

A German Report from Poland During the First World War

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I recently came across a rare book by a German reporter named Wilhelm Conrad Gomoll, who was "embedded" with the Imperial German army that invaded and occupied Russian Poland during the First World War. The title of this German language book is Im Kampf gegen Russland und Serbien ("In the Fight Against Russia and Serbia"). While Gommol was in Poland, he came repeatedly in contact with local Jews. Here are some of his (edited) observations, translated from the German.

The Entry into Warsaw

After days of heavy fighting we eventually reached our destination. The heavy guns, which had done their duty, fell silent, and the infantry, cavalry and light artillery, including the heavy howitzers, entered the city. The western and southern forts were heavily damaged by our artillery fire, and the Russian army also carried out widespread demolitions.

Warsaw itself, this proud city, the pearl and heart of Poland, did not suffer that much from the bombardment, and the local population welcomed our troops with relief, enormous jubilation and joy. People were crowding the roads where the troops were marching through, singing, laughing and waving to the soldiers.

It was not as if an enemy army had come into possession of an important city, but as if the city had been liberated from a foreign rule. Poles and Jews, who do not always agree in their opinions and feelings, were in agreement that on this historic day, August 5, 1915, the German army would bring new hope for freedom to them.

In recent times the Russians were disliked a lot and this was openly expressed. In the quarter where the poorer Jews live, large crowds were in the streets. Captain H., who advanced

alone into the southwestern suburbs, established that the Russians had departed. He told me that he was greeted with great joy by the Jews who thanked him for the “liberation,” and he had difficulty extricating himself from the crowds.



Street Trade in the Jewish Quarter of Lodz

It is now 9:00 pm and the columns are still passing by, batteries of howitzers, and the gunners are singing about their sweethearts from home....

In Serock

I stayed for a while in Serock, which was covered with dirt, and the commanding officer, from an old Bavarian aristocratic family, was unable to dig up the pavement from under the mud. I found accommodation with a Jewish family, where they gave me an old iron bedstead with a straw mattress.

The first impression of Serock is typical of a Russian town. Rows of wretched low houses line the main road, adjacent to the narrow side streets. A large market place, partly paved, otherwise overgrown with knee-high weeds. Jewish children

in rags play all over; scrawny goats are grazing and pigs are chasing each other. On the corner near the school building, a low wooden structure, stands the church with two steeples. Nearby is the Jewish quarter.

In the wooden huts, overgrown with moss, these people live in dreadful closeness - lots of half-naked children, with pale faces and dark eyes. When I looked at them they scurried away, sliding along the wooden houses and escaping through a hole in the wall into the darkness. It was all very strange, sinister; and it revealed the conditions under which these people, “the dear Jews” of the Czar, live in this despotic country.



Jewish Tradesman from Siemiatycze, whose store was plundered by the Cossacks

I wandered along these streets of Russian poverty when an old Jew in a long black coat approached me. “Sir, what are you looking for?” It was the rabbi, a one-eyed, 90 year old man with a long flowing Moses beard. He told me that since the Cossacks and the departing Russian hordes passed through no stranger had visited the town. A crowd assembled, and when they saw the Rabbi speaking to a goy, there was a lot of talk

about the “Russian period.”

I followed the rabbi to his nearby house. It was dark behind the squeaking wooden door and the air inside was heavy. The one-eyed old man talked in the slow language of the old and his words were full of bitterness and accusation. The Russian rabble of soldiers did not have much time to show their hatred of the Jews, but they did find time to rape the women and extort money: five rubles for the Rabbi’s house, which was thus saved from the torch. Later, when I was on my way home, some Jews told me that the rabbi became a poor man when he “purchased” the Jewish houses from the Cossacks. The Rabbi was sitting with his books when I said good bye to him. His last words were a question: “Are your soldiers going to stay with us?”