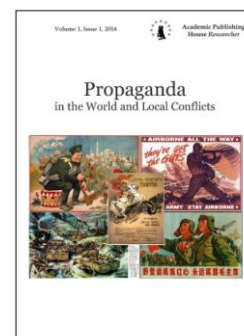


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Articles and Statements

The Glorification of Underage Volunteers in Russian Military Service during World War I

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Abstract

The article covers the problem of glorification of underage volunteers in the Russian army during the years of World War I. The article is focused on the beginnings of the voluntary movement, the first appearances of volunteers at the front and the glorification of the children, who heroically performed at the fronts in the periodical press.

The sources for the work are the articles in Russian circular periodicals (newspapers and magazines) and the postcards, issued before the Revolution, illustrating the problem of glorification of young volunteers in the Russian army during World War I. The author achieved the research goals, applying general scientific methods (analysis and synthesis, particularization, generalization) and the conventional methods of historical analysis. It enables the author to study the causes, motivating the Russian youth to flee to the front as volunteers.

In conclusion the authors resume that the unexpectedly appeared movement of underage volunteers became a fait accompli despite the counteractions of civic and military authorities. Having failed to prevent and stop it with the help of prohibitive practices, the Russian government presented young volunteers activities as the samples of patriotic service in mass media.

Keywords: glorification, propaganda, minors, the Russian Empire, World War I, front.

1. Introduction

Historically, when we mention propaganda during World War I, first of all we remember the Propaganda of Horrors (Zoltzman, 1957). But there were other topics of propaganda coverage. In this work we would like to study the problem of glorification of young volunteers at the fronts of World War I in the Russian Empire propaganda.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. The sources for the publication are the articles in Russian circular periodicals (newspapers and magazines) and the postcards, issued before the Revolution, illustrating the problem of glorification of young volunteers in the Russian army during World War I.

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2.2. The author achieved the research goals, applying general scientific methods (analysis and synthesis, particularization, generalization) and the conventional methods of historical analysis. It enables the author to study the causes, motivating the Russian youth to flee to the front as volunteers.

3. Discussion and results

3.1. Fleeing to the front

At the eve of World War I the process of establishing children paramilitary organizations was in progress. The “poteszny” regiments (regiments of boy -soldiers), scouts and others appeared. The “poteszny” regiments establishment started in 1910 initially in the capitals then in the outskirts of the Russian Empire (Molchanova et al., 2013: 89) The Emperor Nicholas II himself took part in the “poteszny” regiments’ shows (Oldenburg, 1992: 440) as he considered patriotic education of the youth an important integral part of the state’s policy.

It is important to stress that the establishment of the paramilitary organizations, such as the “poteszny” regiment, was only for the purpose of youth education. It was not meant that children would become volunteers in the army at wartime. Nevertheless, with the outbreak of World War I, a great number of minors appeared at the fronts. Their age was from 10 years old (Ogonyok, 1915, 20).

Already on the first day of the Russian Empire's entry into the war, August 1, 1914, “Novorossiyskaya gazeta” reported: “The 16-year-old Vladimir Galdin was preparing to enter the Cadet Corps and on receiving news of the war, left classes and continuously asked to be allowed to volunteer for the war. Parents believe that Goldin had secretly left for active duty (Chernomorskaya gazeta. Novorossiysk, 1914. 1 Aug.)

According to the news from Pskov only in September 1914 railway gendarmes got off the trains more than 100 children, who were heading to the front. On October 20, 1914, more than 30 children volunteers were caught by the police at the Vilno railway station. All in all more than 100 children fled to the front from the city of Vilno during the first years of war (Nedelya voyny, 1915, 11).

