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The Greek Catholic Church and the Scandal of Ruthenian Desertion in Przemyśl, January 1915: Documents from the Kriegsarchiv, Vienna

Alexander Watson

INTRODUCTION

The Habsburg Army was, like the empire it served, an extraordinarily complicated institution. Multi-ethnicity was its defining characteristic; it was, as its official history proudly stated, ‘an army of peoples’.¹ While German-speakers were very prominent in the officer corps, the army’s rank and file fully reflected the diversity of Emperor Franz Joseph’s lands. In 1910, Germans and Hungarians each composed about a quarter of the army’s establishment. Czechs (13 per cent), Serbo-Croats (9 per cent) Poles (8 per cent), Ukrainians (or, as they were commonly known at the time, Ruthenes – 7.6 per cent), Romanians (7 per cent), and Slovaks, Slovenes and Italians comprised the rest. Some regiments recognised as many as four languages among their personnel.² During the First World War, and subsequently in German- and English-language historiography, the impact of troops’ national identity on battlefield performance was much debated. Czech soldiers’ conduct was subject to especially bitter debate and has been scrutinised by historians.³ However, in the conflict’s first year, the Austro-Hungarian High Command’s concern and suspicion was directed at least as much, if not more, toward Ukrainian-speaking (Ruthenian) civilians and soldiers.

This article examines the issue of Ruthenian desertion during the siege of Przemyśl in 1914-15, and presents some documentation from the Kriegsarchiv in Vienna. As most readers of this journal will know, the fortress-city of Przemyśl was besieged by the Russian Army from mid-September until 10 October 1914 and then again from 4 November until its capitulation through hunger on 22 March 1915. Through the struggle the fortress-city became, in the words of one Hungarian journalist, ‘a symbolic point for the Monarchy. Nearly all the nationalities of Austria and Hungary defended it.’⁴ The fortress was garrisoned by the 23

¹ Bundesministerium für Heereswesen und Kriegsarchiv, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg 1914-1918. Das Kriegsjahr 1914 vom Kriegsausbruch bis zum Ausgang der Schlacht bei Limanowa-Lapanów* (7 Vols., Vienna: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1931), i [hereafter *ÖULK*, i], p. 54.

² N. Stone, ‘Army and Society in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1900-1914’, *Past and Present*, 33 (1966), 99-100

³ See, particularly, R. Lein, *Pflichterfüllung oder Hochverrat? Die tschechischen Soldaten Österreich-Ungarns im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna and Berlin, 2011) and, for a rival view, M. Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy* (Vienna, Cologne and Weimar, 2014), pp. 317-54.

⁴ R. Molnár, *Galicja 1914-1915. Zapiski korespondenta wojennego*, tr. A Engelmayer (Warsaw, 2012), p. 148.

Honvéd Division, a formation raised in (what was then) southern Hungary with significant numbers of Romanians and Serbs, and four poorly equipped Landsturm Brigades: the 97th Hungarian, 108th upper Austrian, 93rd eastern Galician and 111th central Galician Landsturm Brigades. Among the garrison's sixty-five battalions, nineteen and a half had in their ranks some or many Ruthenes.⁵

The correspondence accompanying this article dates from January 1915 and was initiated by the Fortress Commander, General Hermann Kusmanek von Burgneustädten (1860-1934). Concerned about rising desertion by Ruthenian troops in his garrison, he sought help from the Greek Catholic Bishop of Przemyśl, Konstantyn Czechowicz (1847-1915). To understand the context to his letter, it is necessary to begin with the national tensions in Galicia and the identity divisions among Ruthenians at the beginning of the twentieth century. The census of 1910 registered 3,208,092 Ukrainian-speakers in the province. These people were far from united. The Austrian parliamentary elections of 1907 reflected a division between a majority identifying with Ukrainian national parties and a Russophile or 'Old Ruthenian' minority who conceived of themselves as a branch of the Russian people. The last years of peace saw considerable turbulence in Galicia. In April 1908, foreshadowing the far more famous regicide of June 1914, the Emperor's representative in the province, Statthalter (*Namiestnik*) Andrzej Potocki, was assassinated by a Ukrainian nationalist student as a protest against Polish conservative rule. Russophile agitation, funded secretly by the Russian government, also greatly increased in the province. The Habsburg military noted with concern the more than tenfold increase in prosecutions for spying in the province between 1908 and 1913.⁶

