

Landscapes of the Eastern Front of the First World War in Narratives and Survival Practices of Ukrainian Refugees

Liubov Zhvanko

European states entered the Great War of 1914–18 hoping to achieve a quick and brilliant victory, but it turned into the five-year horror of the first industrial and truly total war in history. Europe, divided into western and eastern theatres of war, shuddered with unprecedented battles that were radically changing the landscape of the continent. Refugees then entered the stage—millions of voiceless, hitherto unknown extras, actors in all the wars that followed in the 20th century.¹ This chapter addresses the life-worlds of refugees in the war-torn region of Galicia, in particular the marginalized Ukrainian voices. By scrutinizing their experiences, we get a glimpse of the daily struggles of refugees in relation to military necessities, economic pressures, and food crises, as well as the public health dimensions of epidemics, births, and deaths.

In 1914, the territories with ethnic Ukrainian populations which were part of the Austro-Hungarian or the Russian Empires, and were divided into front line and rear according to their status. Today's territory of Ukraine, primarily eastern Galicia, Transcarpathia, northern Bukovina, and the western part of Volhynia, was one of the important theatres of military operations on the Eastern Front. This was the zone of operations of the South-Western Front, on which Russian troops fought against Austria-Hungary and later Germany.² The fronts, figuratively speaking, went not only across territories, they passed through human souls, destroying the existing system of values and devastating the *Lebenswelten* of the ordinary people. Refugees became an inherent feature of wartime society. Many of them found themselves in a foreign and unknown world, and became a “novelty” of its landscape. Thus, the following article examines the problem of the “little man”—a refugee who found refuge

1 Liubov Zhvanko, *Bizhenci Pershoï svitovoï vijni: ukrains'kij vimir (1914–1918 rr.)* [Refugees of the First World War: Ukrainian Dimension (1914–1918)] (Kharkiv: Apostrophe, 2012), 10.

2 Liubov Zhvanko, “Ukraine,” in *1914–1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, eds. Ute Daniel et al., trans. Gary Goldberg (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10245>.

in the Ukrainian provinces—and the practices of his survival in the realities of wartime provinces.

The article distinguishes three periods in the existence of refugees in Ukrainian territories during the war, covering different state formations: the Russian Empire (August 1914–February 1917), the Ukrainian Central Rada and its proclaimed Ukrainian National Republic (March 1917–April 1918), and the Ukrainian State of hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky (April–December 1918). On the one hand, this division was conditioned by different political processes, which were taking place in the Ukrainian lands during 1914–18: the existence of the autocracy and its abolition, the revolutionary processes of 1917, the presence of Austro-German occupational forces, and the hetman's coup of 1918. On the other hand, different political regimes had their own visions for solving the problems of refugees. At the same time, the article moves away from the analysis of the activities of state entities in the sphere of refugees, which have been thoroughly analysed in the research literature,³ with the main focus being on the life-worlds of refugees through the analysis of ego-documents on perceptions of the military conflict and warscapes.

Separate studies of World War I refugees appeared only in the last decade of the last century. Until then, scholars were primarily interested in the military history of the armed conflict, and its economic, political, and diplomatic components. One of the pioneers in the development of this topic was Peter Gatrell, whose groundbreaking work, in particular *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I*,⁴ illuminates the causes of refugeeism as a new and emerging phenomenon, recreating a broad picture of the global movement of civilians from the western frontier to the rear regions, tsarist policies toward this population, the activities of various charitable committees, and the impact of the Russian February Revolution on the ethnic consolidation of refugees. An example of a study of the history of Polish refugees is the book by Mariusz Korzeniowski, Mariusz Mondzik, and Dariusz Tarasiuk *Tułaczy los: Uchodźcy polscy w imperium rosyjskim w latach pierwszej wojny światowej* [The fate of wanderers: Polish refugees in the Russian Empire during the First World

3 Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Liubov Zhvanko, *Social'ni vimiri Ukraïns'koï Derzhavi (kviten'–gruden' 1918 r.)* [Social Dimensions of the Ukrainian State (April–December 1918)] (Kharkiv: Prapor, 2007); Liubov Zhvanko, *Bizhenstvo Pershoï svitovoi vïjny v Ukraïni: dokumenty i materialy (1914–1918 rr.)* [Refugees of the First World War in Ukraine: Documents and Materials (1914–1918)] (Kharkiv: KHNAMG, 2010).

4 Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

War].⁵ The international project “Europe on the Move: The Great War and Its Refugees, 1914–1918”, funded by the British Academy of Sciences for the centennial of World War I, resulted in the publication of the same name, in which scholars from Europe and America reconstructed aspects of the lives of refugees on different sides of the European fronts.⁶ The article by Kamil Ruszała on the fate of Galician refugees who stayed in Austria-Hungary during World War I is closest to the subject we are studying here. He explored the worlds of three groups of actors: the refugees, the local population, and the authorities, who had to face a problem previously unknown, at least at this magnitude. He addresses the limits of hospitality and the efficiency of the bureaucratic apparatus, questions of identity, self-organization, and, most importantly, the reactions in each group’s confrontation with asylum seekers.⁷ At that time, refugees were not yet seen as part of the military landscape on the Eastern Front, as a factor that changed the landscape of host cities and villages. In fact, one could argue that the refugee could almost be the protagonist of the project “Embattled Nature: Men and Landscapes on the Eastern Front of WWI”, as he is both a witness to the changes in nature and the landscape under the influence of the war effort, and the main narrator of this to the local population, and a victim of these changes.

