

*Katarzyna Sierakowska*

Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History

Polish Academy of Sciences

## Women on War and Women – Polish Lands 1914–1918

### Diaries, Memoirs, and Women's Accounts as a Source for Studying the Social History of the Great War

The wartime experience of women on Polish lands has not been the subject of historical research thus far. In classic depictions of the First World War, the category of gender has essentially not been referred to at all.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, both the specifics of women's war experiences and the picture of war they perceived has not been a subject of a deeper analysis. The text presented here is meant to at least partly fill this gap. It seems all the more necessary, insofar that fighting, living in trenches, killing, etc. was mostly the experience of men, while the wartime experiences of everyday life, exile, etc., mainly concerned women and children. The point of emphasis in this study was put on the war as seen through the eyes of women. Therefore, I look first and foremost at women's reports of the war, and only then at the images of women presented by men and children. The source base for my reflections are memoirs, broadly understood. I focus on the analysis of women's diaries and memoirs written in various historical periods, when their authors were of different ages.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that the only difference between the texts, due to the timeframe when the writings arose, is their degree of emotional saturation. However, their content is molded by the age of the authors and their acquired life experience at the time of writing.<sup>3</sup> It is possible to read from them not only various elements

---

<sup>1</sup> Esp.: J. Holzer, J. Molenda, *Polska w I wojnie światowej*, Warszawa, 1967; *Historia Polski*, vol. 3, pt. 3: *1914–1918*, ed. by Ż. Kormanowa, W. Najdus, Warszawa, 1974; J. Pajewski, *Odbudowa państwa polskiego 1914–1918*, Warszawa, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> I managed to collect 50 journals, diaries, and memoirs. Many of them have been published, but a few are only available in manuscript form.

<sup>3</sup> For more on women's memoir writing see: K. Sierakowska, "Kobiety dokument osobisty z czasów I wojny światowej jako źródło historyczne", in: *Człowiek – Społeczeństwo – Źródło. Studia dedykowane profesor Jadwidze Hoff*, ed. by Sz. Kozak et al., Rzeszów, 2014, pp. 537–545.

of the reality of war, but also elements of the then-shaped and still-shaping collective memory of the First World War. Various approaches adopted by women in 1914–1918, and different strategies for survival, emerge from the analyzed materials. Most often, women's descriptions of the war are devoted to everyday life, with its mundane details, uniqueness but also monotony.

Most of the sources analyzed here cover only fragments of the period studied. Those whose authors recorded their impressions for the entire four years between July 1914 and November 1918 are in the minority. Also worth mentioning in this group are notes kept only due to the war, such as the "Diary of Princess Maria Zdzisławowa Lubomirska", and those in which the turbulent years 1914–1918 are only a fragment of a wider whole, like the notes of Zofia Romanowiczówna and writers Zofia Nałkowska and Maria Dąbrowska. Inevitably, the diaries, kept for many years, to some degree allow for the seeking of answers to the question of where war events took place in the biographies of the authors. What significance did they attribute to the wartime period? Analyzing the continuation of the narrative, one can investigate the impact of events from the period 1914–1918 on their later life, on their identity, etc. All the materials considered here arose for various reasons, which is also important, and they are the ones that often decide about the content of the researched sources. Most often, women reached for the pen realizing the significance of events in which they were to participate, to a lesser or greater extent; or they did so at the end of their lives, to render an account to posterity and remain in their memory. Of particular note are the reminiscences of women involved in conspiratorial activities, fighting, etc. I will not write about them though, because I have done it elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

The largest group of authors are women between twenty and forty years old years old, and therefore mature, coming from the landed gentry and intelligentsia. Unfortunately, we hardly have any accounts created in other environments. To a small extent, we can use some of the diaries of peasant women, including Marcjanna Fornalska, or female accounts from the publication *Pamiętniki chłopów* ("Peasant's Diaries").<sup>5</sup> The almost complete lack of