When war erupted in the summer of 1914, both the Galician civil authorities and the army moved against Ruthenian elites of all political persuasions. Across the land, more than 10,000 people were imprisoned. Most were placed in preventative arrest on suspicion of Russian sympathies, though very many were Ukrainian nationalists who felt only enmity towards the great oppressor to the east. Przemyśl was caught up in the hysteria. Greek Catholic Clergy, who as intellectuals and opinion-formers were objects of distrust across the province, were targeted. Across Czechowicz's diocese 314 priests, more than a third of his clergy, were interned by the authorities. Within the city of Przemyśl and its environs, of

⁵ G.A. Tunstall, *Written in Blood. The Battles for Fortress Przemyśl in WWI* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 2016), pp. 29-30 and 35.

⁶ K. Bachmann, *Ein Herd der Feindschaft gegen Rußland. Galizien als Krisenherd in den Beziehungen der Donaumonarchie mit Rußland (1907-1914)* (Vienna and Munich, 2001), pp. 128-38, 196-201 and 232.

fifty-five Greek Catholic clergymen twenty-three were interned.⁷ Ordinary villagers were also arrested and harshly punished, often for minor infractions. The case of Andzej Kuźmin and Józef Leszczyński, two Greek Catholic tailor apprentices from the village of Kropiwnik Nowy (ninety kilometres south-east of Przemyśl, now in Ukraine) illustrates how sensitive the authorities were at the war's opening. Both men were arrested and imprisoned for parodying in public both the imperial hymn and the *Mazurek Dąbrowskiego*. Their rowdy and improvised version of the latter went as follows:

Poland is not yet lost

Though it will be lost

The Pole will have to clean the Ruthenian's boots

And Austria will have to clean the Russian's arse.⁸

Imprisonment and internment could be effectively a death sentence: notoriously, in the camp at Thalerhof, where 8,000 people, most of them Ruthenians, were incarcerated, poor hygiene, epidemics and neglect resulted in the deaths of 1,767 prisoners.⁹ Many others were killed in Galicia by an army made vengeful and more paranoid through early defeat. A general retreat to Przemyśl took place in mid-September. The lawlessness and violence spreading through the province reached the city with the troops. On the sixteenth of that month, Hungarian dragoons massacred forty-four Ruthenian prisoners in broad daylight, among one cavalryman claimed to see among the suspected Russophiles peasants who had shot at a patrol. Firearms, sabres and even fence posts were used in the slaughter. No perpetrator was ever caught.¹⁰

In the Fortress Command at Przemyśl, the middle of September was fraught time. Kusmanek and his staff officers not only had to keep order as the broken Field Army withdrew, but were preparing for imminent siege. Under this intense stress, anxiety about disloyalty, which until this moment had been focused on civilians, began also to be directed toward Ruthenian soldiers. After reports arrived that Ruthenian troops had performed poorly in the defence of the Halicz Bridgehead on the Dniester River, the Fortress Command became concerned that the 111th Landsturm Brigade – a local formation with Polish and Ruthenian personnel – was

⁷ A. Szczupak, *Grekokatolicka diecezja Przemyska w latach I wojny światowej* (Cracow, 2015), pp. 44 and 55.

⁸ Kk Gericht des Festungskommandos in Przemyśl. Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych: 281: fo. 21-7.

⁹ Szczupak, *Grekokatolicka*, p. 49.

¹⁰ See the documentation pertaining to the massacre in Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv Vienna: Min.d.Innern, Präs., 22/Galiz. (1918): Karton 2119: Doc. 21832.

garrisoning the girdle forts. On 16 September, a secret order was issued to post Hungarian troops to these forts, with a view to eventually removing the brigade from these crucial defensive installations.¹¹ Near simultaneously, hurried measures were taken to evacuate 6,000 Ruthenian military labourers from the Fortress. The military telegrams, which initially referred to ‘workers of Ruthenian nationality’, revealingly soon seamlessly reverted to a discussion of ‘Russophile’ workers, as if these terms were interchangeable.¹²

