

Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Russian Empire)

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Summary

The goal of this article is to uncover the causes, dynamics, and transformation of attitudes in the Russian army during the First World War. The contingents of the Russian army constantly changed during the course of military operations, and its composition qualitatively worsened. The mentality of the majority of soldiers of peasant origin and the traditions of the army did not meet the requirements of the technical nature of total war. This brought about a moral crisis, which reached a peak at the beginning of 1917. The process of demoralization in the army could not be contained by ideological, political, judicial and legal mechanisms.

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Introduction

The mood in the Russian army during the First World War has been traditionally examined in the literature as one of the causes leading to the [Russian Revolution](#) of 1917. In Russian (Soviet) literature, this theme was subordinated to the question of revolutionary movement in the army. When this was done, the conscious, class nature of the main groups of the Russian army was stressed in the literature – the workers and peasants, "those dressed in military overcoats". According to such an approach, the revolution had deep socioeconomic and

sociopolitical causes. The war only served to increase the number of burdens, to deliver the masses of soldiers to their deaths, and to unite soldiers' anti-war [sentiments](#) in the form of public [protest](#).¹ In an analysis of the revolution in [Russia](#), Soviet authors, following ideological notions, avoided showing the human reaction to an inhumane war. Right up to the present day, Russian researchers prefer to assess this war predominantly from geopolitical, political, [economic](#), or rather "macro" indicators, leaving the "humane", personal, and psychological component of combat actions aside. Only recently has there been a deviation from the "class" pattern, in an analysis of the attitudes of the Russian army. Psychology, or even the psychopathology of a warring person, ended up in the spotlight in academic literature.² At the same time, a number of works distorted ideas about the course of the war, and all manner of fabrications and fantasies about the prerevolutionary condition of Russian society were spread. The theory of a conspiracy, "the blow of a stab in the back", which deprived the army and the country of an inevitable victory, made its rounds again.³

Sources

This article analyzes the reasons and dynamics at play in the attitudes of the Russian army during the course of the war. The pre-war social experiences of the soldiers influenced their attitudes during the war. However, their attitudes were also shaped by their military experience as part of a modern technical, total war. The existing sources reflect the detailed character and transformation of the moods of the Russian army during the war. The main sources are the military [censorship](#) materials as well as the reports of the commissars with the armies at the fronts (for 1917). An important supplement to the censorship materials is the correspondence between army staffs during the period of [moral](#) crisis in the army (the 1915 retreat; the fraternization of the spring of 1916; and the soldiers' mutinies in late autumn 1916 and winter 1917).⁴

These sources have several peculiarities. In the materials of the military censor, [letters](#) about the war comprise only 2 to 5 percent of the correspondence. But the calculations of "cheerful" and "dejected" sentiments are constructed in the literature on this part of the statements,⁵ which does not represent a complete picture of the moods in the army as a whole. The rest of the letters, up to 95 percent, did not touch on military actions specifically and did not reflect direct attitudes about the war. However, applying the method of using "unintended evidence" (the attitude toward home, family, farm, everyday conditions in war, etc.) to these letters gives substantive results for the identification of the attitudes of the main mass of soldiers in the course of the war.⁶

The Change in the Composition of the Russian Army during the Course of the War

When characterizing the attitudes of the Russian army during the First World War, it is necessary to take into consideration the army's composition and mentality, as well as the pre-war and, most importantly, wartime experience, which influenced the replacement of attitudes and formation of new attitudes with which the army masses left the war for "civilian life". Quantitatively, during the entire war, the Russian army at the front comprised 6 to 6.5 million men and about 1.5 million in the rear, garrisons, and reserve units. But the Russian army changed qualitatively, socially, in age, and in other respects during the war in connection with the [losses](#) in soldiers killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. Therefore, one can speak of three components (contingents) of the army, which were also bearers of the attitudes of the past social, and new military experience.

The first contingent of the army was from the regular soldiers of the army active at the start of the war and reservists who had previously served in the military (4,538,000 men). This contingent took part in the war of maneuver in 1914-1915, in the course of which it suffered massive losses, and almost ceased to exist by the autumn of 1915.

