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The Examination Essays for the Rank of Volunteer, II Category, as a Source on History of the First World War

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Abstract. The article deals with examinations for the rank of volunteer, II category, written in Novonikolaevsk during the First World War. As part of the exams, applicants wrote essays describing their personal experience on a given topic. Some topics had a direct connection to the war, such as “The first day in the barracks”, “The first days of the war with Germany”, etc. Due to being dedicated to different topics, they touch upon a wide range of aspects of the War, such as the perception of the war and the enemies of Russia by the population, barracks life. The essays have some distinct qualities as a historical source, as, not unlike letters or memoirs, they describe personal experience in a free style. Nevertheless, they remain written for assessment by examiners and on a given topic, limiting the applicants in their sincerity, making the essays similar to a degree, while at the same time making a comparison of views of different people on the same topic possible. The texts of the essays do not contain any information that might be impossible to obtain from other sources. However, they still constitute a significant addition to other, more widespread and widely used sources on the history of the First World War. The results is grounded on the principles of historicism and objectivity, and its results present value for the future historical study on the Russian army, allowing to diversify historical sources commonly used for that purpose.

Keywords: World War I, volunteer, personal account, test, essay, perception of war.

Research area: history.

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Экзаменационные сочинения на звание вольноопределяющегося II разряда как источник по истории Первой мировой войны

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Аннотация. В статье на материалах Государственного архива Новосибирской области исследуются сочинения по русскому языку – часть экзамена на звание вольноопределяющегося II разряда, сдававшегося в Новониколаевске в годы Первой мировой войны. В этих сочинениях соискатели звания описывали свой личный опыт согласно заданной теме. Сочинения потенциальных вольноопределяющихся не входят в число наиболее рассматриваемых в историографии источников и в целом малоизучены, хотя обладают определенным своеобразием. Цель настоящей статьи – выявить и классифицировать информацию, содержащуюся в сочинениях, охарактеризовать их как источник, выявить их достоинства и недостатки. Сочинения, с одной стороны, описывают личный опыт авторов и написаны в свободном стиле, с другой – писались на проверку на заданную тему, что делает их в известной степени унифицированными и позволяет сопоставлять между собой опыт разных лиц, на первый взгляд, в одинаковой ситуации. Для статьи нами отобраны сочинения, по тематике имеющие непосредственное отношение к войне: «Первый день в казарме», «Первые дни войны с Германией» и др. Автор приходит к выводу, что, хотя в сочинениях отсутствует какая-либо особая информация, недоступная из других исторических источников, они являются весомым дополнением при изучении разнообразных аспектов проблематики Первой мировой войны: восприятия населением войны и противников России в ней, казарменного быта, работы органов власти по проведению мобилизации и так далее. Заслуживает внимания и тот факт, что большинство соискателей звания к моменту написания сочинения уже состояли на военной службе. Это вызывает дополнительный интерес, так как в историографии в контексте вольноопределяющихся традиционно чаще упоминаются те из них, кто приобрел этот статус еще при поступлении на службу.

Ключевые слова: Первая мировая война, вольноопределяющийся, источник личного происхождения, экзамен, сочинение, восприятие войны, Новониколаевск.

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Introduction. In the last decade, interest in the history of the First World War, which received relatively little attention in Soviet period, has increased. The main historical sources for the period were office documentation, memoirs

written much later, and periodicals, the authors of which had limited access to information about the war due to secrecy. However, these sources were divided into varieties that were less studied. In particular, during this period, at civilian

educational institutions, military personnel undertook examinations for the title of volunteer. Essays on given topics, some of them directly related to the ongoing war, were an integral part of these examinations. These writings had a certain specificity that distinguishes them from other sources.

The study of essays written as part of the examination for the title of volunteer has not yet been popular enough in historiography. In general terms, this topic was touched upon by D.B. Tereshkina, who considered them within the Novgorod gubernia from the perspective of the authors' perception of the everyday life surrounding them (Tereshkina, 2018, 2019), and L.V. Kotovich, whose view of the essays written in Novonikolaevsk included considering them as a source on military history, but was somewhat incomplete (Kotovich, 2014). Thus, despite having characterized in general terms the perception by the population of their duty and the beginning of the war, L.V. Kotovich did not touch upon the arrival of recruits and militia warriors to service, the daily routine in the barracks, or the knowledge of the population about the causes of the war. The study of the volunteers themselves as a military category was one-sided in historiography as well. In most publications they are considered recruits who entered the military service in a certain status, and practically nowhere is it said about them as military personnel who wanted to improve the conditions of their service by becoming a volunteer, or a "volnoper", as the volunteers were informally called in the army (Kurdiuk, 2008; Volkov, 1993).

