came to the town: General Edward Böhm-Ermolli (commander of the 2nd Army) and Archduke Joseph Ferdynand (commander of the 4th Army). A temporary military airfield was established at Posada in Lesko, and in order to allow takeoffs and landings of the planes, the old acacia alley and a part of the historical local park were cut out.

When the Austrian troops were retreating from the town, they blew out two wooden bridges: the first one on the 22nd September 1914 that led to Huzele and the second one – two days later, this time from the side of Postolów.

Francis Joseph I’s troops, without putting up much resistance, left Lesko by 24th September 1914. On the following day, individual groups of Muscovites entered the town tentatively, going from the direction of Ustrzyki Dolne and heading west.
The first Russian occupation of the town during the conflict had just begun. The description of that event can be found in the Chronicle of the Feminine School in Lisko: On the day 25th September, the first Russian patrols entered the town. From 9 o’clock in the morning – a weak bumping of the Russian Army from Baszta to Huzele and Weremień, from 10 o’clock – two Russian machine guns were set up near Szmyd and the District Council until 12 o’clock at noon. At 12 o’clock, two Austrian cannons begin to play in Sosny and 10 Russian cannons – near Krzyż and on Baszta. The bullets are whistling decently. The fights ends at around 4 o’clock in the afternoon.

Unfortunately, before the appropriate military services restored the relative order and discipline among the incoming soldiers, the occupiers during the first days of their stay in the town had managed to intensively plunder the local shops in the town. Above all, the premises owned by the local Jews were the victims of these robberies and devastations.

The persecutions, which were particularly tough in that small provincial town towards the population of the Mosaic faith, were unfortunately not exceptional. The average Russian soldier was “unpleasantly” surprised by the orders prevailing in Galicia, which were as following: centuries of superstitions, strong anti-Semitism and legal regulations concerning this community in the Roman Empire. Broad liberties, political, religious and economic equality of rights, as well as the wealth of some Jewish origin subjects of Francis Joseph I annoyed the invaders not accustomed to this state of affairs. Hence, there were probably the reasons of the numerous atrocities whose victim became that religious minority.

Photo 2. Austrian airfield on Posada in Lesko (June 1915)
After the occupation of Lesko, with the exception of the local castle, the Muscovites did not designate their quarters in the town. Being afraid of the effects of cholera epidemic at the time, the Russians came to that mentioned town daily from the nearby Olszanica, where they were stationed, and making the lives of the locals extremely oppressive.

The following days of the tsarist’s visit in the town were very nervous and overfilled with fear for its inhabitants. The looting of shops and eating houses in the board daylight, thoughtless devastation of the private and common properties and the occupation of the local school converted into a military hospital – all deepened the mood of fear and depression among the townspeople.

In this tragic time for Lesko, the Russian general Kuźma issued an order to the residents to reconstruct the burned bridge in Huzele. In order to restore as soon as possible an efficient transport communication for the units operating in this area, the tsarist commander threatened with burning the town if the structure will not be ready until 28th September 1914 (Monday).

Being under the threat of destroying their town, the citizens vigorously got down to rebuilding the bridge, preparing efficiently useful materials and tools. Unfortunately, in this nervous period for the townspeople, the water in the San River rapidly increased destroying at the same time the wooden material prepared already for the reconstruction. Another visit of the Russian general in the town (30th September) resulted in his postponement of the reconstruction date of that river crossing on the date 3rd October 1914 (Friday). On the eve of the expiry of the deadline, Gen. Kuźma for the third time arrived to Lesko to check personally how the work of
repairing the bridge is progressing. The state of work, which the tsarist commander found on the spot, seemed to him unsatisfactory since he hosted the following townsmen as hostages: F. Osiecki, R. Barański, S. Jankiewicz, J. Langsam and Bard. These citizens were to remain under the guard, as the guarantee of keeping the second deadline for the reconstruction of the structure and then to be dismissed after completion of the work. At the same time the Jews, led by Cossacks with whips to work, supported the carpenters in repairing the damaged passage. Fortunately, thanks to the strenuous effort of the Lesko workers, the bridge in Huzele was renovated and the hostages were released until the deadline (3rd October).

Another counter-offensive of the Austrian forces operating in the Carpathian directions was at the beginning of October 1914. As a result, the troops of Francis Joseph I managed to unblock Przemyśl, which was besieged since September, and liberate lots of localities in western Galicia, among them was Lesko - on 5th October 1914. The town itself was in the belt of military actions of 3rd Austro-Hungarian Army that belonged to Gen. Svetozar-Boroević, whose sub-units were the first seen by the inhabitants of that described town.

The end of the first occupation of that Galician town was described in the Chronicle of the Feminine School in Lesko mentioned earlier: On the 5th of October Muscovites laid the mines under the bridge in Huzele, but without any malign effect, as only one side of the bridge pulled down. About 8 o’clock a Cossack patrol (10 people) goes to the market, then a few shots are fired, the Cossacks are rushing up. A quarter of an hour later, 1 battalion 6 infantry regiment with the general ahead entered there. At 10 o’clock, a knocking over the town has begun and lasts until 12 o’clock. The entire community welcomes the Austrian troops, especially the Jews. On the 5th of October more and more army arrives – 100 cannons, infantry and cavalry.

During the first occupation of Lesko, the Russians occupied the local castle. Due to its location and numerous comfortable rooms, it became the place of stay of troops belonging to the Third Army under the command of Gen. Radko Dimitriew. The effects of this stay were easy to predict. The Cossacks robbed the castle, particularly: a commemorative male hat called “lisiurka”, all the supplies of preserves and wines from the cellar and the inventory that belonged to the owners.

During the retreat of the Muscovites from the town and the district, there was still a short skirmish near the Stone in Lesko. In the course of it, a high-ranking Austrian officer, not known by his full name, was killed there.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In the middle of October 1914, an official announcement appeared in the press that the residents of the District of Lesko can return to their houses. In response to these appeals some of the fugitives returned to the town, among them was the Countess Izabela Krasicka, who was already in Lesko on 26th October. Fortunately, the first Russian occupation of the town was not so tragic for the residence of Krasicki family. The castle remained undamaged, both by the local troops and Muscovites residing in its walls. An interesting thing associated with this stay is the fact that the Russian officer Baron Bildeerling left a letter to the owner of the castle. The mentioned scribble included thanks from “the uninvited guests” and the statement that the Russians stationing there enjoyed the place.

For a while, the war activities were distant from the town and the very first occupation of Lesko on September 25 until October 5, 1914, definitely ended. Fugitives slowly came back to
their houses. Their places of residence were mostly devastated or burned, but certainly plundered. The problem of the deconstruction of the building structure concerned not only flats or private tenements. Schools, district offices and other buildings of the public utility were also largely destroyed, and resources, manpower and raw materials for their reconstruction were missing. What is more, the Lesko’s residents were still suffering from a cholera epidemic and at the same time the poverty and increasing difficulties with the supplies of food to the civilian population did not make them optimistic about the future.

The Great War in the East changed its ways several times and for the second time “visited” this Galician small town. Unfortunately, not just like for the first time for only a period of 10 days, but for over 6 long winter months (November 1914 – May 1915). Unaware of this fact, the townspeople tried slowly to restore order and start the reconstruction of their houses and the whole town. Their brave efforts were bedeviled already in not the entire month when the soldiers of Tsar Nicholas II entered the town again on 7th November 1914.

References