The second contingent of the army was made up of the surviving professional staff, and the large numbers of soldiers of the home guard (6,385,000 men), who formed the majority. It was this component of the army that confronted the enemy in stubborn positional and offensive battles at the end of 1915 and 1916. It had suffered considerable losses by the autumn of 1916.

The third contingent of the army consisted of some of the professional staff and untrained soldiers of the home guard, but was largely populated by the ever-growing number of conscripted draftees, mainly young men, at the end of 1916 (4,200,000 men). This contingent experienced a severe moral crisis, which, in 1917, grew into a collapse of the army machine.⁷

During the war, important qualitative changes also occurred in the army. Its first component was well trained and met the requirements of [modern war](#) to the highest degree. But the second contingent was poorly trained⁸ because of the peculiarities of the draft class (*prizyvnyaya stepen'*). Being of overwhelmingly peasant origin, this component bore the considerable burden of traditionalism. This sharply contrasted with the nature of modern [warfare](#) and gave the command a reason to call this army a home guard "of an atrocious militia nature".⁹ Finally, the third component was not only less trained, but had also experienced the influence of the protest and revolutionary attitudes of the [1905-1907](#)

[Revolution](#) and afterwards. At the end of 1916, this contingent consisted, to a considerable degree, of troublemaking, anti-war, and at times even criminal elements, who reflected similar attitudes in inner Russia during the period of socioeconomic crisis which erupted on the eve of 1917.

The continuous reduction in the trained, professional soldiers of the pre-war army in the field, including draftees, was the most important variable in the qualitative change in the Russian army. There was an increase in the number of untrained soldiers. This meant that, from 1914 to 1917, the army was increasingly unable to meet the challenges of modern warfare, which was on the rise. This phenomenon was also in line with the social composition of the army, which in turn reflected the social composition of Russia. The majority of men in the army, 84 to 88 percent, came from the peasantry and small-scale traditional households. Features of this world included: a patriarchal nature, a lack of innovative technologies, localism, and a dependence on family and corporate traditions.¹⁰

“Cheerful Attitudes” in the Russian Army

Some important characteristics of soldiers' letters that clearly expressed their attitudes toward the war can be discerned. “Cheerful attitudes” dominated these letters until the first months of 1917. The myths of official [propaganda](#), which included the especially moral qualities of the Russian soldier (blithe fatalism, self-sacrifice, protection of co-religionist and consanguineous brothers, the defense of the weak, etc.) were reflected in these attitudes. These appeals, which were borrowed from the [press](#), were reflected in a readiness to fight “for the tsar”, for “the freedom of Russia”, “for Slavic peoples”, for the return of “territories taken away”, and for “the freedom of the motherland”. After the February Revolution, the official ideology put the idea of fighting “for a free Russia” in first place. A feature of these official statements was their undeveloped, stereotypical nature, and lack of awareness by the soldiers. Nowhere in these appeals are a “just cause”, “truth”, or the “defense of brother Slavs” made clear.

A number of statements bear the nature of a naïve, unreasoning patriotism not requiring justification as a motivation to fight. Other patriotic statements were a manifestation of belligerence and the bravado characteristic of a youthful environment. There are statements that reflect the front-line comradeship, [masculinity](#), aggressiveness, and competitiveness characteristic of a male militaristic consciousness. Finally, a number of patriotic quotations and expressions reflect a loyalty to regimental traditions, a faith in beloved chiefs or in allies, or were caused by operations which were successful for Russia and its allies at that moment on the fronts of the world war. Patriotic attitudes were found throughout the entire war, but were particularly characteristic of a small part of the army during periods of increased

morale.

The Peasant Mentality as the Basis of Attitudes in the Russian Army

When characterizing the letters, one needs to consider the peasant mentality of the majority of soldiers in the army. That is what determined the motivation to fight and provided both moral endurance and the fluidity of soldiers' attitudes, which could include rejection of the war itself. Attraction to the family, motherland, and family farm; localism (devotion to the place of birth, with which "motherland" is associated); rejection of the mechanical, technical, and foreign nature of war; ideas about usefulness in war; and the seasonal nature of military operations were characteristic of the peasant mentality. Such a mentality was at the heart of "passive" patriotism in the form of duty to the tsar, family, and peasant world. Many patriotic expressions were imbued with a passive intonation, such as: "destined", "compelled", "fate", "as the Lord wills", "such a fate", "to end up in military service, to defend one's homeland, and the tsar our father".¹¹ The peasant mentality was the basis of the patience, habit, and fatalism characteristic of the traditional manifestation of Russian army's morale. The mentality of the majority of peasant soldiers was defined by obedience to the traditional military hierarchy headed by the tsar. This also explained the soldierly motivation to fight as in accordance with the peasant's world: service to the tsar, parents, one's home, and peasant society. On the other hand, fear of defeat by the enemy, "enslavement", the introduction of a new "serfdom", "savagery" by the enemy, and fear for family and farm were also characteristic of the peasantry and explained the perseverance of the Russian soldier.