---

<sup>4</sup> I wrote about this in: K. Sierakowska, "Kobieta-żołnierka. Kilka uwag o konstruowaniu pamięci o walkach kobiet w latach pierwszej wojny światowej", in: *Polska w XIX i XX wieku – społeczeństwo i gospodarka*, ed. by W. Caban, M.B. Markowski, J. Muszyńska, M. Przeniosło, Kielce, 2013, pp. 329–335; also, K. Sierakowska, "Wpływ powstania styczniowego na zakres patriotycznych obowiązków kobiet", *Rocznik Antropologii Historii*, 4, 2014, no. 2 (7), pp. 77–93.

<sup>5</sup> M. Fornalska, *Pamiętnik matki*, Warszawa, 1960; *Pamiętniki chłopów*, ed. by L. Krzywicki, Warszawa, 1935.

records from other social groups results from at least two reasons: widespread illiteracy, which affected women to a greater degree and from difficult living conditions, whose management rested mainly on the shoulders of women. In the working class environment, older children often went to work in addition to their mothers. The situation was similar in the villages. In families where both the husband and the adult sons were taken into the army, women left alone with small children fared far worse. In *Piast* it was written: “At home on an eight *morga* [ca. 11 acre] farm, I left a wife with three small children, the oldest of which is five years old, the youngest is 11 months old.”<sup>6</sup>

It is also worth noting that in the absence of detailed studies concerning various areas of the social history of the Great War, and, more generally, its rather one-sided picture in Polish historiography, it is not easy to reconcile the information contained in the writings with the actual state of affairs. Therefore, the picture of the war presented here will be a subjective picture, a vision of war presented by writing women. This vision, which should also be emphasized, was expressed using certain conventions, in accordance with the expectations of the then behavior of representatives of particular genders, social circles, etc. In their interpretation, many theories can be referred to. The concepts and theory relating to autobiography seem particularly useful here. The convincing feminist theory of autobiography,<sup>7</sup> asserts that women’s autobiographies have their own unique features. Even though I do not analyze autobiographies, I think that at least some concepts can also be used for the analysis of other personal materials. The war can be seen in the writings of women from this period as a “significant other” who justifies their reaching for a pen. It is the war that is important, not the woman’s accomplishments during it, and because of the essence of the event, she writes a diary for herself, not because she believes that her life may interest someone. If the reader is not convinced, one can refer to significant others, such as children and husbands. It is their achievements, or a duty, that society has placed on the mother – the educator, that commands her to reach for the pen and record particularly momentous events.

A few issues dominate the writings of women. Among them are emotions related to their fears for the future, fears of colliding with the war and fears

---

<sup>6</sup> A. Zwiercan, “Wiedeń, szpital, w kwietniu”, *Piast*, no. 17, 28 April 1918, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Eg., M.G. Mason, “Inny głos: autobiografie pisarek”, in: *Autobiografia*, ed. by M. Czermińska, Gdańsk, 2009, pp. 169–208; M. Filipowicz, “Płeć autobiograficznego ‘ja’. Przypadek Renáty Tyršovej”, *Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne*, no. 11, 2016, pp. 263–266.

for the life and health of relatives, for tomorrow, etc. You can find a lot of repeated gossip and rumors, especially in notes from the beginning of the war. They show how the lack of reliable information affects the public mood. It must be admitted, however, that the authors are generally critical of this type of information.

In their diaries, there is a lot of information about daily life during wartime. Rarely, however, are they presented systematically, such as, for example, by Maria Macieszyna, a member of the intelligentsia with a landowning pedigree, and in such detail. Thanks to the diary of this woman from Płock, we can compare, for example, the prices of individual products, although only starting in January 1916. In general, materials authored by women contain descriptions of selected aspects of everyday life – those most interesting for the authors at a given time, the most disturbing, and most often discussed. Many of them also contain very valuable material regarding inter-ethnic relations. Finally, they are also a source that allows the process of the changing position of women in society to be followed.