A few days later, the Fortress Command’s paranoia ramped up a notch, as attention turned to Landsturm Regiment 19, part of the 93rd eastern Galician Landsturm Brigade. This regiment was dramatically labelled ‘dangerous for the fortress.’ Its commander warned that in fighting further east, the men had ‘left officers in the lurch and fled’, throwing away their weapons in the rush to escape. In the context of the major disasters besetting the Habsburg Army around Lwów, such conduct was neither surprising nor unique; both the 23 Honvéd Infantry Division and the 97 Landsturm Brigade, Hungarian units which later served in the Przemyśl garrison, succumbed to panic and flight in early September.¹³ However, for Landsturm Regiment 19, senior officers all fixated on the allegedly Russophile sympathies of the communities from which the unit was recruited. The national composition of the unit – around one-third Poles and nearly two-thirds Ruthenes – was blamed for its indiscipline.¹⁴ In fact, there were clearly other factors at play which made this regiment especially vulnerable to collapse. As its commander conceded, the unit suffered from a shortage of officers, and many of those it did have were physically unfit. Its rank and file were ‘too old’ for active service. Perhaps worst of all, their rifle training was ‘equal to zero.’¹⁵

The month of October, filled first with intense fighting as the Russians stormed the fortress and then with euphoria at relief by the rejuvenated Habsburg Field Army, appears to have put fears of Ruthenian disloyalty in the ranks temporarily to rest. However, from the start of the

¹¹ Secret order to Commanders of IV - VIII Defensive Districts, 16 Sept. 1914. Kriegsarchiv [hereafter KA] Vienna: Neue Feldakten [hereafter NFA]: Festungskmdo Przemyśl: Karton 1321: fo. 727.

¹² Telegrams from Fortress Command in Przemyśl and Field Transport Control Krakau, 13 Sept. 1914. KA Vienna: NFA: Festungskmdo Przemyśl: Karton 1321: fo. 573 and 641.

¹³ For the 97 Landsturm Brigade’s and the 23 Honved Infantry Division’s panic and flight outside Lwów on the night of 2 Sept see Bundesministerium für Heereswesen und Kriegsarchiv, *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg*, i, p. 253.

¹⁴ R. Nowak, ‘Die Klammer des Reiches. Das Verhalten der elf Nationalitäten Österreich-Ungarns in der k.u.k. Wehrmacht 1914 bis 1918’, p. 331. KA Vienna: NL Nowak B/726/1.

¹⁵ Fortress Command in Przemyśl to 3 Army Command and 44 Infantry Division, 18 Sept. 1914. KA Vienna: NFA: Festungskmdo Przemyśl: Karton 1321: fo. 771-2.

second siege on 4 November, anxiety again rose due to a trickle of desertions which continued into the New Year. Russian Army propaganda, tailored to play on Ruthenian troops' specific concerns, added fuel to the fire. For sure, there were lies: the Russian armies had already crossed the Carpathian Mountains and were marching on Budapest. Cracow was encircled. Yet the Russians also skilfully exploited the real recent Habsburg brutality in order to foster resentment and undermine discipline. 'Your villages have been burned by Austrian troops, your families abandoned to frost and starvation', asserted one propaganda flyer, entirely truthfully. 'They would have starved if we had not given them a warm roof and bread. [...] The sooner the forts fall, the more we can rescue your unhappy compatriots from freezing – from death! It depends on you!'¹⁶

Kusmanek's appeal to Bishop Czechowicz for help in stopping Ruthenian desertions came after six men in the first battalion of Landsturm Infantry Regiment 35 fled for Russian lines early on the morning of 6 January. His claim in the letter that desertion was 'rife' in the battalion was exaggerated; it had reported seven desertions between 10 November and 3 December.¹⁷ Nevertheless, these defections did pose a security risk and the final case which prompted his letter was especially worrying. Russophilia may have been a motive. The unit was raised in the border district of Brody and, according to their company commander, all the deserters came from two communities with known Russian sympathies. On the other hand, the bugler who organised the desertion had a reputation as a reliable soldier and, at three months into the second siege, plenty of other reasons existed to wish to leave: cold, hunger and the obvious hopelessness of the Fortress's strategic situation. What was undeniable and shocking was the brazenness of the flight. The deserters tricked tired frontline sentries in the night by passing themselves off as a patrol, and had escaped into no man's land.¹⁸

The Greek Catholic Bishop of Przemyśl, Konstantyn Czechowicz, was at first glance perhaps a rather odd figure from whom to seek support. After all, his clergy had been among the greatest victims of the Galician civil authorities' and Habsburg army's wartime persecution. Nonetheless, Kusmanek's approach was sensible. The Catholic Church – both its Roman and

¹⁶ Muzeum Narodowe Ziemi Przemyskiej w Przemyślu [hereafter MNZP Przemyśl]: Archiwum Molnera: DVD6 – T. nr 23 MP HIST 410: fo. 3-4.