The Role of Military Experience in Changing the Attitudes of the Russian Army

The main substance of the military experience of soldiers was the combat and military [labor](#) practices in the form of the construction of a defensive zone and its support of military operations. This required enormous effort from soldiers, officers, and administrators. Military experience appeared as the experience of the forced inclusion of a large social group (front-line peasant soldiers) into a zone of modernity, which was brought about by the experience of industrial warfare. The burden of modern war was difficult to bear given human composition, the traditions of military work, and the customary forms of labor discipline. As a result of the difficulty of military confrontation, this led to a deep transformation of the social ideas of the groups which were formed to a considerable degree in traditional values, primarily peasant soldiers. The incompatibility of a majority of these ideas with the realities of war was observed in the course of the war. This concerned even qualities tested by the centuries and customary for the mentality of the Russian army, such as stamina, regimental

camaraderie, and the rhythm of combat operations and of military work on the whole, with the accustomed seasonal practices of labor and rest for the peasant soldiers. Traditional values of peasant soldiers such as usefulness, temporal and spatial orderliness of the life cycle, and customary ideas about the enemy and his territory were questioned. The resource of propaganda and military and [religious](#) support of military operations, which were manifested in the phenomenon of anti-war sentiments widespread in the army, found themselves even less durable for resistance in modern war in successful activity of such a reference group as [pacifist](#) objectors. The army experienced a deep crisis of religious sentiments.¹² The hierarchical military system produced serious failure, both in training even before the war in the form of the career officer corps, as well as in the formation of wartime officers (warrant officers), who fell out of a common chain of subordination between the career officer corps, direct superiors, and soldiers. Regimental camaraderie, one of the foundations of the combat effectiveness of the Russian army, was lost in the face of the quickly-changing composition of soldiers and officers.

War Crimes as an Indicator of the Decline in Morale

War crimes in the army were an indicator of the change of attitudes and decline of morale. The most important of them was surrendering as a prisoner, which began in the first months of the war and continued to the end. The annual number of [prisoners of war](#) from the Russian army shows a growth in this tendency (especially considering the insignificant number of battles in 1917). According to official (Main Directorate of the General Staff) data for 1914, 192,009 men surrendered and went missing; in 1915 – 1,365,581; in 1916 – 1,505,822; and in 1917 – 574,859, out of a total number of 3,638,271 men. This comprised 23.66 percent of the entire number drafted into the ranks of the army. For each year of war from 1914 to 1917, this was 5.3, 37.5, 41.4, and 15.8 percent respectively.¹³

Another manifestation of the decline in morale was mass desertion. By 1 March 1917 a total of 195,130 men had been detained while leaving the theater of combat operations for the interior regions of Russia, and by 1 August 1917, it was 365,137 men.¹⁴ The 442,605 men detained on railroads inside Russia by the gendarme police directorate at the front and in the rear since the end of 1914 ought to be added to the number of deserters. This exceeds the total number of deserters in the German (35-45,000) and British (35,000) armies.¹⁵

The deserters not only exerted a negative influence on the composition of the army, but were also a serious factor in the increase of criminal activity in the country. In the theater of combat operations, deserters participated in illegal confiscation, attacks, outright robbery, the embezzlement of [government](#) property, drunkenness, and depravity. In the interior

regions of Russia, deserters, among whom were many troublemakers known even before the war, terrorized the local population, and instigated anti-war and [food](#) riots. The deserters symbolized discontent with the war and were quite vocal about it when among the general population, including in the Petrograd region. The criminal actions of deserters were more often associated with the antisocial and antigovernment attitudes and acts on the eve of the revolution.