## Daily Life in Wartime Through the Eyes of Women

The declaration of war marks an important turning point in women's writings, and not only in those written as events were unfolding, but also in accounts written later. It is definitely the declaration, or rather the declaration of war and the announcement of mobilization tied to it, which becomes a symbolic moment of transition to a different, wartime reality. The diarists scrupulously record their current and past feelings. It was precisely the outbreak of the war that stimulated some of them to keep systematic notes, and when the initial dust settled, and the unusualness of war became an everyday reality, many of them gave up or at least significantly curtailed writing down their impressions.

Twenty-eight-year-old Janina Gajewska, a Warsaw clerk living with her parents, described the transition from peace to war as follows: "On Friday a mobilization was announced in Warsaw and a prelude to the war began to play out here."<sup>8</sup> The change caused by the outbreak of the war was also felt by the sixteen-year-old Maria Balinowska, who was vacationing in Palanga and concluded that "you began living differently". Zofia Kirkor-Kiedroniowa,

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ta wojna zmieni wszystko. Dziennik Janiny Gajewskiej*, Warszawa, 2015, p. 28 (2 Aug. 1914).

who was on vacation with her children and mother in Wisła, stated in her memoirs that after the mobilization was announced, the summer vacationers frantically began returning home. She added: “My sadness [associated with the mobilization of her husband, who ultimately stayed home] and personal anxiety was connected with fear for what the war would bring to Poland.”<sup>9</sup> Maria Lubomirska, then a forty-year-old, on 31 July, wrote after the announcement of mobilization: “I am immensely concerned by the peril of the situation, the enormity of the cataclysm that is boiling.”<sup>10</sup> In Lwów, Zofia Romanowiczówna, over seventy at the time, noted in her diary on 5 August:

It has happened! The die has been cast – for three days now, war – apart from Austria with Serbia, the war of Germany with Russia and France – a general mobilization – besides those, almost all European countries are mobilizing, and ours are in all ranks. Horrible!... What will happen, what will happen!... Maybe a cataclysm and maybe a rebirth to a new, more beautiful life...<sup>11</sup>

A similar tone was given in the writings by Helena Kozicka, younger than the previous writer by more than a quarter-century, the older sister of Zofia Moraczewska,<sup>12</sup> who lived in Tarnopol at that time.

Therefore, all the authors were aware of the breakthrough triggered by the war. They were aware of the gravity of the situation. However, their fears were accompanied by hope for improving the fate of the Homeland. Interestingly, the word “cataclysm” appears in almost all of the women’s accounts from the beginning of the war. Both Romanowiczówna and Lubomirska look with sorrow upon those mobilized to the army. Their voices are joined by Nałkowska (b. 1884), who also stated that people were terrified “as against an earthquake.”<sup>13</sup> Stefania Dzikowska-Dobrowolska, staying in Przemyśl, reported in August 1914 about the nearly unceasing panic in the city and the anticipation

---

<sup>9</sup> Z. Kirkor-Kiedroniowa, *Wspomnienia, Ziemia mojego męża*, pt. 2, introd. by H. Wereszycki, ed. by A. Szklarska-Lohmannowa, Kraków, 1988, p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> *Pamiętnik księżnej Marii Zdzisławowej Lubomirskiej 1914–1918*, ed. by J. Pajewski, comments by A. Kosicka-Pajewska, Poznań, 2002, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Z. Romanowiczówna, *Dziennik lwowski*, vol. 2, Warszawa, 2005, p. 251 (5 Aug. 1914).

<sup>12</sup> Zofia Moraczewska (1873–1958) – a women’s activist, founder of the Women’s League in Galicia and later, in 1928, of the Union for Women’s Civic Work (Związek Pracy Obywatelskiej Kobiet, hereafter: ZPOK). A member of the Sejm in the interwar period, a socialist and the wife of Jędrzej Moraczewski, the first Prime Minister of independent Poland. For more see the biographic entry by W. Bieńkowski in: *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 21, Wrocław et al., 1976, pp. 677–679.

