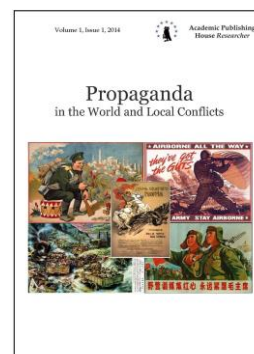


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Literary Propaganda and Litterateurs during World War I

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Abstract

This work examines the activity of litterateurs during World War I. It provides an insight into military propaganda in literature at the time, as well as the patriotic zeal of litterateurs in different countries who went to the front as volunteers.

Relevant materials employed in this paper include newspapers and magazines published in the participating countries during the World War I period.

In putting this work together, the author was guided by the historicism and systemicity principles. The historicism principle enabled the author to make as full use as possible of the materials available and depart from existing viewpoints on the subject. At the same time, the use of the systemicity principle helped the author gain an insight into the activity of litterateurs not only from the Entente nations, but those a party to the Triple Alliance as well.

The author's conclusion is that 1914 was a time of tremendous patriotic fervor in all the countries participating in World War I. Patriotism ran rampant across wide swathes of society, with writers being no exception. Literature in the participating countries was virtually in an instant placed on a war footing, with many magazines for home reading becoming patriotic, military publications. In addition, members of the literary intelligentsia took an active part as volunteers in warfare on the front lines of World War I. A substantial number of writers, as was the case in France, lost their lives during the confrontation period, with the death of the writers being presented to the public subsequently as a sacrificial exploit for the good of the country.

Keywords: literature, propaganda, writers, World War I, period 1914–1918, opposing sides.

1. Introduction

During World War I, in Germany alone litterateurs published nearly 3,000,000 patriotic poems. In addition to this, a significant number of social-political magazines were reorganized into military magazines. In fact, Germany was one of the first countries to be able to mobilize literature in a quick and effective manner for military purposes. This paper examines the contribution of literature and litterateurs to fostering patriotic sentiment in the countries that participated in World War I.

2. Materials and methods

Relevant materials employed in this paper include newspapers and magazines published in the participating countries during the World War I period.

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materials available and depart from existing viewpoints on the subject. At the same time, the use of the systemicity principle helped the author gain an insight into the activity of *littérateurs* not only from the Entente nations, but those a party to the Triple Alliance as well.

3. Discussion

The historiography on literary propaganda is quite abundant. The subject has been explored by researchers from each of the countries that took part in the conflict. However, it has been researched the least in Russia. The key reasons behind this are the Russian Empire's revolutionary exit from the war, followed by the government's ideological ban on this subject being researched. To the extent that Soviet researchers explored it in any way, they viewed the war as imperialist and as the forerunner of a revolution. In this context, the year 1938 saw the publication of Orest Tsekhovits'er's 'Literature and a World War' (Tsekhovits'er, 1938).

Only after the disintegration of the USSR, the issue of literature and *littérateurs* during World War I gradually began to be revisited by Russian researchers. For instance, A.I. Ivanov has researched the political and ethical aspects of Russian literature (Ivanov, 2002). The same researcher has also explored Leo Tolstoy's pacifist ideas in Russian literature from the World War I period (Ivanov, 2004).

On the eve of the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, there came out a whole host of articles on the popular culture of memory (Baranov, 2018), Russian propaganda during the war (Medyakov, 2018), and German military propaganda (Zoeller, 2018).

Scholars have also researched the American periodical press from the World War I period. Specifically, this subject has been explored by A.V. Savel'eva (Savel'eva, 2016). Issues relating to the militarization of the public consciousness have been investigated by G.R. Iskhakova (Iskhakova, 2014).

Some researchers have analyzed materials from the periodical press on certain narrowly specialized subjects. Specifically, a group of researchers led by A.A. Cherkasov has explored the subject of underage individuals running away to the front in the Russian Empire (Cherkasov et al., 2016). L.G. Polyakova has examined caricature, through the example of Ogoniok magazine, as a means of propaganda in wartime (Polyakova, 2016). The same subject has been investigated, through the example of the Don periodical press, by M.V. Bratolyubova and V.P. Trut (Bratolyubova, Trut, 2017).

4. Results

During World War I, the activity of *littérateurs* was multifaceted. On one hand, they did it professionally, and, on the other hand, many *littérateurs* went to the front as volunteers.

