

**THE 15TH CORPS OF THE OTTOMAN ARMY ON THE GALICIAN FRONT
IN THE LIGHT OF THE “HARB MECMUASI” BIWEEKLY MAGAZINE¹**

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The participation of the Ottoman 15th Corps on the eastern Galician front in 1916-1917 seen by the Poles from the perspective of almost one hundred years can be perceived both as the fulfillment of Wernyhora's prophecy regarding the regaining of their independence and as a direct impulse to the establishment of the Turkish Studies Department at the Jagiellonian University². Thus, this subject deserves deeper historic research, which however is difficult due to a very modest source base. In Poland its main asset are fragmentary press reports and even more fragmentary paragraphs in memories which are usually based on them³. The Turkish 15th Corps fought in Galicia under the German command (within the Southern Army of General Felix count von Bothmer), but all the relevant German documents were burnt during the Second World War. Although the Ottoman units benefited on the front line from the Austria-Hungarian artillery, engineering and logistic support, so far no documents related to this military cooperation have been found in the archives in Vienna. The archives in Moscow still remain unsearched in respect of the mentioned war activities. Thus, the majority of our knowledge on this subject comes from the Turkish sources, although it should be stressed that even those sources⁴ cannot be considered as extremely rich⁴.

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² Cf.: P. Nykiel, *Słów kilka o tym, co łączy Wernyhorę z krakowską turkologią*, „Od Anatolii po Syberię. Świat turecki w oczach badaczy”, ed. E. Siemieniec-Gołaś and J. Georgiewa-Okon, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2010, pp. 143-148.

³ More about Polish sources in: P. Nykiel, *Na odsiecz Turkom broniącym Galicji* (review of the article „Turecka odsiecz – historia walk tureckiego XV Korpusu w Galicji w latach 1916-1917” by Krzysztof Bassara, published in „Przegląd Tatarski”, No: 1/2011, pp. 7-10), <http://www.navyingallipoli.com/teksty/bassara.pdf>

⁴ First of all we should mention here the monograph *Birinci Dünya Harbi, VII nci Cilt, Avrupa Cephesi*, 1 nci Kısım, *Galiya Cephesi* published by the Turkish General Staff, which is barely 116 pages long and thus is one of the most modest volumes of this series. The second important source are the memories of Mehmet Şevki Yazman, *Kumandanım Galiya Ne Yana Düşer? Mehmetçik Avrupa'da*, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, İstanbul 2011.

This situation forces us to pay especial attention to each and every reachable source. This also concerns the Ottoman illustrated biweekly war magazine “Harb Mecmuası”. From among those issues accessible to the author, materials from the Galician front were published in eleven of them (in each consecutive issue starting from 12 to 21 and in the joint issue 25-26). These materials consist of four reports of war correspondents, four propaganda articles, three poems dedicated to the Ottoman soldiers fighting in Galicia and one informative text. The iconographic material published in the above mentioned 11 issues is of especially great value. It consists of as many as 78 photographs directly related to the presence of the Ottoman 15th Corps on the Galician front. Five of them were printed on the front pages (Issue 12 and subsequent issues starting from 14 to 17). Thus we can boldly say “Harb Mecmuası” is the most coherent and hitherto known collection of the archival illustrations related to this episode.

The first and the most valuable group of texts from the point of view of a historian consists of the reports of the war correspondents. In the case of the longest of these, entitled “From Galicia to the Home Country” and published in two parts in issues 12 (pp. 178-181) and 14 (pp. 210-214) we are not dealing with the account of fights seen personally by the journalist but with a narrative and dialogue form. In the first part the author, who signs himself with initial “N”, acquaints us with the realities of the battlefield by using the statements of his interlocutors, simple soldiers. Some topographic hints in their accounts enable us to determine that all of them served in the 20th Infantry Division. Dialogues between the journalist and the soldiers are marked with a healthy dose of propaganda and pathos. Despite this a historian is able to pick out some precious information, for instance on the circumstances in which one of the Galician hills was called Cevat Tepe⁵. Noteworthy, all the interlocutors’ accounts with the war correspondent unanimously stress how the Australians against whom they had fought at Gallipoli earlier were a much demanding enemy than the Russians they faced in Galicia. A conversation with a soldier coming from a village near Ankara is particularly interesting: asked by the journalist whether he knew where and what for he was, the soldier replied in the simple language of an Anatolian peasant that it was “Austrian land” and that he was “fighting here against Moscowmen”. He also explained that the Ottoman Empire was siding with “the German, Austria, and Bulgarian” and he

⁵ Presumably it was hill 304 in sector 5206 between Kotów and Mołochów (east from hill 421). The name was a tribute to Second Lieutenant Cevat who was killed on this hill on September 8, 1916.

had come to Galicia “to help them”. When asked whether his country would have any benefits from this aid, he replied with a question: “Would they have sent us here if it wouldn’t?”. The discerning journalist wanted him to explain what exactly this benefit would be, but the soldier replied with a disarming frankness: “Such things I don’t know, sir”. It is interesting that these words of a simple soldier reflected the state of knowledge of the majority of the citizens of the Ottoman Empire. As far as we can learn also from other texts published in “Harb Mecmuası” – and that which will be discussed later on – the sense of the participation of the 15th Corps in the engagements in Galicia is questioned not only by the contemporary Turkish historians, but it had raised huge doubts as early as in 1916.