The topic of our study is relevant not only to the part of historiography that directly studied the sources of interest to us, but to that which uncovered the main plots described in these works as well. Therefore, E.S. Seniavskaia, a well-known military psychologist, touched upon the main aspects of the mentality of the soldiers of the First World War in her monograph: the abstractness of propaganda and the lack of understanding of the reasons for the start of the war. The author noted that in nobles, merchants and city dwellers patriotic feelings, especially at the beginning of the war, were extremely strong. She at the same time noted

such wartime elements as the development of the image of the enemy in the minds of the population, which included propaganda about the atrocities and depersonalization; among other sources, evidence of such propaganda is contained in the writings we are considering (Seniavskaia, 1999). The importance of studying the psychology of soldiers was noted in the articles of other authors, highlighting such points as the patriotism of the population characteristic of the start of the war, the difficulty of leaving family behind, lack of awareness about the causes of the war, and unsuccessful propaganda work (Gorbacheva, 2013; Kholodov, 2014; Khubulova & Sosranova, 2015).

The Volunteers

First, let us clarify the status of volunteers for the reader. They voluntarily entered the military service before the result of the draw. Volunteers were divided into three categories. The 1st category included those who had passed the test from the course of educational institutions of the 1st category (i.e. higher education). Volunteers of the 2nd category passed the tests from the course of educational institutions of the 2nd category. Those who passed the tests according to a special program fell into the 3rd category. Initially, according to the law of 1874, volunteers of the 1st category spent three months in active service, the 2nd category spent six months, while the 3rd spent two years; changes in the Charter on military service of 1912 equalized them in this respect, obliging all volunteers to serve two years of active service. The only exceptions were those who successfully passed the examination for an officer rank, but even for them service time was only reduced to one and a half years.

Volunteers had certain privileges – for example, they could hold only combat positions, choose a military unit for service themselves, could not be assigned to household work, and, if possible, they received a separate room in the barracks. Commanders of units were responsible for their education and lifestyle. In addition, volunteers who were in the first and second categories could receive certain positions in excess of vacancies in the selected unit and opt to serve in the guards, artillery and engineering

troops (with the consent of the commanders). In the guards and cavalry, volunteers supported themselves, in other branches of the military they were on state support.

Volunteers received career privileges as well: after passing a special test, a volunteer could be promoted to non-commissioned officer after two months of service (1st category), 4 months (2nd category), 1 year (3rd category), and, again, over vacancies. Volunteers could enter a junker school having not served and in any rank, but after passing a test in combat education in accordance with a special program. For promotion to an officer rank, before the changes of 1912 it was necessary to serve: three months in the 1st category, or six months in the 2nd, or three years in the 3rd. In addition, it was necessary to conduct a full course of field training. The edition of the Charter of 1912 gave volunteers two opportunities to become an officer: to pass an examination for the rank of ensign at the end of the first year of service or, in the second year of service, an examination for the rank of second lieutenant.

Thus, the status of a volunteer provided wide opportunities for career growth, and even those who failed to take advantage of them significantly improved their conditions of service. Therefore, it is not surprising that military personnel tried to move into this category; some, as will be seen below, tried to do this repeatedly.

The funds of the State Archive of the Novosibirsk Oblast contain a number of documents related to examinations for the title of a volunteer II category, including essays. First, the willing person wrote a petition addressed to the director of the educational institution (in our case, the director of the Novonikolaevsk *Non-classical Secondary School*), asking to be allowed to take the examination. As a rule, said petition included a photograph and, for military personnel, a permission from the immediate army superior. After the examination, there remained a final writing and a draft on the Russian language test in the form of essays, as well as an examination paper on arithmetic. We do not consider the arithmetic works of applicants in the current article, but they may be of interest for future research. If successful, the

applicant received a certificate from the school stating that he has the right to enter the service as a volunteer.