¹⁷ K.u.k. Festungskommando, Op. Nr. 159/5, 5 Jan. 1915. KA Vienna: NFA: Festungskmdo Przemyśl: Karton 1323: fo.135.

¹⁸ See the reports on the desertion from the 2 Feldkompanie, K.k. Landsturminfanterieregiment No. 35, 6 Jan. 1915. KA Vienna: NFA: Festungskmdo Przemyśl: Karton 1323: fo. 202-8.

Greek branches – was an ideological pillar of the Habsburg Monarchy. While Franz Joseph's peoples were riven by ethnic division, four-fifths of the population were unified through the Catholic faith.¹⁹ Czechowicz had no doubt of his loyalties. First, from both his Church and Ukrainian national standpoints, his interests lay with Austria. As he wrote in his reply, 'I know ... that the Russians would respect neither my Catholic faith nor my nationality nor, what concerns me personally, my position.' Hostile Tsarist authorities had dissolved his Church in Russia already in 1875. Since his consecration as bishop in 1897, he had been confronted by the rival Russian Orthodox Church's aggressive proselytising in his diocese. The Russian occupation of eastern Galicia in 1914 brought with it the arrest and deportation of the Greek Catholic Metropolitan of Lwów, Andrei Sheptits'kyi, an influx of Orthodox clergy and attacks on Ukrainian education and culture.²⁰

There is also good reason to believe Czechowicz's claim to be 'bound to the holy person of his Majesty ... not only by sacred oaths, which I have sworn repeatedly but also by the deep inner feelings of gratitude, love and stalwart loyalty.' The bishop had enjoyed the support of Austrian authorities in upholding the Greek Catholic faith, and been ennobled and rewarded with high honours such as the Order of the Iron Crown.²¹ His conduct during the visit of Karl, the future Emperor, to Przemyśl at the end of October 1914 offers insight into his mindset, and particularly his deep concern (as in his letter to Kusmanek) to emphasise Ruthenians' loyalty to the Monarchy. The 'old Ruthenian bishop', wrote Karl, 'explained to me with tears that he feared that His Majesty could believe of his loyal people of the Ruthenians, that it was unpatriotic. He pleaded that one should execute the bad elements – they deserved nothing more – but the real Ruthenians were true to the Kaiser till their last breath.'²²

The Bishop's response to Kusmanek's request was to organise a series of special sermons and services between 13-16 and 20-23 January. His efforts were given added urgency by another group desertion from the first battalion, Landsturm Infantry Regiment 35 on the night of 13-

¹⁹ See P. Houlihan, *Catholicism and the Great War. Religion and Everyday Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1922* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 21-9.

²⁰ M. von Hagen, *War in a European Borderland. Occupations and Occupation Plans in Galicia and Ukraine, 1914-1918* (Seattle, WA, 2007), pp. 19-45.

²¹ For a full discussion of Czechowicz and his pre-war struggle against Russian Orthodoxy, see Szczupak, *Greckokatolicka diecezja Przemyska*, pp. 16-40.

²² From the 'Kriegserinnerungen Kaiser Karls – Kriegsjahr 1914 o.O., 1914 Oktober 13 – Dezember 24', reproduced in E. Kovács, P. Arato, F. Pichorner and L. Wewalka (eds.), *Untergang oder Rettung der Donaumonarchie? Politische Dokumente zu Kaiser und König Karl I. (IV.) aus internationalen Archiven* (2 vols., Vienna, Cologne and Weimar, 2004), ii, p. 85.