In the second part of the “From Galicia to the Home Country” report (Issue 14, pp. 210-214) the journalist quotes conversations conducted with non-commissioned officers and soldiers who during the night before (on September 23/24, 1916) had taken part in an attack on the Russian positions. In this text – in comparison to its first part – spontaneous accounts describing specific clashes predominate. However, we cannot help but get the impression that the interlocutors were carefully selected in order to show to the readers on the basis of their examples the great heroism of the Ottoman soldier. Concluding his text the war correspondent mentions that in one of the Galician villages he was quartered with an Orthodox priest and his family. He noticed that the priest’s children despite being educated and knowing some foreign languages had only a bookish knowledge of Turks, one which was far from objective. What is more, apparently the priest’s relatives, when they had learned that Ottoman soldiers were expected to enter his village, had urged him to flee arguing that “the Turks were wild”. However, after some time spent together the priest’s family realized their guests “were exactly the same as they were”. The journalist was also assured that the priest’s relatives and friends would get the letters explaining how wrong they had been in their assessment of the Turks.

The article entitled “About Heroes from Galicia” by Mehmet Rifat published in Issue 15 (pp. 227-233) is a text which combines a war report, posthumous tribute to a fallen hero and a text of propaganda. It is dedicated to the commander of the 1st heavy machine guns platoon in one of companies of the 63rd Regiment of the 20th Infantry Division, Sergeant Fahreddin, who was killed on October 30, 1916. The heroic

achievements of this non-commissioned officer were described in detail and firmly based on facts. However, they constitute only a background for Mehmet Rifat's personal reflections overblown by propaganda and pathos and only ascribed to the hero chosen by himself. The floweriness of the language abounding in Persian words – most probably not understood by Sergeant Fahreddin, makes the whole text very artificial and bombastic. This feeling is enhanced by some invocations to the Young Turk ideology or even to Pan-Turkism, promoting the idea of the Great Turan and of the superiority of the Turkish race. Even a reference to the fight for equal rights for women, something being timidly introduced by the Committee of Union and Progress government, can be found in the text. Sergeant Fahreddin, after being moved with his platoon to the strategic reserve, complains in his heart of hearts saying: “Until now I had taken part in every clash, so why during this one have I to sit [idle] like a woman?” After a short reflection he realized that “even a woman has her own input to the war effort” and this conclusion only increased his frustration.

“Epic of the Galician Heroes” published in Issue 16 (pp. 251-253) is, in fact, a posthumous tribute to the fallen 2nd Lieut. Osmanoğlu Cevat from Istanbul, the military chaplain mufti Hüseyin Fehmi, Sgt. Hüseyin from Kırşehir and Pvt. Hüseyinoğlu İsmail from the Aşikoğulları clan residing in the province of Dinâr. However, the very detailed account of the circumstances of their death allow us to qualify this text dedicated to them as an example of war correspondence. The editorial board of “Harb Mecmuası” must have been convinced that such a choice of heroes and the heroism of their achievements had a strong enough propaganda impact. Thus, the emotional narration in this text is not as impudent as in other ones, but still perceptible, especially in the tribute to mufti Hüseyin Fehmi.

Presumably the publication of the first part of the report “From Galicia to the Home Country” had raised a stir and a wave of criticism from the readers, who, most probably only from “Harb Mecmuası” had learned of the sending of Ottoman troops to Galicia. So, in order to appease these reactions the first pure propaganda text was published in Issue 13 (pp. 196-199). It was an editorial article by Ahmet Refik entitled “To the Splendid Ottoman Soldiers in Galicia”. In fact its real addressee was Ottoman society, which – as has been already mentioned above – could not understand and did not approve the decision of the then Minister of War, Enver Pasha, to send the 15th

Corps to such a distant front. The author, in a very emotional text reminds the readers of the times when the Ottoman Empire “had borders reaching deep into Lehistan and the Russian steppe”, and “Czehryń, Chocim and other places that now suffer in hands of the Moscovmen (...) had had their place in Ottoman heroic poetry for centuries”. It is interesting that the references to the battles fought by the Turks at Chocim and Kamieniec Podolski, as well as fairly detailed accounts of the victorious sieges of some castles on the Eastern borderland of Poland appear in this text in such a way that a historically unprepared reader – who as we may expect were dominant – could get the impression that all those battles were fought against Russia. Several times the author raises the aspect of help to the “Hungarian Brothers”, attacked by the Moscovmen and persuades one that conflict on such a distant front is also good to defend the borders of the Ottoman Empire from the eternal enemy.