Below is an outline of this activity in each of the areas.

Literary activity

Inspiring one with patriotic spirit was a significant part of *littérateurs*' activity, and they did this with great fervor. It is especially during the initial period of the war that all of the participating countries witnessed a spontaneous outpouring of patriotic fervor across society and, of course, the literary community.

It is to be noted that *littérateurs* acted in quite a professional manner at the time. Consequently, on January 27, 1915, the birthday of Emperor Wilhelm II, 12 German writers were awarded in Germany the Order of the Red Eagle, the group including Richard Dehmel and Gerhart Hauptmann (Tsekhovits'er, 1938: 98).

Commendations were awarded to Russian *littérateurs* as well. Specifically, Leonid Andreyev received a formal commendation from the Belgian and Serbian Ministers.

French poet Théodore Botrel resolved to take his poems to the front lines to provide encouragement to soldiers. The military authorities granted him a pass to visit all of the army's combat troops and recite his patriotic poems to them. In addition, the authorities issued a special request to the army units that Botrel be treated well.

Of note is the fact that in terms of organizing literary propaganda the Russian Empire was well on par with France and Germany. *Littérateurs* did their job quite promptly. For instance, Vyacheslav Ivanov wrote a poem about the seizure of Przemyśl by the Russians the same day there came in information about the seizure of the Austrian fortress. There were many *littérateurs* with

no previous experience writing about military life who would become battle writers at the time. With the start of World War I in 1914, even *Niva*, a family magazine, would turn into a military magazine to carry military belles-lettres, outlooks on the war, and speculations about it. A special library, The Library of the Great War, was even established.



Fig. 1. Covers of three Russian magazines from the World War I period.



Fig. 2. Covers of two German and one French magazines from the World War I period.

In Russia, as in the other warring nations, they managed to mobilize the public consciousness. Well-known literary scholar and philosopher Mikhail Gershenzon noted that “Russia must win, and do so faster, which may require that we engage our collective consciousness and be continuously mindful of our joint responsibility as the only way to temporarily constrain, constrict, and bring under control the play of individual energies in an effort to achieve the objective as soon as possible. Not everybody can and not everybody is fit to be of actual help in wartime; yet we must be against loafing and irresponsible behavior; we must want every person to be indissolubly attached to the war in their minds and just bear in mind that it goes on day and night, that it is horrible by nature, and that it is fraught with enormous risk. The creation will naturally provide all that is needed. Those capable of taking action will become prepared to act,

while those incapable of doing so will be inspired with a sentiment that via a thousand miniscule means – microscopic actions, judgements and estimations expressed aloud, or even facial and eye expressions – will imbue society with a common focus on victory and a unity of natural common interests” (Gershenson, 1915: 3).

This kind of mobilization of the public consciousness was also spoken of by Leonid Andreev, who voiced the need to “be anxious, eager, and strong right now, this very minute; make happen what must happen”, i.e. strive for victory through the mobilization of collective strength and will (Andreev, 1915: 78).

Volunteer movement

Filled with patriotic feeling, many *littérateurs* in Russia, Germany, and France joined the regular army as volunteers. For instance, in France one such *littérateur* was Editor of *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine* magazine Charles Péguy. His example was followed by French *littérateur* Paul Adam, who approached the military authorities with the request of enlisting him in the regular army. Another *littérateur*, Pierre Loti, replaced the foreword to his collection of front line impressions and observations with a letter to the military authorities, in which he asked to be shifted from the rear to the front lines.

The spirit of patriotism pervaded *littérateurs* of all ages at the time. For instance, even 70-year-old French *littérateur* Anatole France approached the military authorities in request of enlisting him in the regular army. Eventually, the famed *littérateur*, who had to appear before a medical commission, was declared unfit for active service. The chair of the commission supported the *littérateur*’s patriotic fervor with the following words: “While denying you the sword, your country is counting on you to defend it with your pen, which in your hand is tantamount to a sword” (Tsekhnovitser, 1938: 101-102).

During the first days of the war, Belgian poet Maurice Maeterlinck wrote the King a letter requesting his enlistment in the regular army. The patriotic upsurge in mid-1915 left 95 writers, poets, and critics dead in France, with 87 wounded and 20 captured. By May 1916, the death toll was now nearly 300 writers, the group including a number of major poets, like Léon Gauthier-Ferrières. The war took the lives of Paul Drouot and Charles Péguy (Figure 3). Afterwards, a stamp was released commemorating Charles Péguy (Figure 4).