It is important to emphasize the difference between the deportation of citizens of the Russian Empire, who were defined in the documents as “Christians” and “Slavs”, and the deportation actions directed against Germans, Austro-Hungarians, Turks, and Bulgarians. The Polish population was regarded by the Reich as voluntary Slavic refugees who were guaranteed free rail travel, food on the routes into the hinterland, the opportunity to earn a living, and local support. Despite their Russian citizenship, non-Slavic ethnic groups were regarded by the official authorities as “enemy reservists”. They were ostracized, administratively expelled from the frontline areas under police supervision, and were not entitled to state and public support. They were de facto deported and can be categorized as “deportees”. The Jewish population constituted a

5 Mariusz Korzeniowski, Marek Mądzik, and Dariusz Tarasiuk, *Tułaczy los: Uchodźcy polscy w imperium rosyjskim w latach pierwszej wojny światowej* [Wandering Fate: Polish refugees in the Russian Empire in the years of the First World War] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2007).

6 Peter Gatrell and Liubov Zhvanko, eds., *Europe on the Move: The Great War and Its Refugees* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

7 Kamil Ruszała, *Galicyjski eksodus: uchodźcy podczas I wojny światowej w monarchii Habsburgów* [Galician exodus: Refugees during World War I in the Habsburg monarchy] (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych “Universitas,” 2020).

special group of displaced persons, suffering not only from displacement and flight, but also from a widespread anti-Semitism.⁸

The term “refugee” in relation to part of the displaced population of the Russian Empire was clearly defined in the “Decree on the Assistance of Refugees” signed by the emperor on 30 August 1915. In this document, “refugees are recognized as persons who have left the territory under the threat of enemy advance, or who have already been occupied by the enemy, or who have been expelled from the area of military operations by order of the military or civilian authorities”.⁹ The first transports of refugees arrived in the Russian Empire in the autumn of 1914, mainly from the western Polish provinces. This spontaneous movement was voluntary and “a natural consequence of the enemy’s advance into our territory”.¹⁰ The mass influx of refugees from the western theatre of war to the rear provinces of the Russian Empire began in July–August 1915, as a result of the Russian retreat and the implementation of the “scorched earth” doctrine by the military. It reached its peak in September/October and ended in November/December of the same year.

The world of the World War I refugee who found shelter in Ukrainian towns and villages was mostly the world of women, children, and the elderly. Refugee men’s view of evacuation life is very difficult to discern, as the vast majority of them were mobilized into the tsarist army. In their letters, refugees wrote about the things that bothered them: food, clothing, and the possibility of making money somewhere. Many of the letters were written in the same handwriting because many of the refugees were illiterate, so they paid money to have someone write a letter for them. This source material is complemented by military documents, such as orders and snippets from the provincial press.

The telegrams and orders of General Alexei Mavrin, the chief of supply of the armies of the South-Western Front, issued in the summer of 1915 by the local authorities, can be considered important sources for understanding the attitude of the authorities to the refugees, the organization of their relocation, the provisioning of them on the road, and the vision of the landscape changed by the war and by these people.¹¹ Periodicals established by provincial and district zemstvo offices, city governments, and public unions, various “dailies”, such as *Ekaterinoslavskaya zemstvo* newspaper, *Yuzhnaya Rossiya* (Nikolaev), *Yugo-Zapadnyj kraj* (Vinnitsa), *Chernigovskoe Slovo*, *Yuzhny Krai* (Kharkov), *Odessa Listok*, *Volyn* (Zhitomir), *Poltavskiy Den’*, and *Rodnoy Krai* (Kherson), responded

8 Zhvanko, *Bizhenci Pershoi svitovoi vijni*, 39.

9 Zhvanko, *Bizhenci Pershoi svitovoi vijni*, 92.

10 Zhvanko, *Bizhenci Pershoi svitovoi vijni*, 31.

11 State Archives of Poltava Oblast, f. 83, op. 1, d. 143, 37–38, 41.

to a new social phenomenon, unknown in previous wars—refugeeism. Analysing the content of the press (working through 68 editions) with material about refugees, it was possible to identify a certain pattern: in the publications from the beginning of the war there were no references to refugees, which was explained by the situation at the front; from the summer of 1915, when the mass evacuation of the civilian population from the western provinces of the Russian Empire began, the press began to actively cover it, and there was even a special newspaper, *Yugobezhenets* (Odessa), published by the office of the head of the commission for the refugee settlement of the South-Western Front. A significant number of articles about the life of refugees can be found on the pages of the press in 1916, because it was in this year that refugees began to settle in their new locations. From the spring of 1917, when the revolutionary element swept the Ukrainian lands, the newspapers did not pay much attention to refugees, but in 1918 they covered the problems of their return home.¹²

As a historian, I have been dealing with the problems of World War I refugees in Ukraine for over 20 years, but not even in my darkest dreams could I have imagined that in 2022 the fate of the protagonists of my books and articles would befall me. Now I am an “academic refugee”, and when a Russian bomb falls on my home in Kharkiv, all the materials I collected in archives and libraries over many years will be destroyed. At the same time, to go and pick up the stored source materials, as well as to work in the Ukrainian archives, is now simply life-threatening, so this article is written from the published and preserved materials in my laptop. In fact, this article is a compressed summary of the many years of pre-war research. It includes “voices” of local inhabitants and refugees—quotations from articles and letters—so that the reader can make their own assessment of the situation at that time, reflecting it onto the present realities of European cities and the presence of Ukrainian refugees in them.