In the same issue of “Harb Mecmuası” (on pages 200-202) we can also find a reprint of a letter “To the [soldiers] in Galicia” by Cenap Şehabettin Bey originally published in “Tasvir-i Efkar”. Its author praises the soldiers who “sacrificed themselves twice more than the others” by leaving their home country in order to drive the enemy out. It is a clear allusion to the situation on the Caucasian front, then very unfavorable to the Turks. Of course this text is equally full of references to the past. The red banner carried by the soldiers of the 15th Corps is compared to the shroud covered with the blood of the ancestors who had fallen on Galician soil. Cenap Şehabettin Bey addresses the tsar in sharp words too. He writes that his victories resemble for him court verdicts won by bribery. In conclusion the author reminds the reader that no matter where the Turkish soldier fights, the soil on which he falls is for him like that of the home country.

In Issue 20 (pp. 316-317) we can find a short text by Süleyman Nazif entitled “From the Dardanelles to Galicia”. Its author praises the achievements of the soldiers of the 15th Corps in the Gallipoli Campaign that had taken place between April 25, 1915 and January 9, 1916. He also claims that the Ottomans who had fallen on the soil of Galicia in previous centuries could not wait for a more beautiful visit to their graves as that now paid to them. In this context Süleyman Nazif refers to the Muslim tradition of saying “fatiha” on the graves of ancestors. According to the author the achievements of the Turks on the Galician front would one day be compared by historians to those from the Dardanelles.

“To our soldiers in the Vienna recovery center” is another text by Süleyman Nazif, published in the joint Issue 25-26 (pp. 407-409). By referring again to history the author once more raises the issue of the purpose of Ottoman military participation in the engagements on the Galician front. He assures the wounded veterans that their unusual sacrifice will be remembered with gratitude by subsequent generations.

Starting with Issue 18 of April 1917 the number and size of texts that relate to the Galician front visibly decreases. Although photographs from this theatre of war are still being published, they have disappeared from the front pages. In Issue 21 (p. 322) we can only find a small amount of information framed but lacking an introductory text. It gives the detailed figures on war booties taken from the Russians by the Ottoman 20th Division during the counteroffensive of the Central Powers that took place in August 1917, after the Kerensky Offensive had been broken.

Finally it is worth mentioning three poems published in “Harb Mecmuası”. The first one is entitled “Soldier and Poet”. This was written by Ziya Gökalp and printed in Issue 14 (p. 214). It was inspired by the picture published on the front page of the same issue. The photographed “Mehmet” sleeps in a trench holding a hand grenade to his chest. The author compares the soldier to a small girl who clasps a doll while asleep and holds him up as a model for all poets, because “even when he sleeps, he does not drop his pen”. In the last verse Gökalp chastens poets, writing: “While he sacrifices his life for you / You don’t bother to write a poem for him / You deserve to have your pen taken away / And to be sent to dig a grave for him”.

The author of another poem, published in Issue 17 (p. 266) is M. Hasib from Monastir (now Bitola). His poem “To the Ottoman Armies in Galicia and Rumania”, although a rhymed composition, should rather be treated more as a patriotic appeal than as a piece of poetry. Its artistic value is much lower than the poem by Gökalp, and patriotic pathos spiced up with a clearly visible dose of religious fanaticism overflows from each verse.

The last poem is the one printed in Issue 21 (p. 327), entitled “To the Turkish Soldiers in Galicia” and written by Midhat Cemal (Kuntay). This poet also strongly strikes the patriotic note, but the artistic value of his work is unquestionable.

Undoubtedly the first verse of this poem is worthy of inscription on the symbolic gravestone of the Ottoman Soldiers at the Rakowice Cemetery in Krakow:

*Don't give away this soil, o' grandsons, it's yours
It covers the bones of your grandfathers after all
Yet not its surface, but the underneath is yours
And is a grave of those who for the faith of fathers fall*

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Maybe the above discussed texts from “Harb Mecmuası” do not provide us with too many facts on the course of engagements fought by the Ottoman 15th Corps in Galicia but thanks to them we gain a knowledge of the profiles of some of the heroes forgotten by history, and learn about their burial places, today already not known to anybody. We also have the opportunity to examine the way the Turkish war propaganda of the day functioned. War bulletins similar to “Harb Mecmuası” were published in all countries, on both sides of the frontline, and European historians still readily make use of them. Unfortunately, most of them have no idea of the existence of a Turkish equivalent to “The Illustrated War News” or “Der Krieg in Wort und Bild”...

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