Alongside desertion, self-inflicted injuries can also be considered a type of “exit from the war”. This “exit strategy” increased as the war continued. Whereas the average “ordinary” number of wounds to one’s upper extremities in the previous wars in the Russian and other armies comprised 25-35 percent of all wounds, during the years of the First World War this number was between 45 and 55.8 percent.¹⁶ Thus, 10-15 percent (more than the “ordinary” 35 percent) of the “slightly-wounded” were a consequence of “self-wounds”, which comprises 200-350,000 “finger-injured” out of the total number of 2,588,538 wounded in the war.¹⁷

Yet another manifestation of the decline of morale in the Russian army was fraternization with the enemy. This form of “exiting the war” also intensified as the war continued. Whereas at [Christmas 1914](#), single cases of fraternization were noted, by Easter 1915 their number had grown notably. At Easter 1916, dozens took part in fraternization, and at Easter 1917, hundreds of regiments. Furthermore, a firm connection between fraternization and a growth in anti-war sentiments was observed in comparison to fraternization in the west, where, on the contrary, their number constantly fell, limited by ritualized aggression, etc., forms of temporarily “exiting the war” without attempts to grow into anti-war attitudes.

The embezzlement of things by soldiers was associated with the the high and rising cost of living, and profiteering inside Russia demonstrated the decline of morale. At the last stage of the war, the phenomenon of embezzlement of military property (which was exchanged for food [or] other consumer goods) essentially bore the nature of the black-market trafficking characteristic of the [Civil War](#). The growth of drunkenness which accompanied fraternization, the decline of discipline, and military offenses ought to be considered in the same vein. Finally, the growth of criminal offenses against civilians in the theater of military operations and in Russia by military men demonstrated the serious decline in morale, which even went as far as outright demoralization of the troops. Such criminal activity took place covertly, in the form of attacks (so-called “social banditry”), and openly, in the form of looting while on leave, generally in “civilian life”, and even went as far as the creation of bands of deserters. An important factor accompanying military crime at the front and in Russia was the growth in its decriminalization: the indulgence of the command, doctors, etc., leniency of punishment, and collapse of the legal system.

The Dynamics of the Moral Crisis in the Army

The army repeatedly experienced a moral crisis during the war years. For example, the enthusiasm that accompanied the beginning of the war (the summer and autumn of 1914) had already declined (in the autumn of 1914 and the winter of 1915), and as a result a campaign of [spy mania](#) and “the enemy’s brutality” began to unfold to increase the motivation to fight. In the summer of 1915, mass surrender and forced confiscations of civilian property were accompanied by a growth in covert army criminal activity in the course of “the great retreat”. In the autumn of 1915 and the spring of 1916, the army again experienced a moral crisis, accompanied by a wave of desertions and fraternization. After the rise in morale in the spring and summer of 1916, which was associated with the Brusilov offensive beginning in October, the army fell into a deep crisis that manifested itself in the steady growth of negative attitudes right up until the February Revolution. The moral crisis in the Russian army reached its apogee by the end of 1917. The magnitude of the crisis in the army compared to the moral crisis in western armies was that the crisis in Russia could not be normalized with ideological, administrative, or disciplinary measures. Its resolution was seen in the complete overturn of the existing political system. The term used in Soviet [historiography](#), “demoralization”, rather than “moral crisis”, is more suitable to describe the attitudes in the army in 1917.

The Implementation of the “Internal Enemy” in the Attitude of the Masses of Soldiers

Generally, on the Russian front during the war years, the experiences had by soldiers led to a change of attitudes and, in the final account, to the formation of a mindset that allowed them to link leaving the war with the start of fighting for social reform. These attitudes were a consequence of the steady entanglement of the peasant household in the economy of the world war, which allowed the masses of soldiers to escape the bounds of a purely peasant mentality, and set the course for peasant soldiers to be included in sociopolitical reforms. It is this factor that formed a tie with the rear areas, due to the defense of the civilian population from the social hardships of the war period, and determined the politicization of the army beginning in the autumn of 1916. These attitudes guided soldiers towards social and domestic changes, even as far as revolution, and not to the defense of the motherland. A formation of soldiers defending the motherland had begun, the citizen soldier, seeking the “enemy” not in front of him, but inside the country, behind the front line. According to soldiers, the “enemies” were: “famous merchants”, banking figures (“*Kolupay Kolupayeviches*”), “all are thieves through and through, pencil-pushers, rear area heroes”, “predatory profiteers”, “Germans, money-grubbers, and other tricky people”, “slick merchants”, “looters”, landowners, and those who owned land in general, the so-called