1 The Statistical Dimension of the Refugee Question on the Eastern Front

Refugees constituted a variable population that was in constant flux, and this made it difficult to collect objective data. Natural demographic factors (births and deaths) influenced refugee numbers, with the added complexity of movement from one area to another, along with conscription, family reunion, and so

12 Zhvanko, *Bizhenstvo Pershoi svitovoï vijni*, 17–19.

forth. The best estimate is that refugees in the territory of Ukrainian provinces numbered more than 400,000 in November 1915, increasing to about one million in the winter of 1918. In autumn 1915, some 220,000 refugees sheltered in Yekaterinoslav province, making it home to the largest number in the Russian Empire. Naturally, these data should be considered tentative. Following the February Revolution, an uncontrolled movement of refugees took place from Russia to Ukraine, which they regarded as a place of transit. Additional contingents of refugees included Romanian refugees who fled the German occupation of their country. Nearly 900 such refugees were sent to Kremenchuk, Poltava, and the Poltava district in the first three months of 1917. Others found temporary shelter in Yekaterinoslav and Kherson provinces. In total, refugees on Ukrainian soil belonged to 20 different national groups, including Ukrainians, Russians, Belarusians, Poles, Germans, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Czechs, Slovaks, Moldavians, Romanians, and Serbs.¹³

Analysing the gender and age profile of the refugee population, we can conclude that the main contingent were women and children. Although it is difficult to determine the exact number of women refugees, since some of them were included in the statistical data prepared by the local refugee committees in the column headed "No gender division", it is still possible to assert the predominance of women among refugees.¹⁴ In July 1915, a Yekaterinoslav newspaper wrote: "The majority of refugees are multifamily, almost exclusively women and children".¹⁵

The archival sources are more revealing. For example, on 3 March 1915, 37 women and 148 children aged from one month to 16 years arrived in Kharkiv from Lublin district. In one case, a 19-year-old refugee from Pultus district of Warsaw province, Regina Gaak, came to Kharkiv with her son who was only two weeks old. Considering the circumstances of the railways and martial law, it is fair to assume that the boy was born on the road. In all, of the 806 refugee children who arrived in Kharkiv between 28 February and 15 March 1915, 404 children were under the age of seven. Almost all of the women had several children. Here is just one example: on 2 March 1915, 63 families from Płock province arrived in Kharkiv, among whom was 35-year-old Amalia Pym. Eight

13 Liubov Zhvanko and Oleksiy Nestulya, "Ukrainian Assistance to Refugees during the First World War," in *Europe on the Move: The Great War and Its Refugees*, eds. Peter Gatrell and Liubov Zhvanko (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 112–13.

14 Liubov Zhvanko, "Sud'ba zhenshchiny-bezhenki. Po dokumentam Pervoj mirovoj vojny" [The Fate of a Refugee Woman. Based on the documents of the First World War], *Historians* (2017), <https://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/doslidzhennya/1029-liubov-zhvanko-sudba-zhenshchyny-bezhenky-po-dokumentam-pervoy-mirovoy-voyny>.

15 "Pomosch slavyanam-bezhentsam," *Yekaterinoslavskaya Zemskaya Gazeta*, July 14, 1915.

children came with her: Wanda (15 years old), Emil (13), Charlotte (11), Ludwig (9), Elsa (7), Juliana (4), Herman (3), and Anna (2).¹⁶

By the end of 1916, refugees had become a common sight in the local population; no one was surprised by the queues outside the premises of the committees to get meagre aid. There was no longer particular zeal among the organizers of the various donations; refugee women remained alone with their troubles, cradling infants born of soldiers stationed nearby,¹⁷ and orphan children lost by their parents no longer touched correspondents with their pitiful appearance. Essentially, we can say that refugees, and more often refugee women, were settling into a new social role as breadwinners in a new place:

Refugees are no longer an extreme phenomenon. The refugees themselves and the natives have become accustomed to the situation and the refugee issue has become routine, ordinary. Refugees, in most cases, settled down, acclimatized. Some have opened their own business, some have taken jobs, but all have established a “settled” order in their homes and in their relations with the population. You hear “in Warsaw”, “in Grodno” less often. We are accustomed to saying, “here in Poltava”.¹⁸

2 Ethnic Characteristics of Refugees

For ethnic refugees who found shelter in Ukrainian towns and villages, everything was alien, from the language, as the sources repeatedly point out, to the national cuisine. For example, several families of Polish refugees lived in the Kryvenetska Estate of Count Branicki, Taraschany district, Kyiv province. According to a newspaper article from October 1915, the local peasant women were very sympathetic to these unfortunate people, but, it was noted, “they do not freely understand each other, as the refugees speak only Polish”.¹⁹ It is interesting to note that some of the local committees even gave food to the refugee women to cook their national food. The fate of ethnic refugee women is a separate page in the history of refugee women, as nominally staying within the same state, they faced a completely different world in the evacuation.

During the First World War, more than 20 nationalities had refugee status on the territory of the Ukrainian provinces. Among them were Ukrainians,

¹⁶ State Archive of Kharkiv Oblast (SAKhO), f. 18, op. 21, d. 3, 30–32.

¹⁷ State Archives in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, f. 63, op. 1, d. 1163, 25.

¹⁸ “Sredy ulitchnykh detej” [Among street children], *Poltavskij den'*, August 2, 1916.

¹⁹ V. Tsehelnjuk, “Bezhtentsy,” *Kyivskaja Zemskaya Gazeta*, October 1915, 26–27.

Russians, Belarusians, Poles, Germans, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Jews, Czechs, Slovaks, Moldavians, Romanians, Serbs and others. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine the quantitative composition of the individual groups under the conditions of their constant movement. The largest groups were “Russian refugees” (usually a generalized term for Belarusians, Ukrainians and Russians) and Poles.