14 January. A corporal and nine men had disappeared from a field watch.²³ The Bishop's first sermons on the thirteenth and fifteenth were given to this Landsturm Regiment. The first day's session was held in Przemyśl city centre. To reach all its soldiers, the Bishop then travelled on the fifteenth to the camp at Żurawica, in the north of the girdle. Subsequent masses and sermons were targeted at other units with Ruthenian personnel. The Bishop spoke to the Third Battalion of Major General Nickl's Group on the sixteenth, Landwehr Infantry Regiment 19 on the twentieth and, on the final two days, to soldiers from a variety of units, including Landsturm Infantry Regiment 33.²⁴ As well as urging the men to remember their oath to Austria's monarch, Czechowicz particularly stressed the oppressive nature of Russia. The empire to the east, he warned, was 'the prison of unfree nations.' The Tsars 'never kept promises to subordinated peoples.'²⁵

Whether the Bishop's sermons stiffened Ruthenians' willingness to hold out is debateable. Unquestionably, desertions continued. In early February, for example, Landwehr Regiment 19 suffered a spate of desertions from field watches despite having been one of the units sermonised by the bishop.²⁶ Landsturm Infantry Regiment 33, another targeted unit, similarly lost a field watch in early March, which went over wholesale to the Russians.²⁷ Kusmanek had threatened 'strict military measures' in his letter to Czechowicz if there was more desertion and the following month these were implemented. The Fortress had already executed men for absconding.²⁸ The new measures amplified the deterrent effect of the punishment. Soldiers were to be warned that deserters' home communities would be telegrammed so that their 'cowardice' could be made publicly known. Not only they, but also their relatives would be made to suffer. All state support would be withdrawn from their parents and wives. In the hope of preventing further cases, officers were warned to keep a

²³ Report by Company C.O. and interviews with sentries of 5. Kompanie, K.k. Landsturminfanterieregiment Nr. 35, 15 Jan. 1915. KA Vienna: NFA: Festungskmdo Przemyśl: Karton 1323: fo. 410-12 and 415.

²⁴ 'Programm für die Predigten Sein Exzellenz des griechisch-kath. Bischofs'. KA Vienna: NFA: Festungskmdo Przemyśl: Karton 1323: fo. 413-4.

²⁵ Additions to the Bishop's notes by Reverend Aleksander Zubrycki, quoted in Szczupak, *Greckokatolicka diecezja Przemyśka*, p. 97.

²⁶ IV Defence District Command, 'Bezirkskommandobefehl', 15 Feb. 1915. MNZP Przemyśl: Archiwum Molnera: DVD 12: T.nr 7 MP. HIST 394, fo. 61a.

²⁷ J. Vit, *Wspomnienia z mojego pobytu w Przemyślu podczas rosyjskiego oblężenia 1914-1915*, trans. L. Hofbauer and J. Husar (Przemyśl, 1995), pp. 79-80.

²⁸ See the vivid descriptions of such executions in J. Gayczak (ed.), *Pamiętnik Oberleutnanta Stanisława Marcelego Gayczaka* (Przemyśl, n.d.), pp. 26-7 and 39-40 (diary entries for 18 Nov. and 22 Dec. 1914).

close eye on their men's mood, to watch out for conspiracies to desert and to report any special agitation among their soldiers to the Fortress Command.²⁹

The mounting numbers of Ruthenian soldiers absconding from the fortress in the siege's last months do not necessarily show Bishop Czechowicz's intervention to have been worthless; without it, the numbers of men fleeing may have been still greater. However, the Fortress Command's focus on national disloyalty as the root cause of the disciplinary problems does appear unhelpful. First, desertion was hardly an exclusively Ruthenian problem; even the much vaunted Hungarians also suffered cases.³⁰ Second, it distracted from the dire material conditions faced by the garrison. By mid-January 1915, ration allowances for bread and vegetables had halved since the start of the siege. Troops' meat consumption had remained steady, but only because beef was replaced by horsemeat made available through the slaughter of the garrison's own horses. What men needed was therefore less spiritual than calorific sustenance.³¹

To close observers of Ruthenian troops, it was primarily these shortages of basic necessities, both food and also clothing, and not treasonous ideology, which provided the main motor for desertion. The calamitous circumstances of service were described well by one Hungarian officer who visited positions where, he wrote Ruthenians were surrendering '*en masse* as a result of poor rations and especially as a result of lack of clothing – none of them had boots.' The men were standing 'in more than half a metre of water and cannot even lie down. They sleep crouched.'³² Similarly, an officer of the 18 Landsturm Infantry Regiment explained the desertions by Ruthenians in strictly material terms: they 'didn't like the starvation in the fortress.' Notably, however, he did draw an implicit distinction between his regiment's Ukrainian-speakers and its Poles. Despite the men's rations being identical, Ruthenians were

²⁹ Festungskommando, 'Massnahmen gegen Desertion' Op. Nr. 188/10, 6 Feb. 1915. MNZP Przemyśl: Archiwum Molnera: DVD 7: T.nr 11 MP. HIST 398, fo. 18.