One of the first cases of girl fleeing to war was reported in Petrograd. As “Chernomorskaya Gazeta” wrote: “A boy of 14 drew the non-commissioned officer’s attention at the Warshavsky railway station. The boy answered the suggested questions and claimed that he was heading to the war as a volunteer. But after the further questioning the volunteer had to make a recognition: it turned out that the authorities dealt with a student of Revel’s gymnasium, a daughter of a photographer Teterin. The girl explained that the parents didn’t let her go to the war and she decided to flee. The men’s clothes and the gun she got from the other student of the gymnasium, who had left for the war earlier. Teterina was sent back home to her parents (Chernomorskaya gazeta Novorossiysk, November 12, 1914).

The front flee wave didn’t decrease half a year after the war outbreak. On January 13, 1915 “Chernomorskaya Gazeta” reported, that more than 10 young student volunteers, who escaped from their parents for admission to active duty were arrested. By the way, there were two local gymnasium students among them (Chernomorskaya gazeta (Novorossiysk). 1915, October, 23).

According to the reports from Kiev, only during January-February 1915 railway police arrested 214 young volunteers, 11 girls turned out to be among them (Nedelya voyny. 1915, 11).

Summer, 1915 was marked by the process of the retreat of the Russian army at the Eastern front, in military-historical literature this process was named “The Great retreat”. Disappointing reports from the frontlines, a desire to help parents and adults aroused a strong will in some part of the Russian youth to provide all possible assistance for the front. So for example, Ivan Kalchenko, 14, a student of the second higher primary school, Ivan Gessen, 13, and Victor Golovchenko, 16, fled to the front (Nikolaevskaya Gazeta, October 23, 1915).

The process of kids fleeing to the front came as a surprise for the Russian administration, but the phenomenon became so large scaled that the practices of propaganda character should have been taken. For example, “Niva”, the weekly magazine, published an interview with one military officer, “Their wounds are useless, so is their death. There is no place for children at war. They should study... Isn’t it ridiculous that Russia, that can have at fronts 16 million soldiers, has children in the army! If such little fellows are captured by the Germans, they wouldn’t miss a chance to reveal to the troops: “Look! How depleted Russia is. Kids are sent to the war!” (Niva, 1915, 52).

This article was reprinted in many periodicals of the Russian empire, but it didn't make any change. Police actions of searching kids at the railway station squares, stations, as well as at the frontline zone were not very efficient.

Despite these and other attempts to stop the flight of children to the front, it was impossible to do it. Meanwhile, the front news reported that in many units, minors, who managed to reach the frontline and were enrolled in military commands began to perform heroic deeds and became the Knights of St. George.

The underage voluntary soldiers served in all armed forces: artillery, cavalry, in intelligence, machine-gun teams, infantry, they were even in the Russian expedition corps in France. Arriving at the front, children quickly adapted to war, standing all the hardships of the camp life, food shortages, substandard living conditions, cold and combat losses.

Let's consider an example from 'Niva' magazine: "In September 1914 Konstantin Zapolli, 14, fled to the front. On September, 29 he was already at the frontline by the Pilitsa river in Poland. The positions of the adversaries were at the distance of just 200 steps. The location of the Zapolli's coy was constantly 'swept' by the well camouflaged German machine gun on the parapet. The company commander ordered to terminate the pillbox. The young warrior offered to be the 'hunter'. At night Konstantin crept to the enemy trenches and found a machine gun, masked with branches. It was impossible for him to carry the gun, so he tied it with the brought rope. The volunteer returned to his soldiers, pulling the rope as long as he could. A team of military intelligence pulled the rope in the neutral zone: the machine gun was knocked down from the parapet and in a moment "jumped" in the field in the direction of the Russian trenches. Awakened Germans rushed to catch it, but were forced back to their trenches by the Russian fire. For the successful 'search' Zapolli was awarded St. George's cross 4th class (Fig. 1) and later he became a Knight of one more St. George's cross (Niva, 1916, 4).



Fig. 1. St George's crosses 1–4 class.

St George's crosses were awarded only for the military merits to the servicemen (to the soldiers and junior officers), ascending from the lowest to highest. One could get only one cross for each successful operation. But some cases were recorded at the front, when minors were awarded with up to three St George's crosses of 4th, 3rd and 2nd classes relatively.