The fate of Polish refugee Antonina Urban, who was evacuated to Kharkiv from Lublin, is interesting and at the same time tragic. The “Refugee Book” of 1916 showed the following family composition: “father—Peter Urban, 29 years old; mother—Antonina Urban, 22 years old; children—Lucina, 2 years old, Jozefa, 1 year old”. In 1917, Jadwiga was born. Antonina’s husband died in 1919 from a smallpox epidemic, the same year little Jozefa also died. Antonina was left alone with two small daughters without a livelihood, without knowledge of the language, and only kind people prevented her and her children from starving to death. This woman lived in Kharkiv for many years, but her only dream, of returning to her native Lublin, according to her granddaughter Liudmila Toporkova, remained unfulfilled, which she regretted all the time.²⁰

From the distant outskirts of the empire, refugees brought different ways of life, religions, and languages, even different appearances, to the Ukrainian provinces. At the time, even the clothes of female refugees served as a kind of marker, by which entire provinces were recognized. An eyewitness from Odessa wrote:

Province after province. After a few hours on the road, you can already tell the difference between a province and a gubernia. You will recognize it by the hairstyles of the women. From under the kerchief to the forehead trimmed “fringe”. Like our ladies wore 20 years ago.²¹

3 Refugees in the War Landscapes on the Eastern Front

Ukraine’s provincial towns and villages perceived the outbreak of war differently and were affected by different aspects of it. By and large, in the first days the city was struck by euphoria at the coming victorious war, while the countryside was plunged into despair and grief. The complex urban system that is

20 Zhvanko, “Sud’ba zhenschiny-bezhenki.”

21 “Religiosnaja prozessia,” *Odesskyi Listok*, October 15, 1915.

the city had undergone dramatic changes since the outbreak of the war. Cities can be divided into three notional categories: front line, destroyed in the initial phase of the war; front line, where the war left its significant destructive traces; and rear, which lived in anticipation of war. It was the latter that became the place of accumulation of the alien element—refugees, prisoners of war, deportees, displaced persons, all those who were a direct consequence of the resolution of this military conflict.

With their arrival, the city's natural and cultural landscape, its space, and visual appearance underwent changes. These included barracks for temporary residence, entire towns for refugees, which were built near train stations and in city parks, new signs on the houses that told the average citizen about the existence of committees to help these people in the city, various posters with appeals to help refugees, job ads, signs for various "Labour Bureaus for Refugees", and trucks of donation collectors on the streets. And the refugees themselves—symbols of suffering and foreignness—changed the face of the city. They dissociated themselves from the usual urban landscape. Moreover, it was as if they demanded attention and help, generating feelings of guilt, but the refugee, as it turned out, was not always a positive innovation for the urban environment. Along with various crooks and fake fundraisers, "pseudo-refugees" also appeared.

The cultural space of the provincial city also underwent transformation: speakers of another language, of another psychology, another mentality appeared in it. At the same time, the city served as an environment where ethnic refugees, particularly Poles, sought to preserve their identity with the help of even small local diasporas.

An eloquent marker of the war is the railway station, where sanitary trains carrying wounded, refugees, and prisoners of war arrived. And while wounded soldiers and prisoners of war were perceived as a normal manifestation of war, the large number of refugees was a rather unusual phenomenon, unknown from past wars. By and large, it was not entirely clear to the average person where such a large number of displaced people came from, and why.

There were also points at the stations for receiving information about refugees who had lost their relatives on the way, and points for helping these same refugees. Representatives of various NGOs, volunteers, and students were on duty at these stations to receive refugees. It was simply impossible to transport a huge mass of refugees at one time, so special distribution points were organized at the major railway junctions and towns, which were located on the routes of their intensive movement. In a short time, actual refugee towns

appeared in Kharkiv and Yekaterinoslav, as the most important cities for the transit movement of refugees. In Yekaterinoslav it was called “Pokrovskiy Gorodok”, named after the station square, where it was located.²²

The so-called “refugee camps”, sometimes built in the centre of cities, also became a kind of reminder of the war for the society in the rear. For example, on 12 July 1915 the first “Camp in the Poltava City Garden” began its work, for the needs of which, on 15 July, the city government gave all the buildings in the city garden.²³ Thus, temporary barracks for refugees, barracks for prisoners of war, infirmaries, and hospitals became inalienable external attributes of urban landscapes of provincial Ukrainian towns and villages.

In the Ukrainian countryside, the war broke out in the midst of the harvest, displacing a significant number of workers, and therefore was perceived as a terrible natural disaster. The war took the male breadwinner. The unploughed field was a symbolic image of the countryside during World War I. It was especially difficult in the countryside for the families of the mobilized to receive the same paltry material aid. In the village, the competition between the “arrivals”, even if not of their own free will, refugees and prisoners of war, and the local population became even more pronounced, as the peasants who worked in the landlords’ economies saw the same prisoners as potential competitors.

In the countryside, letters from the front were probably one of the main sources of information about the war, and the same information was also disseminated among refugees. This gave them an opportunity to compare their experiences on the road with what they heard from the relatives of a soldier who was fighting. It should also be noted that soldiers, mostly potential prisoners of war, sent letters from the front with “trench truths” that quite often made a shocking impression on the psychology of unprepared readers in the rear.

4 The Trials and Practices of Survival on the Road

The first refugee carts appeared in the Ukrainian provinces as early as the autumn of 1914, mostly from the western provinces of the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Poland. This spontaneous movement was voluntary and was

22 Liubov Zhvanko, “Provintsia i chelovek vo vremja Velikoj vojny. Nekotorye akzenty problem” [Province and Man in the Time of the Great War: Some Accents of the Problem (1914–1918)], 1915: *Vojna, Provintsia, Chelovek: ukrainsko-polskie akzenty problem* [1915: War, Province, Man: Ukrainian-Polish Accents: Materials of the International Scientific Symposium], ed. Liubov Zhvanko (Kharkiv: Maidan, 2016), 72.