³⁰ Company Commander of 1 Kompanie, kon. ung. 16/II Honvéd Marchbaon, report on the desertion of five men, 14 Jan. 1915. KA Vienna: NFA: Festungskmdo Przemyśl: Karton 1323: fo. 416-17.

³¹ Comparison of fortress rations at the outset of the siege and 8 Jan. 1915 in 'Beilage zum Fskmdobefehl Nr. 282', 7 Nov. 1914 and 'Festungskommandobefehl Nr 12', 7 Jan. 1915. KA Vienna: NFA: Festungskmdo Przemyśl: Karton: 1321: fo. 100 and Karton 1323: fo. 188. On the earlier date, troops were entitled to 700 grams of bread, 300 grams of meat and (on 6 days in the week) 200 grams of vegetables. These allowances were reduced to 350 grams of bread and 100 grams of biscuit, 300 grams of horsemeat and 90 grams of vegetables (on six days of the week, on the final day 120 grams was allowed).

³² Diary of an unknown Hungarian officer, 14 Jan. 1915, in I. Lagzi (ed.), *Węgrzy w Twierdzy Przemyśkiej w latach 1914-1915* (Warsaw and Przemyśl, 1985), p. 141.

seen as the primary security risk. The unit was therefore careful to pair up men so that Ruthenians would never be on duty alone.³³

One prisoner, Landsturm Artillerist Roshanki – a Ruthenian primary school teacher in civil life, told his captors at the end of September that in Przemyśl ‘great mistrust rules toward Russian [Ruthenian is meant] soldiers and inhabitants. A large number of Ruthenes had been shot for trivialities. Such executions take place daily in the fortress; in order to escape this persecution, Ruthenes were converting in massive numbers to Catholicism.’³⁴

Ultimately, Kusmanek did introduce new measures to try to stem group desertion. Emphasis was placed on officers’ care of their men. ‘I demand’, wrote Kusmanek, ‘that the officers minister to the men to a greater degree than till now, and concern themselves at every opportunity for the welfare of the rank and file under them. Especially the composition, the preparation and distribution of food is to be given particular attention.’³⁵

The exchange took place at the beginning of January 1915; a difficult time for the Fortress. Przemyśl’s stocks of food were running low. The Habsburg Field Army had briefly liberated the fortress-city in October, and had proceeded to consume much of its supplies. When this correspondence took place, the garrison had just completed the slaughter of 8,000 of its own

³³ Vit, *Wspomnienia*, pp. 79-80.

³⁴ Interrogation of prisoner, Landsturm Artillerist Roshanski, c. 28 Sept. 1914. KA Vienna: NL Kusmanek: B/1137/15.

³⁵ Festungskommando, ‘Massnahmen gegen Desertion’ Op. Nr. 188/10, 6 Feb. 1915. Muzeum Narodowe Ziemi Przemyskiej w Przemyślu: Archiwum Molnera: DVD 7: T.nr 11 MP. HIST 398, Image 18.

horses for food, in order to prolong its resistance. Morale was also depressed because a break-out attempt conducted in late December – the best chance the fortress had of liberation during the second siege – had failed with heavy losses.³⁶ The correspondence reflects Kusmanek's concern about rising desertion, and his special distrust of his garrison's large Ruthenian contingent.

Kusmanek was a native of Transylvania, then in Hungary. He became an officer in the Habsburg Army in 1879 and over a long career served as a brigade commander, divisional commander and worked in the War Ministry. In May 1914, he was designated Commander in Przemyśl.³⁷

DOCUMENTATION

1.) Draft letter from Fortress Commander Kusmanek to Greek Catholic Bishop Czechowicz³⁸:

K.u.k. Fortress Command in Przemyśl

In the 1st Battalion], Landsturm I[nfantry] R[egiment] 35 desertion is becoming rife. The men do not stand firm in battle and desert to the enemy.

7th January 1915

Your Excellency!

