

DOCUMENTS ON THE FIRST WORLD WAR (GERMAN FRONT) FROM THE RUSSIAN STATE LIBRARY

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The year 2014 marks the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I, one of the largest wars in human history. Thirty-eight nations participated in the fighting that took place on land, in the air and at sea, and lasted more than four years (from August 1, 1914, to November 11, 1918). Of the more than 74 million people who fought on the battle fields, 10 million were killed and 20 million were wounded and maimed.

World War I was unprecedented in terms of its scale, number of casualties, military weapons used (tanks, armored vehicles, machine guns, etc.), and communications infrastructure, as well as its social and political consequences. It had a tremendous impact on economics, politics, ideology and the system of international relations, and led to the collapse of a number of powerful European nations and the emergence of a new geopolitical situation in the world.

A crucial role in the outbreak of the war was the uneven global economic development situation that had emerged by the turn of the 20th century and its abrupt nature, which led to rivalry among the major world powers, and sharp political and economic conflicts among them – in particular, between Germany (the main organizer of the Triple Alliance military-political bloc, which included Austria-Hungary and, until 1915, Italy) and Great Britain (a member, along with France and Russia, of the Entente military-political bloc formed to counter the Triple Alliance).

The strategic plan of Germany was to defeat its main enemy, Great Britain; weaken France and Russia (wrenching from it Poland, the Baltic states and Ukraine); and, in cooperation with Austria-Hungary, gain a foothold in the Balkans and the Middle East.

The killing of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by Serb nationalists on June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo (Bosnia), was the pretext for the outbreak of World War I. Austria-Hungary presented Serbia an ultimatum with clearly unacceptable conditions for resolving the conflict that was rejected by the Serbs. On July 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

To fulfill its allied commitments to Serbia, Russia began a general mobilization on July 30. The next day, Germany issued an ultimatum, demanding that Russia halt the mobilization. The German ultimatum to Russia was left unanswered, and on August 1, Germany declared war on Russia.

“Germany has declared war on Russia and has already opened hostilities. We must defend our homeland and the honor of our weapons. This is not the first time our troops have had to fight the Germans: They faced our guns in 1757 and in 1812, and we were always victorious.

“I am convinced that the troops entrusted to me will demonstrate their inherent valor in the forthcoming war and, as always, honestly and selflessly fulfill their duty.”

(From Order No. 2 to the forces of the Northwestern front, dated July 20, 1914 (O.S.), from the commander-in-chief of the Northwestern front, Ya. G. Zhilinsky, Warsaw).

The main battle fronts on the Europe continent on which the outcome of World War I was decided were the Western (French) and Eastern (Russian) fronts (for Russia, the Northwestern front, established on August 1, 1914, split into the Northern and Western fronts on August 17, 1915).

More than 130 volumes (more than 20,000 documents) from World War I are presented perhaps for the first time in such a comprehensive, consistent and complete manner in this microfilm collection.

The military records of 1914-1917 offer a fairly complete picture of the Russian high command, the central military authorities of that period (orders and instructions of the supreme commander-in-chief of the Russian Army, Grand Duke Nicholas (uncle of Emperor Nicholas II); orders by the Main Administration of the General Staff; orders by the War Ministry, General Staff Circulars, etc.), as well as the commanders of the fronts and armies who served during the fighting on the battlefields of World War I (including in the Northwest, against the German empire and its ally, Austria-Hungary).

Of particular interest may be documents relating to activities on the Northwestern, Western and Northern fronts (orders of the commanders-in-chief of the fronts, commanders of the armies at the fronts: the 1st, 2nd, 5th, 10th, etc.) involved in military operations against the German and Austro-Hungarian troops, such as the battles of East Prussia, Warsaw-Ivangorodsk, Lodz, Augustow, Przasnysz, Vilna, Mitavsky, etc.

What is in these documents? What can we learn from them?

They contain information about combat operations, the situation at the front, supplies, the everyday life of the troops, military successes and fatal errors that led to defeats (such as those described, for example, in *Order No. 39 of the commander-in-chief of the armies of the Northwestern front dated August 21 (O.S.), 1914*). The documents highlight issues concerning combat operations against the enemy:

"The fighting that took place recently in East Prussia along the fronts entrusted to me showed that the Germans are successfully using machine guns mounted on armored vehicles. These machine guns... using the abundance of highways and their ability to swiftly relocate to the flanks and rear of our position, fired effectively not only on our troops, but also on our transports." To protect troops from machine-gun fire, the commander-in-chief of the armies of the Northwestern front ordered that *"teams of mounted military engineers be dispatched to damage highways that could help...the enemy relocate."* (From *Order No. 35 of commander-in-chief of the armies of the Northwestern front, Ya. G. Zhilinsky, Bialystok, dated August 19 (O.S.), 1914*).

As well as rules for conduct in occupied enemy territories:

"By order of the commander-in-chief of the armies of the Northwestern front, I order that when German cities are occupied, six to 10 prisoners (of exclusively German descent) be taken from among the inhabitants; in addition, contributions shall be taken from them ... for the payment of indemnity to those who suffered German atrocities in our cities. The indemnity shall be imposed only on the German population, not the Polish... The money shall be registered to field treasuries." (From *Order No. 33 to troops of the 1st Army, dated August 10 (O.S.), 1914, von Rennenkampf*).

Of interest are documents revealing the composition of the fronts, their structural changes, personnel appointments and the replacements (dismissals and appointments) of their commanders.

In general, the documents shed light on day-to-day aspects of World War I, unvarnished and in all its forms: from courage and heroism (commendation lists with the names and military accomplishments of Russian soldiers and commendation lists of Red Cross personnel serving in the armies on the fronts), to flagrant breaches of military discipline that were punished by execution (*Order No. 34 to troops of the 1st Army, dated August 10 (O.S.), 1914*).

World War I served as a catalyst for the revolutionary process in Russia, which led to the October Revolution of 1917. After the October Revolution, Russia effectively left the war, signing a truce with the German-Austrian alliance on December 2, and later engaging in peace talks (Treaty of Brest-Litovsk).

In the autumn of 1918, the allies of Germany (Bulgaria, Turkey, Austria-Hungary) signed a truce with the member countries of the Entente.

The defeat on the front lines, as well as adverse economic conditions, accelerated the development of revolutionary events in Germany. On November 9, 1918, the German monarchy was overthrown.

Germany surrendered on November 11, and at Rethondes station in the Forest of Compiègne (France), a German delegation signed an armistice. Germany admitted defeat. The final conditions of the peace treaties with Germany and its allies were drafted at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919-1920. On June 28, 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was signed, officially ending World War I.

It is hoped that this microfilm publication will make available to the general public many interesting and previously little-known materials, documents and sources on World War I (1914-1918); assist in the development of new works of historical scholarship; and appeal to anyone interested in global and Russian military history, as well as army and regimental historiography.

Language: Russian.

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1914-1917

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