In our study, we analyzed 47 essays written by 43 authors, both military personnel (28 people) and civilians (15 people), on various topics related to the First World War. Of the military personnel, three were from the training unit of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment, three have been evacuated from the front for treatment, and two held the rank of sub-ensign (sub-ensigns were not full-fledged officers, despite the consonance of this rank with the officer rank of ensign, and were closer in status to non-commissioned officers). Two more were Cossacks. As for the civilians, there were eight peasants, four city-dwellers and two nobles among them, with the status of one more of them remaining undetermined. One of them, an Ufa local K.M. Lukanin, wrote the essay "Recapturing our trenches", in which he describes a battle as if he took part in it; however, there is no evidence of his military service in the examination documentation. K.M. Lukanin might have obtained the information necessary for the essay from the newspapers. We will consider the essays in order according to their topic; this will allow us to compare them more clearly and provide a more unified understanding of each of the topics.

"The First Day in the Barracks"

The most common plot in these essays, mentioned by almost every writer, is undoubtedly their longing for home. For example, A. Alekhin "remembered a home holiday that I would spend in a circle of my relatives and comrades"¹; a *gefreiter* of the training unit of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment A. Andreichuk "thought about his mother, whom [he] left at home alone to fend for herself"². I. Rastorguev, a militia warrior, 2nd category, of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment, "remembered both the former life and the family left far away in the homeland, and heavy boring thoughts fell on the heart"³. A rifleman of the same regiment, O. Filippovich, "did not get to

¹ SANO. F. D-157. Оп. 1. OP. 1. D. 61. L. 18.

² SANO. F. D-157. Оп. 1. OP. 1. D. 61. L. 32.

³ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 65. L. 4ob.

sleep, because different thoughts came to mind: about parents, comrades”⁴.

In contrast, some of the soldiers tried to write essays full of confidence in victory over the enemy, even though it took place in the spring – autumn of 1916, after the Great Retreat had happened. For example, P. Boukolovsky, a nobleman of the Tomsk province and a non-commissioned officer of the 33rd Yellets Infantry Regiment, drafted early in 1917, was wounded and sent to the rear to recover. He noted that “our brothers are bravely fighting the enemy, not sparing their own lives... In an instant, I changed, vigor and courage appeared”⁵. P. Nekrasov, a non-commissioned officer and a peasant of the Tomsk province, drafted in 1917, was dismissed from an infirmary to a vacation. He described the work of his company commander as follows: “[he] announced that we were now soldiers and must forget civil matters for the time being, devoting ourselves to the study of military affairs and discipline... He spoke so well that we, in a moment of spiritual patriotic impulse, shouted “Hurray!””⁶.

However, the soldiers expressed their fighting spirit in terms that are more mundane as well. The same P. Boukolovsky wrote, “got used to everything. After some time, [we] were already fit and in a position where it is the duty of every soldier to be”⁷. Soldiers generally wrote about their enthusiasm at the beginning of the service with apparent sincerity: I. Korolev, a junior non-commissioned officer of the training unit of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment, was told by a friend, even before the service, that “life in service is very good”⁸, and I. Rastorguev described a similar conversation in the army: ““Don’t be sad, countryman!” One of my comrades brought me out of my thoughts. “Here we’ll make war with the Germans and go home again!””⁹.

The transportation of soldiers to the barracks and their accommodation upon arrival, another significant topic, was reflected in the writings as well. A junior non-commissioned

officer of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment V. Mozharov briefly covers the process of selecting military personnel: “We were led into a large room, where a commission of doctors examined and sent us to the next room – the office... We had been standing in front of the office for a long time. Two soldiers came and, having divided our party into several unequal parts, led us to company dispositions”¹⁰. S. Doronin, a junior non-commissioned officer of the training unit of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment, on the way to his destination “had to spend the night in a large brick barn, which used to be a stable. The barn was cold, there was no bed, and I laid down right on the straw”¹¹. I. Korolev and his comrades “were driven into a barrack that was not inhabited... [We] took a place near a window, where there was a lot of straw, but the straw was wet”¹². However, the barracks to which the soldiers eventually arrived seemed to meet their requirements. A. Andreychuk describes his barracks as “big” and “made of stone”; Y. Kupavtsev’s barracks were “a vast room lined with beds in a strict order”¹³. To I. Rastorguev it seemed that “you can get comfortable in it. The first thing I noticed was the new pine bunks, which smelled so pleasantly of resin”¹⁴.