23 Central State Historical Archive of Ukraine in Kyiv, f. 715, op. 1, d. 1748, 14.

“a natural consequence of the enemy’s attack” on their territory.²⁴ The mass arrival of refugees to the rear provinces from the western theatre of operations began in July–August 1915, as a result of the retreat of the Russian armies and the implementation of the “scorched earth” doctrine. It reached its peak in September–October and ended in November–December of the same year.

In terms of the method of movement of refugees to the rear provinces, two stages can be distinguished. In the first one, which lasted from the summer to the beginning of the autumn of 1915, the main method of evacuation was cartage. The overwhelming majority moved in their own wagons, covered with tarpaulins and loaded with their most valuable belongings. Sometimes in a hurry, they packed what was at hand. Immediate participants of those events in Volyn described their simple utensils as follows:

A box with clothes, towels and rows, a bread tub, a shovel for planting bread, a tub of bacon, a sack of flour, a shovel, an axe and a saw were put on the wagon. And no more could fit on the cart. Each of them was covered from the rain on top. Because it was dry, the carts really creaked.²⁵

Analysing what was hastily put on the wagons, we can conclude that these people counted only on themselves, taking away food and tools, perhaps the main thing for both women and men. The refugee woman thought, she hoped, that somewhere along the way she would surely get to a house with an oven, in which she could bake bread and take out her own shovel, as she had done so many times at home. In fact, in a new and at the same time foreign place, these people, by and large, wanted to lead a way of life “like home”. And a shovel, an axe, and a saw were the tools with which houses were built at the beginning of the last century. So refugees drove their wagons deep into the empire with the hope of waiting out the blizzard of war that had whirled their families and scattered them in foreign lands.

It was very difficult for the woman on the road, for whom the journey was an ordeal. She gave birth and buried her babies, her way was marked by the burial mounds of babies and elderly parents who died on the road, she was caught up with the news of the death of her husband, her beloved, her father at the front.

The transportation of refugees by railway began in the autumn, and new problems arose. Compared with European countries, the Russian Empire’s backward rail infrastructure significantly complicated the process of refugee

24 “Refugees and the organization of assistance to them in connection with the work of the Special Meeting,” *Izvestiya Vserossiiskogo Soyuza Gorodov* (1916, 1927–28), 174.

25 Zhvanko, *Bizhenstvo Pershoi svitovoi vjini*, 45.

transportation. Often there were hours of delays at stations in the absence of an adequate number of trains. All this led to antisocial behaviour from the refugees, which could be understood, as it was a question of simple human survival. For example, on 15 October 1915, the head of the Slavyansk gendarmerie department telegraphed to Kharkiv governor Nikolai Protasiev: "The refugee women with children, driven to extremes, having received no fuel from anyone, are openly robbing coal from the wagons at the station, going by railway. I find it difficult to carry out repressive measures".²⁶ And there were many such telegrams:

When you enter the territory of Volyn, you see with your own eyes what the resettlement of people means. The entire region has risen and moved somewhere forward, away from the theatre of military operations. ... And everywhere, in all those trains, the picture is the same: you cannot believe how so many people could fit into them, and with what effort they were pushing their bundles, bags and suitcases everywhere they could. ...

And at the stations—the long streets of dark-red goods wagons, driven into the railway deadlocks, waiting in line to go further. For now, they live in the wagons. And they live in a very real way: they put up tables, spread out and hang up their household rubbish. They turned out to be mobile apartments. ... But they are the lucky ones. And the majority took the surviving "ponies" to the unknown road.²⁷

Unknown landscapes posed a particular danger for the refugees. At the same time, there were cases when deliberately false rumours were spread among the refugees, further exacerbating the already tragic situation. For example, when a batch of refugees from Volyn arrived in Kherson, the refugees were simply afraid to get out of the wagons because someone had spread a rumour that they would all be drowned in the sea. Refugee women wailed in horror: "They're taking us to the sea to drown us!"²⁸

5 Destruction and Refugees

The road of refugees to evacuation was a continuous ordeal, which was due not only to personal tragedies but also to the depressing landscape of the war. The

²⁶ SAKhO, f. 18, op. 21, d. 10, 144.

²⁷ "In Volyn," *Nezhynets*, August 29, 1915.

²⁸ "The destitute," *Novosti Chersonskogo zemstvo* 41 (1915), 1112.

familiar, peaceful sights of cities, roads, and streets disappeared. Refugees witnessed the burnt-out villages; moreover, they became part of this landscape. German general Erich von Ludendorff wrote in his memoirs about refugees of a hostile state: “the Russians, retreating, deliberately and systematically ... burned settlements. ... Refugees, when they hindered the movement, were driven off the road into the swamps”.²⁹

The refugees were extremely distressed when their own homes were destroyed. In fact, we can say that a burned down house was the impetus for a person to be ready to evacuate, since the civilian population of the front-line provinces did not want to leave their homes and stayed until the last possible minute. Here is how one of the guides of groups of refugees to the place of evacuation in Kvasnitsky described his meeting with refugees in the summer of 1915:

They [refugees] encamped in the forests, built themselves huts from planks and young wood, cut down here, and sat around continuously burning fires. I myself walked around this camp, which stretched for 3 *versts*. Few people agreed to go: some were still going to sell cattle and horses, others were busy washing and mending laundry; many of the owners, having left their families in the sticks, went to investigate in their villages whether it was possible to go back to their native places. Some of the latter, in my presence, returned from such reconnaissance and said that they had nothing to return home to, as their settled nests had been turned to ashes.³⁰