Regrettably, events have shown that the troops of Ruthenian nationality in the Fortress – in contrast to the others – not respecting the sacredness of the oath they have sworn, perpetrate actions which are to be deeply deplored and which are concerning for the defence of the Fortress.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 102-3, 177-81. Also, F. Forstner, *Przemyśl. Österreich-Ungarns bedeutendste Festung* 2nd edn. (Vienna, 1987, 1997), pp. 197, 200 and 216.

³⁷ R. Kiszling, 'Hermann Kusmanek von Burgneustädten', in *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon 1815-1950*, accessed at <http://www.biographien.ac.at/oebl?frames=yes> on 28 March 2018.

³⁸ KA Vienna: NFA: Festungskmdo Przemyśl: Karton 1323: fo. 133 and 137. Both Kusmanek's letter and Czechowicz's reply are in the German language.

Thus, unfortunately, within the designated unit desertions to the enemy have frequently occurred. The men have also proven themselves unreliable in battle, either not standing firm or surrendering themselves to the enemy.

Even though the officers have sought to manage this distressing phenomenon, and although too the Fortress chaplaincy has left no stone unturned in order to exert religious influence on the seemingly stirred up and malevolently advised rank and file, unfortunately there has been no success.

As, however, through this the security of the Fortress appears threatened, I shall not fail to order whatever military measures are necessary.

Nonetheless, before I introduce strict military measures, I want to leave no means untried that could result here in change.

For this reason, I am turning to Your Excellency with the request to support me in my efforts.

Words which come from the lips of a so high church dignitary will for sure produce a more lasting impact on the men of Ruthenian nationality than words of subordinate clergy.

I write this in the belief that I can rely on the loyal disposition that Your Excellency has so often emphasised and on Your Excellency's high priestly wisdom.

Convinced that Your Excellency will be inclined to support me in my efforts, I request – especially with consideration of the urgency of the matter – a reply as soon as is possible.

I would then send my General Staff Chief to Your Excellency for the purpose of agreeing more detailed, concrete arrangements.

Your Excellency, permit me to express my greatest respect, from most sincerely

...

2.) Czechowicz's reply to Kusmanek's message, which arrived at Fortress Command on the next day³⁹:

Greek Catholic Bishopric.

January 1915

Z1/Ord.

Przemyśl, 8th

³⁹ Ibid., fo. 213.

Your Excellency!

The much valued message from Your Excellency of the seventh of the current month, ref.: Op. 159/5 about the conduct of the troops of Ruthenian nationality within the Fortress saddened me greatly. All the more so, for in this regard I was of an entirely different conviction.

In consequence of the fact that the majority of the Greek Catholic clergy have left Przemyśl, and that apart from myself only five canons and two young priests have stayed, for months I have been obliged, despite the bad weather, to read the daily Holy Mass not in my private chapel but in the Cathedral. Otherwise, there would have been too few Holy Masses for the churchgoers and for those, mostly soldiers, coming to Communion. I also sit every day in the Confessional Box, as the remaining few clergy could scarcely cope with this work. Both I and the other clergy hearing confessions never neglect to instruct the confessing soldiers about the sanctity of their military oath and their duties towards His Majesty, the Supreme War Commander and Father of the People, and towards the Fatherland.

We have the impression that the soldiers of Ruthenian nationality take their duty very seriously and want to discharge it with the fullest devotion.

Similarly in the sermons at which soldiers are present, influence is exercised in the same sense. I preach myself from time to time – the last time was yesterday – and every time I also call upon the soldiers to be mindful of their oath and to do their duty.

The safety of the Fortress, the defeat of the enemy is for me a vital issue. First, I am bound to the holy person of his Majesty, our all merciful Father of the People not only by sacred oaths, which I have sworn repeatedly but also by the deep inner feelings of gratitude, love and stalwart loyalty. I know too that the Russians would respect neither my Catholic faith nor my nationality nor, what concerns me personally, my position. And these same feelings fill also the hearts of the Ruthenian people, despite the Russophile exceptions.

Whatever is in my power, whatever I am in a position to do in order to support the efforts of Your Excellency, I am always ready with all my heart to do. I await Your Excellency's wishes and propositions in this matter.

Permit me to express the greatest respect toward Your Excellency

Sincerely,

+ Konstantin Czechowicz

Greek Catholic Bishop.