“eternal” enemies of peasants. Peasants who remained in the countryside, chiefly older people benefiting from the war, were classed with these enemies. Relatives, even wives, who sent them to the war were called enemies, and they themselves engaged in debauchery with the prisoners of war. The soldiers rarely spoke against the government, which was incapable of taking steps against high prices, policemen, rural constables, and gendarmes. The State [Duma](#), which did not justify hopes for change, came under criticism. The apogee of the politicization of the army came at the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917.

Such a change in sentiments, and the formation of the new attitudes of the Russian army, put into doubt the assertion of some Russian authors who try to exonerate the Russian army of these negative processes, ascribing them only to the rear areas, where the “stab in the back” of “the Great War” was being prepared.¹⁸ These assertions do not withstand criticism in the light of ideas about the modern nature of the First World War. The indissoluble connection between the front and the rear, where the domestic front is no less important in the matter of organizing the country for defense is characteristic of it. The inability of the regime to ensure the necessary regulatory measures in the economy, balance the wartime burdens for the population in the form of social support in the face of high prices also provoked social protests inside Russia. The army, especially the peasant soldiers, viewed its presence at the front as a family task with the condition that this family would be provided for in the face of wartime hardships. The growth in prices and shortage of necessities because of the dominance of “the domestic Germans” undermined such tacit agreement. The civilian population saw the soldiers as their defenders in the face of the “internal enemy”, which also gave support to the mass protests inside Russia. In their letters, soldiers promised to defend the interests of their families, and cheered the population fighting for their rights.¹⁹ It was the moral crisis of the end of 1916, the worsening mood of the soldiers, and the formation of new attitudes that supplied legitimacy and scale to the sociopolitical protests that led to the 1917 revolutions.

Conclusion

The mood in the army after the February Revolution was determined on the one hand by the efforts of the new military and civilian leadership regarding mobilization, the development of propaganda, new organizational forms, and “volunteer work”. On the other hand, the process of demoralization continued under the influence of anti-war attitudes, an increase of the common socioeconomic crisis, and the activity of the forces of the revolution. The euphoria to which the troops were susceptible after the fall of the autocracy, which was responsible for the military failures, was associated not with the acquisition of a feeling of freedom, but with the expectation of a quick end to the war. This was manifested in a growth in desertion. This

took the forms of outright departure from the front and tardiness when returning to units from assignment or leave. There were especially great demands for soldiers to be sent to work the fields at home.

The new forces could not revitalize the “shock regiments”, “battalions of death”, and women’s formations. The propaganda supported by the new “revolutionary courts” failed. The women’s battalion movement turned out to be uninspiring, given the misogynist conditions which flourished at the front. Instead, fraternization, which had taken on a spontaneous nature, spread all the more rapidly, and was supported by the Austro-German military command in certain cases. The [volunteer](#) movement and the nationalization of units did not lead to an awakening of consciousness and an increase of a feeling of military duty but, on the contrary, to the demoralization of units. Soldiers eagerly enrolled in such units, but demanded to fight close to home or their place of birth. This led to a considerable number of units undergoing constant reformation and being unfit for action. At the last stage of the war, in the autumn of 1917, the desertion movement and surrendering as prisoners sharply lessened as the end of the war approached. This was the consequence of a fear of exclusion from land distribution after the end of the war in the event of the conclusion of peace.

In the autumn of 1917, defeatist, anarchical sentiments and a readiness to conclude a peace at any cost were widespread at the front among both soldiers and officers. The policy of the Bolsheviks completely met these sentiments.²⁰ The establishment of Soviet power in October 1917 and the Peace Decree adopted by the new Bolshevik government triggered not only Russia’s exit from the First World War, but also the liquidation of the Russian army itself.

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- [Dekret über den Frieden, 26. Oktober \(8. November\) 1917 \(in Russian\) \(100\(0\) Schlüsseldokumente\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
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