Destroyed buildings, depressingly familiar sights from the beginning of the refugee journey, decreased in number with the advance into the rear Ukrainian provinces. Unfortunately, we have not been able to find any mention in refugee letters of this terrible destruction, but a Polish refugee found shelter in Kharkiv in the summer of 1915, who put his feelings on the road to evacuation, as well as the experiences of others, into poetic form. That refugee was one of Poland's outstanding poets, Leopold Staff (1878–1957). In his collection *Rainbow of Tears and Blood* (*Tęcza łez i krwi*), published in Kharkiv in 1918, there is a poem “Wychodzcy”, dedicated to refugees (which is the meaning of the title), their hard evacuation journey, and experiences.³¹

29 Erich Ludendorff, *Moi vospominania o vojne. 1914–1918* [My Memories of the War. 1914–1918] (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2007), 77.

30 Zhvanko, *Bizhenstvo Pershoï svitovoi vïjni*, 199.

31 Liubov Zhvanko, “The First World War, Poles, and Forced Displacement: Kharkiv's Sylwetki,” *Europa Orientalis. Studies on Dziejów Europy Wschodniej i Państw Bałtyckich* 11 (2020): 119.

6 Death and Burial around Refugees

Already from the first moments of the transformation of the civilian to refugee, his companion on the road becomes death. Death on the road, death in the refuge, death all around them—in newspaper articles, in conversations, in mourning processions.

The hastily carved cross symbolizes the end of refugees' suffering on the road. Nameless crosses were left in memory of relatives, which was very difficult for many refugee peasants, who did not know the area and the names of settlements that were foreign to them. Quickly buried family members who could not bear the hardships of the "involuntary journey"—these terrible pictures were with them in the evacuation as well: "Graves of the weakest—children and the elderly—began to appear on both sides of the roads".³² Even some higher military ranks remarked on this, such as General Vasily Gurko, who in his memoirs noted: "The entire route of this mass escape was marked by graves with hastily carved crosses".³³

Death lived in the wagons in which the refugees moved in the evacuation. For example, in a telegram, which was not an isolated case, Chairman of the Committee for Assistance to Refugees of Sumy nobleman Ilya Traskin wrote to the governor of Kharkiv: "The cars are overcrowded. The Southern Railway refuses to take them. Refugees make the station unsanitary. Deaths".³⁴

Death was a companion to the lives of refugees in various shelters. In autumn 1915, journalist Timofey Emtsev, a former village teacher, related the terrible story of an eyewitness who had visited a refugee shelter in Kherson district:

Day and night a baby was sobbing its heart out. It shouted itself hoarse and, having turned blue, it was swinging its thin greyish worm-like legs and moaning like an adult. Its mother with tormented face full of tears put her empty breast to its mouth and faltered ... "Die! I've got no milk! Oh! Die! I cannot!" She clasped her head and moaned ... "Ah! I cannot take any more! God, take it! I cannot". At night the baby suddenly died. It did

32 Vital Luba and Jevgeny Miranovic, eds., *Refugees of 1915* (Belastok: SPHU "Podlaska," Zakład Poligraficzny, 2000), 7.

33 Vasily Gurko, *Vojna i revoliutsia v Rossii. Vospominania komandujushego Zapadnym frontom* [War and Revolution in Russia. Memoirs of the Commander of the Western Front. 1914–1917] (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2007), 157.

34 SAKhO, f. 18, op. 21, d. 6, 243.

not cry anymore and did not swing its worm-like legs and its mother was sitting and striking her head against the wall.³⁵

In turn, for refugee children, orphanhood was a terrible ordeal: the deep psychological wounds of losing loved ones and the incomprehensible long journey to a foreign land where the unknown awaited them. All of this filled the children's souls with fear, and their faces acquired an adult expression of anguish. Tragic images of children's ruined fates were encountered by zemstvo workers, who repeatedly visited the orphanages where refugees lived. Here is what a representative of the Yekaterinoslav Refugee Aid Committee saw:

"And here is an orphan!" ... a woman says to me, pointing to a lonely girl sitting on the bunk. From the account of those around her, it was clear that her mother had been dead for several days and that her father was gone. And so lives the six-year-old by herself. Nice, smart girl. Wise-looking blue eyes, beautifully combed hair; all in all quite clean-cut, unlike the children just seen. She sits with her legs covered.

After her mother's death, 9 roubles of money and a sheepskin coat remained.³⁶

7 Evacuation Survival Practices

One of the most difficult problems proved to be the task of providing refugees with adequate food. Refugees received food at specially arranged canteens or cafeterias. For example, in Volyn, on average, around 47,000 refugees received food daily at canteens,³⁷ of which 9,000 refugees were fed daily in two such establishments in Zhytomyr.³⁸ These stations became places for mutual exchange of information between compatriots, and here we can begin to see the impact of the war on people's lives and character.

In August 1916, the correspondent of a Kyiv newspaper described one establishment that he visited as follows:

It is lunch time. A dense grey crowd. Senior citizens, teenagers, children—but the majority are women. Grey "Little Russian" [*Malorossiiia*] coats,

35 Timofey Emtsev, "Nedostatky," *Novosti Chersonskogo zemstvo* 41, October 1915.

36 Zhvanko, *Bizhenstvo Pershoi svitovoi vjny*, 56.

37 "Chronicle," *Volynskaja zhishn'*, January 20, 1916.