3.2. Volunteers at the front

Seeing the impossibility to stop the children fleeing to the front, in addition to the quite encouraging information from there, periodical press starts massive publishing of soldier children progress at the battlefields to promote this social phenomenon. Even the youngest volunteers' success wasn't left unattended. A 10-year-old ammunition volunteer of 131 Tiraspol infantry regiment team, Stepan Kravchenko, was wounded twice and was awarded with St George's cross 4th class (Ogonyok, 1915, 20) for the rescue of the machine gun.

It happened so that the children made an army career. For example, a 12-year-old scout, Vasily Naumov, was awarded with two St. George crosses and medals, became a non-commissioned officer, and was wounded twice in the battles.

Another volunteer, a Zhitomyr gymnasium № 2 4-th grader, Nikolay Orlov, went to the South-Western Front at the beginning of the military operations. He managed to take part in 11 fights, but his main show-off event occurred in Galicia at Zlochev's. Orlov's unit was cut off by the Austrians. And then this young warrior volunteered to make his way through the enemy fire to get reinforcements. For this feat Nikolai was awarded St George's cross 4th class. On September 20th, 1914, he arrived back in Zhytomyr, where he was enthusiastically greeted within the walls of his native Gymnasium ([Nicholaevskaya gazeta, 27 September, 1914](#)).

It should be noted that minors' presence at the front was not constant. For one reason or another, the commanders tried to send such volunteers back - to the home front. The "Smolensky Vestnik" on April 30, 1915, reported that "an Echelon" of 7 volunteers, aged 11-7, all being from different provinces of Moscow, Tver, Kaluga and Smolensk, returned from the war theatre across the village of Nadva, arrested by the police.

They were housed in apartments of the Palcev village, all being previously bathed. The volunteers look very cheerful, talk about their combat life on positions, regretting they could not battle any longer" ([Smolensky Vestnik, 1915, April 30](#)).

A 13-year old volunteer, Nikolay Smirnov, Knight of St George (awarded with St George's cross 4th class and 2 medals), escaped from German captivity in 1915, and captured a German officer by himself in subsequent battles ([Ogonyok, 1915, 20](#)).

Pavel Smolyanoy, at the age of 13, being awarded with a St George cross 4th class, came back from the Southwestern front to his hometown Nikolaev for the treatment in summer of 1915. He was a Modlinsky infantry regiment scout, escaped captivity, repeatedly executed his superiors' dangerous orders ([Nicholaevskaya gazeta, 11 July, 1915](#)).

Foreign young volunteers were also actively described in the periodical press. So, «Niva» magazine published a picture of a 12-year-old Chechen boy Abubakar Dzhurgaev ([Fig. 2](#)), a Caucasian native mounted Division (commonly known as the "Wild Division"*) volunteer.



Fig. 2. A 12-year-old volunteer Abubakar Dzhurgaev.

* The Cavalry Division, one of the compounds of the Russian Imperial Army, was formed on August, 13, 1914. By 90% it consisted of Muslim volunteers - the natives of North Caucasus and Transcaucasia, which, like all the native inhabitants of the Caucasus, according to the laws of the Russian Empire were not a subject to conscription. Many representatives of the Russian nobility served as Division officers.

Abubakar Dzhurgaev went to the front at the age of 12 with his father Yusup, leaving his studies in Grozny specialized school. He was an active participant in all the famous "Wild Division" battles during the World War I. Being on service in the Division, this boy frequently displayed bravery and valor.

When the "Wild Division" commander, the Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovitch Romanov (a brother of the Emperor Nicholas II) found out about him, he presented the boy a dagger. Abubakar was only 12 year old at that time. Being 14, Abubakar received an honorary award – St. George's Ribbon, tied by the His Highesty the Commander himself, the Grand Duke M.A. Romanov.