Fig. 3. Charles Péguy.



Fig. 4. Stamp commemorating Charles Péguy.

During the war, France lost an entire generation of *littérateurs*. Maximilian Voloshin says the following to this effect: “Today’s generation has been quartered and beheaded. One can speak of literature in France only by way of analysis of the lists of the dead and wounded” (Birzhevy vedomosti, 1915: 18 iyunya).

A patriotic upsurge was observed among Russian *littérateurs* as well. For instance, during the first days of the war, among those who went to the front was Nikolay Gumilev (Figure 5), who

expressed the following thought: “Some people are born just for war. Russia does not have fewer of these than any other country. While they may be of no use as “civilians in this Northern state”, they must be indispensable to “its martial destiny” (Gumilev, 1916: 11 *yanvaryaya*). Of note is the fact that Gumilev was awarded two Crosses of St. George for his service during World War I. Another Russian littérateur, Poruchik Aleksandr Kuprin (Figure 6), was even ashamed of being a writer. He wrote the following while serving on the Army Staff: “I still feel uncomfortable about being a writer and a civilian among my senior comrades, but I am doing my best to make up for it”.



Fig. 5. Nikolay Gumilev.



Fig. 6. Aleksandr Kuprin.

Another Russian littérateur whose views are of interest is Valery Bryusov. On January 18, 1915, during a banquet held for members of the Moscow Literary-Artistic Club in conjunction with Bryusov’s return from the front, where he worked as a reporter for the *Russkiye Vedomosti* newspaper, the poet responded to the greeting with the following: “If I were ever forced to choose between poetry and my country, I would go for the demise of the poet and poetry and the triumph of great Russia; the country will triumph soon, and there will then appear a poet who is worthy of such a great moment” (Tsekhnovitser, 1938: 104).

Members of the Russian intelligentsia were convinced that their personal participation in the war would cure Russian littérateurs of the various malaises of then-modern life and inspire them to explore new topics. In late 1914, *Russkaya Mysl* magazine wrote of many of the writers being in the thick of the battle, united in a common heroic cause: “Judging by news of them making it into print and their own reports on the war, they are going through a whole lot over there, things unheard of and unseen before – a true baptism of fire for them, a new beginning. In a sense, they have already become different persons. There is some kind of a shift that has taken place in them... these members of the intelligentsia, who chose the battlefield over the study, have instantly come alive, having found for themselves in that bloody environment the very reviving elixir they had long yearned for” (Koltonovskaya, 1914: 133).

Littérateurs losing their lives on the front lines of World War I exemplified self-sacrifice, causing another outburst of patriotism in society. The names of the fallen were extolled as those of

national heroes, with a halo of sanctity and martyrdom created around them. For instance, Paul Fort wrote a special poem dedicated to young poet seminarian Olivier Hourcade, who was killed at the front: "I am weaving your laurel wreath, and it ought to be a tall one, Olivier! The noblest poetic heart of all pierced by a piece of shrapnel...".

The death of Charles Péguy in the Battle of the Marne sparked a whole wave of patriotic articles in the French periodical press, in which it was described as "a great sacrifice for the country", with greater significance imparted to his oeuvre thereby.

In England, a person who gained a special popularity was young poet Sublieutenant Rupert Brooke, who took part in the Royal Naval Division's Antwerp expedition in 1914. He died in 1915 at Gallipoli. In one year, starting in May 1915 (Brooke died in April), his poems went through 13 editions.

Thus, the writer's sacrificial fervor theme would continue to be employed in the countries that participated in World War I after the deaths of members of the literary intelligentsia as well.

5. Conclusion

The year 1914 was a time of tremendous patriotic fervor in all the countries participating in World War I. Patriotism ran rampant across wide swathes of society, with writers being no exception. Literature in the participating countries was virtually in an instant placed on a war footing, with many magazines for home reading becoming patriotic, military publications. In addition, members of the literary intelligentsia took an active part as volunteers in warfare on the front lines of World War I. A substantial number of writers, as was the case in France, lost their lives during the confrontation period, with the death of the writers being presented to the public subsequently as a sacrificial exploit for the good of the country.

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