38 Zhvanko, *Social Dimensions of the Ukrainian State (April – December 1918)*, 133.

jackets, city coats, Galicia fur hats. The nuns who bring meals are scarcely able to make their way through the crowd. Refugees eat at long tables, others are waiting their turn, and some are receiving rations to take away. On one side there are the tables of inquiry offices: Russian, Polish, Jewish.³⁹

Refugees received monthly monetary “food aid” to buy their own food. It averaged 6 roubles per month per adult. Food was also distributed mainly to ethnic refugees for whom the local cuisine was quite peculiar. The diet of refugees was not varied, it differed in the various provinces of Ukraine mainly in the amount of food issued, which depended on local conditions and the ability of the committees and local governments to purchase it.

The prolonged evacuation did not make the refugees any healthier, so they turned to local high-ranking officials for help when they were unable to work. For example, on 3 June 1916, refugee Zalma Lasman wrote to the Kharkiv governor:

I have the honour to ask you, Your Excellency, to help me get money, from the committee, needed for my existence. My husband is at war. I am left with a child and an old mother without any means to live. I myself am very ill and therefore cannot earn money.⁴⁰

It should be noted that with each new year of the war, the situation with the provisioning of refugees became more and more difficult and the authorities looked for radical ways to solve this problem. For example, in March 1916, the chief of supplies for the armies of the South-Western Front telegraphed to the Volyn provincial zemstvo board that all refugees in the province should be involved in the upcoming field work, provided they were not deprived of their rations in the meantime. In the case of refugees who refused to work, the council was invited to deny them their state rations.⁴¹

Refugees who settled in Ukrainian towns and villages were given free medical care in outpatient clinics, inpatient hospitals, epidemic barracks, and hospitals. The vast majority of the evacuees needed emergency medical care because their health was undermined by “the shocks experienced, the change in lifestyle and climatic conditions, the lack of timely nutrition, etc.”⁴²

39 Zhvanko and Nestulya, *Ukrainian Assistance to Refugees during the First World War*, 115.

40 SAKhO, f. 18, op. 21, d. 63, 108.

41 “Involvement of refugees in field work,” *Volynskaja zhizn*, March 13, 1916.

42 State Archives of Poltava Oblast, f. 992, op. 1, d. 3, 2.

There were outbreaks of especially dangerous epidemics—typhus, cholera, smallpox—among them. In general, the level of efficiency of the medical care provided to refugees did not exceed the general level of health care in the Russian Empire. The main responsibility for the service of the evacuated people lay with the zemstvo and town councils, and that is why all the problems of the region had a negative impact on them as well. The ethnic committees were also engaged in organization of the medical care for the refugees. One example is the Lithuanian committee in Odessa, the activity of which was described in the newspaper *Yugobiezheniec* on 1 November 1915:

Medical help is rendered by the doctors, students and cadets of the senior course. One group is in charge of the asylum, another takes in the sick on the committee's premises who do not live in the asylum; the seriously ill are treated at home. Medicines are given to the sick free of charge.⁴³

In 1918, due to the difficult epidemiological situation in Ukraine, vaccinations against smallpox, cholera, and typhoid were organized for refugees. For example, in Poltava province, inoculations were given in the premises of the zemstvo administration and by a mobile zemstvo epidemic unit in Lubensky district. In July 1918, over 2,000 refugees were inoculated on a mass scale.⁴⁴

A problematic issue was providing the evacuees with housing. Since the events of the conflict were unfolding in such a way that it had the prospect of turning into a long war, it was necessary to find options capable of providing for a stay of several years in a foreign land. It should be noted that the diverse mass of refugees—families with many children, orphans or children lost on the road, the elderly, the disabled, and the sick—required different approaches to solving the housing problem. Local committees prioritized “intelligent and semi-intelligent refugees”, i.e. people with an education and “workers in intellectual professions”, as well as girls and single young women who were potential victims of sexual violence, for whom special shelters were opened.

The authorities of the Russian Empire took the path of least resistance in this matter, settling the bulk of the refugees sent to the countryside with the local population. Such a move was a ticking time bomb, since over time social conflict arose. The local population, which had recently welcomed the refugees with hospitality and sympathy, in some cases simply threw them out into the street. The reactions of local inhabitants were understandable, since they had the considerable burden of providing their own homes for the new arrivals.

43 Zhvanko, *Bizhenstvo Pershoï svitovoi vjini*, 175.

44 Zhvanko, *Bizhenstvo Pershoï svitovoi vjini*, 372.

One could also speak of an interference in one's own world, with strangers living in one's home for several years. On the other hand, refugees did not always feel comfortable either, certainly there were domestic quarrels and grievances, and therefore getting a roof over their heads did not even represent an illusory peace of mind in the war.⁴⁵

8 Conclusion

The Great War of 1914–18 was a tremendous ordeal for human civilization and led to fundamental changes in geopolitical and ethno-social dimensions. It brought not only catastrophic destruction, with huge numbers of victims on the battlefields, but also transformed the system of moral guidelines, degrading the very value of human life. Society's system of social roles was changed. New groups—refugees, deportees, prisoners of war—entered the scene, united in modern Western historiography by the single notion of displaced persons. Their emergence, as well as the fact of the movement itself, was a direct consequence of the military conflict.

A special place among these groups is occupied by refugees—civilians who, by the will of the military or out of fear for their lives, left their homes and settled in a foreign land for many years. This phenomenon acquired a special scale, unprecedented in comparison with previous wars, in the Russian-Austro-German theatre of military operations. The “eastern vector” of refugees was extremely powerful in terms of both voluntary evacuation and deportation actions by the Russian command. Ukrainian towns and villages received huge numbers of refugees, most of whom were women and children. Refugee women bore the brunt of the burden of the evacuation of families and the organization of life in the new places. Fear, uncertainty about the future, and the feeling of separation from their homeland were the daily companions for refugee women.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Central State Historical Archive of Ukraine in Kyiv. F. 715. Op. 1. D. 1748.
“Chronicle.” *Volynskaja zhizn'*, January 20, 1916.