By the way, not only boys battled on the front, but girls, too. A 6-th grader of the Highest Mariinsky Vilen School, Kira Bashkirova, was awarded St. George's cross 4th class for her combat feats. Disguised as a volunteer Nicholas Popov, she joined one of the regiments, and after a single week, she exceeded in a night scout mission ([Parlamentskaya gazeta, 2014, 31 July](#)).



Fig. 3. A Portrait of Alexey Dyachkov, a 98 infantry Yuriev regiment volunteer. Artist V.A. Zverev. Petrograd-Tsarskoye Selo. The Knight of St. George is pictured wearing a Grenadier Regiment overcoat and a cap without badges.

A 13-year-old volunteer Ivan Stepanovich Sobolev, native of Antonovka, Tomsk province, joined the 208-th machine gun Lori command of the 5th infantry regiment when the war broke out. He distinguished himself in May 1915, during the defensive battles on the San River, while the regiment was retreating, being showered by the German heavy shells. Regimental machine gun carts were destroyed during one of the firings. Only one of them was left, but the rider was killed. Ivan, not wasting time, despite the shells rushing around him, rode that cart to the gathering point. He got a severe head concussion during this ride. But, upon reaching the gathering point, he refused to go to the infirmary and asked for medical help only when the regiment was out of the battle. For the salvation of the machine gun and courage Sobolev was awarded the Valor St. George's Medal 4-th class ([Niva, 1917, 9](#)).

Another young volunteer performed the salvation of a machine gun. A 10-year-old ammunition team of 131 infantry Tiraspol regiment volunteer, Stepan Kravchenko, was wounded twice, and was awarded the St. George's cross 4th class for the salvation of the machine gun ([Ogonyok, 1915, 20](#)).

Periodical press often represented children-volunteers performing activities specific for their age. Thus, 1915 "Niva" magazine published a photo of the Petrograd volunteer Hugo Daniel ([Fig. 4](#)), a 14-year-old Estonian.



Fig. 4. Hugo Daniel is exhausted.

Hugo joined one of the Cossack regiments. He endured all the hardships of the battle life on a par with the adults. He was in battles and went scouting dozens of times, where he showed outstanding bravery. (Niva. 1915, 26)

It is necessary to note, that the young volunteers were enlisted in the Russian infantry brigades in France (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. An expeditionary corps of the Russian army in France.

What psychological motives moved the youth in their desire to go to war? We believe that many things intertwine: the magnitude and significance of the World War I, the explosion of patriotism, the relative proximity of the front, the intensification of the social life on the home front, a great deal of refugees and wounded – all this contributed to the fact that hundreds of volunteers became "sons of regiments" of the Russian Imperial Army. A. Bogdanov, a Russian

teacher, wrote in 1914: "When the whole country is agitated, then the children, unwittingly following the adults, cannot remain indifferent spectators of events ... Who, among the children, did not imagine himself as ... Robinson, the rogue Churkin, Mike Pinkerton, Sherlock Holmes, before the war? The love for heroic adventure is inseparable from a child's soul. Their inflamed imagination, being under the influence of what they have heard and what they have read, pushed children to war" (Niva, 1915, 12).

In addition to newspaper and magazine publications, children-heroes popularizing was also performed on postcards. They often portrayed a collective image of a young volunteer, without reference to any specific historical character on the postcards (Fig. 6, 7).



Fig. 6. A little body often harbors a great soul.



Fig. 7. Young volunteer Peter Littlefellow fled to war not wearing an overcoat.

Postcards were printed in thousands of copies and also contributed to the glorification of children soldiers and formed the patriotic image of the Russian youth.

4. Conclusion

Thus, during the World War I, a sudden volunteerism movement appearance among the underage youth, despite of all the opposition of civil and military leaders, was a fait accompli. Failed to prevent it and eradicate it with interdictions, Russian administration made the youth volunteer movement an example of patriotic fatherland, through the mass media services.

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