The authors of the essays quite rarely mention offenses on the part of old-timers, characteristic of the Russian army of a later period. This in itself is understandable, as it is likely that the examinees avoided topics that could make a bad impression on the examiners. Nevertheless, as a militia warrior 2nd category of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment M. Chazov recalled, “the lower ranks who were in the barracks met us very unfriendly, shouted, laughed at us, which I considered an insult and a sad situation for myself”¹⁵. The above mentioned A. Alekhin had an unpleasant experience on his first day too: “I was a stranger, everyone walked around me, and some approached me

⁴ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 65. L. 39.

⁵ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 61. L. 55

⁶ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 64. L. 29ob.

⁷ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 61. L. 55ob.

⁸ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 63. L. 17ob.

⁹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 65. L. 4ob.

¹⁰ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 64. L. 23.

¹¹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 62. L. 24.

¹² SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 63. L. 17.

¹³ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 63. L. 28.

¹⁴ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 65. L. 4.

¹⁵ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 65. L. 44. “Lower ranks” is an Imperial Russian term for “enlisted personnel”.

with different ridicule...¹⁶. However, the mentions of offenses are limited to insults, without any descriptions of beatings.

“The first days of the war with Germany”

Among the works written on this topic, each one affects a specific city or village; these works are patriotic – because of both the authors and those they describe. Thus, P. Abashev, a gefreiter of the 8th company of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Battalion, notes the high level of patriotism among the youth of Tomsk: “Many of the youth expressed their desire to become volunteers”¹⁷. K. Borisov, a peasant of the Nizhny Novgorod province writing about Novonikolaevsk, proclaimed the unity of the Russian people: “All of Russia, as one person, rose up, and military trains rolled to the land that the enemies had already stained with the blood of civilians”¹⁸. F. Dolgopolov, a peasant of the Tambov province, noted the perception of the war by the women of Novonikolaevsk: “although the women cried at first, they then began to pray to God that He help our miraculous heroes to defeat the enemy”¹⁹. S. Umanets, a gefreiter of the 10th company of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Battalion, wrote about increased hostility towards the Germans in the village of Belovskoye, Ishim uyezd: “everyone was overwhelmed with the desire to face the insidious enemy chest to chest and repay him for all the insults and oppressions that the cunning Germans have been bringing to us Russians for many years”²⁰. The conclusions of V. Yashkov, a militia warrior 1st Category of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Battalion evacuated from the front, are interesting as well. Having been on the front, he became convinced of the complexity of the task Russia was facing: “we still need to fight the enemy for a long time and in order to defeat him, we need everyone, both those

drafted to the army ranks and those remaining in cities and villages, to act together, and only then can we achieve a complete victory”²¹. Y. Kupavtsev, writing about Novonikolaevsk in his essay, sums up: “Russia does not remember such great patriotism. Starting from the luxurious chambers of a nobleman, and ending with the wretched hut of a fisherman”²².

One of the forms of expression of the patriotic rise were demonstrations and prayers. They were mentioned, for example, by P. Abashev: “near the chapel of the Iverskaya Icon of the Mother of God, I saw a mass of people with uncovered heads already serving a prayer service”²³. The senior clerk of the 9th company of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Battalion K. Alsin notes that in the city of Tatarsk “unusually there was a lot of life. The topic of conversation, as in the villages, was the war”²⁴. V. Kartashov, a tradesman of the city of Borisoglebsk, clarifies that “all along their journey, the demonstrators sang the national anthem and wished a long life to the Sovereign Emperor and the Allied Powers”²⁵.

Charity has become one of the most active ways to contribute to the common cause. K. Borisov notes that such activities started at the beginning of the war: “in July 1914, societies formed in the city, which enthusiastically set about sending help to families of lower ranks”²⁶. Nobleman of the Kovno province S. G. Tolochko mentioned in his essay, “In the summer they [students] went to work in the field, which brought great benefits to the fatherland”²⁷. The rifleman of the 5th company of the 17th Siberian rifle depot battalion T. Ivanov described that in August 1914, “many boys and girls with mugs and flowers walked along the streets of Barnaul, carrying signatures in large letters, urging people to donate to the wounded”²⁸.