45 Zhvanko, *Bizhenstvo Pershoi svitovoi vijni*, 196–97, 205.

- Emtsev, Timofey. "Nedostatky." *Novosti Chersonskogo zemstvo* 41, October 1915.
- "In Volyn." *Nezhynets*, August 29, 1915.
- "Involvement of refugees in field work." *Volynskaja zhizn'*, March 13, 1916.
- "Pis'ma iz derevny. Bezhehntsy." *Novosti Chersonskogo zemstvo* 45, 1915.
- "Pomosch slavianam-bezhentsam." *Yekaterinoslavskaya Zemskaya Gazeta*, July 14, 1915.
- "Refugees and the organization of assistance to them in connection with the work of the Special Meeting." *Izvestiya Vserossiiskogo Soyuza Gorodov*, 1916, 1927–28.
- "Sredy ulitchnykh detej" [Among street children]. *Poltavskij den'*, August 2, 1916.
- State Archive of Kharkiv Oblast. F. 18. Op. 21. D. 3, d. 6, d. 10, d. 63.
- State Archives in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. F. 63. Op. 1. D. 1163.
- State Archives of Poltava Oblast. F. 992. Op. 1. D. 3.
- State Archives of Poltava Oblast. F. 83. Op. 1. D. 143.
- "The destitute." *Novosti Chersonskogo zemstvo* 41, 1915.
- "The religious procession." *Odesskiy Listok*, October 15, 1915.
- Tshehelnjuk, V. "Bezhehntsy" [Refugees]. *Kyiv Zemskaya Gazeta*, October 1915.

Secondary Literature

- Gatrell, Peter, and Liubov Zhvanko, eds. *Europe on the Move: The Great War and Its Refugees*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.
- Gatrell, Peter. *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Gurko, Vasily. *Vojna i revoliutsia v Rossii. Vospominania komandujushchego Zapadnym frontom* [War and Revolution in Russia. Memoirs of the Commander of the Western Front. 1914–1917]. Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2007.
- Korzeniowski, Mariusz, Marek Mańdzik, and Dariusz Tarasiuk. *Tułaczy los. Uchodźcy polscy w imperium rosyjskim w latach pierwszej wojny światowej* [Wandering Fate: Polish refugees in the Russian Empire in the years of the First World War]. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2007.
- Luba, Vital, and Jevgeny Miranovic, eds. *Refugees of 1915*. Belastok: SPHU "Podlaska," Zakład Poligraficzny, 2000.
- Ludendorff, Erich. *Moi vospominania o vojne. 1914–1918* [My Memories of the War. 1914–1918]. Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2007.
- Ruszała, Kamil. *Galicyjski eksodus: uchodźcy podczas I wojny światowej w monarchii Habsburgów* [Galician exodus: Refugees during World War I in the Habsburg monarchy]. Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych "Universitas," 2020.
- Turchenko, Halyna. "Social and Economic Processes in the Southern Ukrainian Region." In *The Great War of 1914–1918 and Ukraine*, 408–32. In 2 books. Book 1: Historical essays (Kyiv: Clio, 2014).

- Zhvanko, Liubov, and Oleksiy Nestulya. "Ukrainian Assistance to Refugees during the First World War." In *Europe on the Move: The Great War and Its Refugees*, edited by Peter Gatrell and Liubov Zhvanko, 108–28. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017.
- Zhvanko, Liubov. "Provintsia i chelovek vo vremja Velikoj vojny. Nekotorye akzenty problem" [Province and Man in the Time of the Great War: Some Accents of the Problem (1914–1918)]. In *1915: Vojna, Provintsia, Chelovek: ukrainsko-polskie akzenty problem* [1915: War, Province, Man: Ukrainian-Polish Accents: Materials of the International Scientific Symposium], edited by Liubov Zhvanko, 68–84. Kharkiv: Maidan, 2016.
- Zhvanko, Liubov. "Sud'ba zhenschiny-bezhenki. Po dokumentam Pervoj mirovoj vojny" [The Fate of a Refugee Woman. Based on the documents of the First World War]. *Historians* (2017). <https://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/doslidzhennya/1029-liubov-zhvanko-sudba-zhenschyny-bezhenky-po-dokumentam-pervoy-mirovoy-voyny>.
- Zhvanko, Liubov. "The First World War, Poles, and Forced Displacement: Kharkiv's Sylwetki." *Europa Orientalis. Studies on Dziejów Europy Wschodniej i Państw Bałtyckich* 11 (2020): 115–42.
- Zhvanko, Liubov. "Ukraine." In *1914–1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, edited by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson. Translated by Gary Goldberg. Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10245>.
- Zhvanko, Liubov. *Bizhenci Pershoï svitovoï vijni: ukraïns'kij vimir (1914–1918 rr.)* [Refugees of the First World War: Ukrainian Dimension (1914–1918)]. Kharkiv: Apostrophe, 2012.
- Zhvanko, Liubov. *Bizhenstvo Pershoï svitovoï vijni v Ukraïni: dokumenti i materiali (1914–1918 rr.)* [Refugees of the First World War in Ukraine: Documents and Materials (1914–1918)]. Kharkiv: KHNAMG, 2010.
- Zhvanko, Liubov. *Social'ni vimiri Ukraïns'koï Derzhavi (kviten'–gruden' 1918 r.)* [Social Dimensions of the Ukrainian State (April–December 1918)]. Kharkiv: Prapor, 2007.