In general, expectations from the war were optimistic. K. Alsin noted that “every-

¹⁶ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 61. L. 18.

¹⁷ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 20ob. “Volunteers” mentioned here are named “Okhotniki” in the original text, which is a different category than the volunteers of the main topic, who are named “volnoopredelyayuschiesya” in the original texts. These categories had a number of differences, the main one being that the “okhotniki” were not necessarily educated.

¹⁸ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 59.

¹⁹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 98.

²⁰ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 68. L. 56.

²¹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 68. L. 84ob.

²² SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 55.

²³ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 20ob.

²⁴ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 35ob.

²⁵ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 10ob.

²⁶ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 59.

²⁷ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 68. L. 44ob.

²⁸ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 3.

one believed in the power of Russian arms and a quick victory over the enemy”²⁹; according to F. Dolgoplov, “warriors happily went to defend their homeland and said: “we will teach the German a lesson”... Maybe soon there will be no kingdom of this ferocious and brutal German people”³⁰. Y. Kupavtsev wrote, “Everyone firmly believes in the victory and crushing of the despicable Teutons”³¹, and V. Yashkov mentioned, “Experienced people were quite confident in an imminent victory in their assumptions”³².

The rather contradictory level of knowledge of the population regarding the war did not contribute to the accuracy of the forecasts. K. Alsin describes his meeting with a messenger who delivered the announcement of mobilization in this way: “The rider was already shouting from a distance: “mobilization!” I took an interest and asked what kind of mobilization it was. He showed me a red package, which actually said, “urgent for mobilization”. I asked, “whom will we fight?” Both the driver and the rider could not reliably answer this question for me”³³. Y. Kupavtsev paints a dramatic picture of the beginning of the war: “On July 18, 1914, Germany treacherously, without declaring war, attacked our borders. [Germany] crossed the border and only then declared war on us. She was joined by her ally, Austria-Hungary, attacking our eastern border”³⁴. A junior non-commissioned officer of the 13th company of the 21st Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment I. Larkin turned out to be more knowledgeable: “In June, 1914, the war with Germany began; because of our Orthodox Christians of Serbia. Russia rallied for Serbia against Austria, and Germany rose against Russia and concluded an alliance with the Turks and Bulgaria. But as Russia had not been defeated by anyone before, then our allies rose up for us: France, England, Japan, Belgium and Montenegro”³⁵. S. Tolochko, on the contrary, argued that Russia had allies because of her military weakness, and

S. Umanets argued that “such an unexpected declaration of war was only unexpected for us, as the Germans had been preparing for this for a long time”³⁶.

Some of the examinees described the course of the mobilization, which they witnessed from different sides of the events. T. Ivanov on “July 16, 1916... Was the duty clerk for management. In the first hour of the night, a hasty telegram was received, which I sent to the military chief. At one o'clock in the morning the military chief came and ordered to hastily report to the police department. On July 18, the first groups of reserve lower ranks arrived”³⁷. A sub-ensign of the 4th company of the 21st Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment M. Matskov noted the role of military chiefs as well: “on the appointed day of mobilization, the reserve had to appear at the assembly points of uyezd military chiefs; presenting their ticket, they made up teams that were sent by railways on trains and steamboats to the nearest military units”³⁸. S. Tolochko mentions a riot of the mobilized in the city of Novonikolaevsk: “soldiers walked around the city in crowds and raised a riot. So they broke four wineries in the city of Novonikolaevsk. But this joke didn't go well for them. A small detachment of soldiers was put up against them, who were ordered to shoot. When they had lost several of their comrades, they stopped these jokes of theirs”³⁹.

Another topic affected in the writings are the first news from the war, which were mostly favorable. F. Dolgoplov recalled that “when everyone had found out that our troops, having defeated the Germans and captured many prisoners and weapons, were moving forward, everyone was very happy with our victory”⁴⁰, V. Kartashov mentioned “the news of the defeat of the Austro-German troops near Lublin and Tomashev”⁴¹. Y. Kupavtsev, writing about the first months of the war, notes: “having defeated the Germans near the Vistula River, our valiant army crossed the border of Prussia. They then took the city of Lyk and began to move fur-

²⁹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 36.

³⁰ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 98–98ob.

³¹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 56.

³² SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 68. L. 84.

³³ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 35–35ob.

³⁴ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 55.

³⁵ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 63.

³⁶ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 68. L. 56.

³⁷ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 3.

³⁸ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 77.

³⁹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 68. L. 44–44ob.

⁴⁰ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 98.

⁴¹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 10.

ther, which saved the French capital, Paris”⁴². A “son of a peasant” of the Ryazan province, A. Poskryakov, claimed that the news of early victories brought great joy to his village: “a Russian soldier went to the army with good feelings, with the hope of victory over the enemy”⁴³. S. Umanets showed awareness of the heroes of the war: “There were many miraculous heroes who performed feats, about whom there was no rumor before the present war, such as: Kozma Kryuchkov, Panasyuk, Makukha and many other heroes”⁴⁴. K. Borisov touched upon the topic of war crimes and their influence on the creation of the image of the enemy among the population: “the atrocities of the impudent Teutons and Swabians began to be attributed by the illiterate people to some kind of unbelief of the Germans in the true God”⁴⁵.

“Seeing the Recruits off”

Another topic on which many essays were written was “Seeing the Recruits off”. In addition to such obvious aspects of this phenomenon as a sad parting with relatives, there are several less trivial stories here. For example, the consultations that recruits received from those who previously served are repeatedly mentioned. A. Alekhin wrote the following about this: “upon being accepted for military service, recruits go home for a short time... In their free time they go to old soldiers to learn how young soldiers are treated and to practice military maneuvers”⁴⁶. A. Bocharov wrote the same: “they make inquiries with the reservists, i.e. those who already served in the military, [what] to do”⁴⁷.

An integral part of seeing off the recruits were festivities and prayers. A. Alekhin wrote that at the end of the prayer service, “the recruits gathered in a group and left the church, singing a song, and their wives and mothers echoed them with cries and shouts”⁴⁸. A senior non-commissioned officer of the 1st company of the 22nd Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment,

M. Bulanov, “very often came across a half-drunk crowd of villagers”⁴⁹, and a peasant of the Vyatka province S. Klekovkin noted that “upon the announcement of the draft to young people, in the villages, the locals begin playing harmonica with songs. This cheerful revelry makes everyone understand that the call is coming”⁵⁰.

The course of sending recruits to their units is described, taking into account all the essays, more or less completely. K. Kochengin pointed out that “the village elder went around all the recruits and ordered them to get ready for the assembly”⁵¹, while A. Bocharov mentioned the volost administrations: “at the appointed date they are all going to the volost or village administrations, where, after assessment, they are sent to places where there is military presence”⁵². One of those applicants about whom there was no information on military service, N. Zabrodin, noted the great importance of a military chief: “Everyone goes to the military chief in the morning to be drafted... They examined us, some were told that they were released due to illness, others had an exemption, and all the rest were fit for service, and they said that tomorrow we would be sent to the designated city”⁵³. After that, according to I. Larkin, “the military chief sends them in groups to some regiment”⁵⁴.

The “Seeing the Recruits off” topic, as expected, has some common motifs with “First Day in the Barracks”, in particular, the recruits’ perception of arriving at the service. According to essays on this topic, recruits went into the army with a doomed sense of duty. A. Bocharov recalled that “the duty of every citizen, with the onset of a certain age, is to go into military service to guard and protect: the Tsar, the Faith and the Fatherland, both from domestic and foreign enemies”⁵⁵. G. Vlasov, a peasant in the Samara province, “sincerely envied his brother [who was entering service], calling him lucky... I told my mother that there

⁴² SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 55ob-56.

⁴³ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 124.

⁴⁴ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 68. L. 56.

⁴⁵ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 60.

⁴⁶ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 27.

⁴⁷ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 66.

⁴⁸ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 27ob.

⁴⁹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 69.

⁵⁰ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 21.

⁵¹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 41.

⁵² SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 66.

⁵³ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 115.

⁵⁴ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 61–61ob.

⁵⁵ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 66–66ob.

was nothing to cry for: after all, the brother was going to protect us from the Germans”⁵⁶. L. Karpov recalled that the recruits “know that they are going to a good cause, to defend the Faith, the Tsar and the Fatherland”⁵⁷. A senior non-commissioned officer of the 23rd Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment S. Semenov argued, “after all, we are neither the first nor the last”⁵⁸.

Other topics

In addition to the topics we have indicated, some servicemen wrote essays on the routine of weekdays and holidays in the barracks. In view of the small number and uniformity of these works, we confine ourselves to Tables 1 and 2 as an example.

Table 1. Weekdays in the barracks according to sub-ensign of the 7th company of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment I. Zhavoronkov*:

Time	Event
5.30	Getting up
–	Washing
–	Prayer
–	Breakfast, tea, half an hour
до 11.30	Training
12.00	Prayer, dinner
–	Two-hour rest
13.30	Getting up, tea
15.00	Training in fields on near the barracks
17.30	End of training
19.00	Supper
22.00	The end of the artisans' work
23.00	Going to bed

* The table is based on SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 79. L. 50a-50aob.

Finally, an Ufa tradesman K. Lukanin wrote a single essay with the title “Recapture of our trenches”. He briefly described the different stages of a battle: “soon we began to approach the position... the enemy began to bombard us

⁵⁶ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 66. L. 79–79ob.

⁵⁷ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 67. L. 15.

⁵⁸ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 68. L. 9.

with artillery fire. The battalion quickly scattered into a chain and already in a chain, it had to make its way into the trenches of the front line... Having reached the trenches, our battalion remained lying in them until evening, waiting for the command to advance... With the onset of evening, we were ordered to move forward... The closer we approached, the more and more frequent the shooting became... Fifty paces from the enemy trenches, we shouted hurray! And almost everyone forgot themselves during the bayonet fight”⁵⁹.

Conclusion

Thus, as we could see, essays for the title of a volunteer have their own originality. In

Table 2. Holidays in the barracks according to sub-ensign of the 7th company of the 17th Siberian Rifle Depot Regiment I. Zhavoronkov*:

Time	Event
5.30	Getting up
–	Washing
–	Prayer
–	Breakfast, tea, half an hour
–	Examining and repairing equipment
8.30	A prayer, rest in the barracks or going off-duty
12.00	Dinner
–	Two-hour rest
14.00	Rest in the barracks, while artisans work
19.00	Supper and going to bed
22.00	Artisans end work and go to bed

* The table is based on SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 79. L. 50a-50aob.

particular, they combine the characteristics of different varieties of sources: like letters, essays are documents of personal origin, but they correspond to a single theme and are written for examination. Thus, they contain the most important details on not the entire military service, but on what can be presented on the specified topic. In addition, the fact that the essays were written on a given topic makes it possible

⁵⁹ SANO. F. D-157. OP. 1. D. 80. L. 11.

to compare them with each other. Some military personnel failed the examination and later rewrote the essay, on a different topic, which sometimes turned out to be military; thus, such essays provide an opportunity to study the perception of different stages of a military path by the same author.

As is obvious from the topics of the essays cited, they are a source on the history of both the rear and the front, and contain such diverse information as: the psychology of the combatant, the propaganda of the belligerents, the course of mobilization, and the daily routine. All this information taken together makes it possible to carefully reconstruct the path of a drafted Russian soldier, starting from the declaration of war (“The first days of the war with Germany”) and departure from home (“Seeing the recruits off”) through “The first day in the barracks” to “Weekdays” and “Holidays” on service, and, finally, at the war itself in “Recapturing your trenches”. Such a variety is available on the materials of just one archive, although the works are by no means specific to

Novonikolaevsk or the whole of Siberia, which opens up extensive possibilities for their study. These sources are the evidence of the military personnel’s transition to the category of volunteers after entering the service, which, though not so rare, was rarely touched upon in historiography.

Nevertheless, essays on the title of a volunteer are only an auxiliary source, and are not self-sufficient, since they do not contain any information absent in other types of sources. For example, the patriotism of the beginning of the war, combined with a lack of understanding of its causes and goals, and the tactics of warfare are known to us from memoirs and army manuals (for example, the Field Service Charter), and information about the psychology of a combatant is known from soldiers’ letters home. Another disadvantage of essays as a source stems from the same fact that they were written on a given topic and for examination, because of which the examinees might have been less sincere than if they wrote letters.

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List of abbreviations

SANO – State archive of Novosibirsk oblast