<sup>13</sup> Z. Nałkowska, *Dzienniki*, vol. 2: 1909–1917, Warszawa, 1976, p. 338 (1 Aug. 1914).

of the need to evacuate. On 14 September, she wrote: “What’s happening here in Przemyśl is hard to write about! Hell on earth. We are boundlessly weary, tormented by fear and deliberation of where and when to go.”<sup>14</sup>

A similar, wartime panic was described by Kozicka. It increased at the news that the Russians were approaching Tarnopol. The sounds of the approaching front gave residents an overwhelming desire to flee the city.

Just now, under the pressure of the people, the glass panes at the station began breaking out, and masses of frantic people began crowding the windows. Packages are flying out of these windows onto the center of the platform, and the people force themselves in behind them, huddled, howling, dreadful. Women howl and squeal, men beat and jostle, and all this combined with the calling of soldiers, the clash of broken glass, the crying of children, creates a terrible image, simply wild.<sup>15</sup>

This and other very similar images of panic contained in many women’s diaries show certain permanent elements: screeching, screaming or lamenting women, crying children, descriptions of innumerable pieces of luggage and bundles of various sizes. Slightly less frequently do men appear among the panicked, like with Kozicka. These images are strongly conventionalized and this convention is fairly constant – it does not change regardless whether the panic is described by a man or a woman. They refer to gender stereotypes – women react emotionally but also passively – they cry and lament, thus confirming the powerlessness and lack of agency attributed to them. Men, if they appear in these descriptions at all, beat, push, seek information, etc. – so they rationalize the situation and try to solve it. Their behavior also falls within the traditional image of masculinity identified with strength, activity, and struggle. Slightly different is the reaction of younger women and girls to the outbreak of the war. The aforementioned Balinowska recognized the outbursts of fear, crying and horror as the grotesque face of the war. Janina Gajewska was rather excited about what was happening than terrified. Of course, there is no unambiguous explanation for this difference. Certainly, the age of the writers played a role, that these young women were not burdened with a family, they also had less life experience. Perhaps, however, changes in their reactions resulted from the progress of emancipation, above all a change in the model of education towards the valuing of independence and agency.

<sup>14</sup> S. Dzikowska-Dobrowolska, a fragment of a diary in: A. Strońska, *Sennik galicyjski*, Warszawa, 1993, p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> H. Kozicka, *Rosjanie w Tarnopolu. Dziennik 1914–1916*, introd. and ed. by. I. Florczak, J. Gołota, Ostrołęka, 2015, p. 25 (23 Aug. 1914).

The beginning of the war is also tied to descriptions of women's reactions to the sounds of battle. Most often, the diaries indicate a *bang* that accompanied the wartime operations. It is hardly surprising that precisely these sounds of battle reach the civilians remaining in the rear as the first signs of the real proximity of the war. Zofia Nałkowska noted that after a few days' battle, "listening to these shots is becoming a torment. The fight is going on somewhere just outside of Warsaw, from the Mokotów side."<sup>16</sup> Her note also shows how difficult it is to wait for the unknown. According to her own account, Helena Kozicka had a greater presence of mind, demanding that all the members of her household go down to the basement, where she prepared food supplies. However, her notes are not free from descriptions of trembling walls, bangs and fear. "We sat in silence and agony, shaking with each stronger boom"<sup>17</sup> – she wrote. All these accounts show that the first contact with real war caused strong emotional reactions, and only with time could one get used to wartime sounds. It is also worth noting that the sounds of war similarly affected soldiers who found themselves in the trenches.

An important element of women's accounts of the war, as mentioned above, is the description of daily life in wartime. It is hardly surprising. Most of the authors ran a household and issues related to provisioning the family were an important element of their everyday life. Some of them were gainfully employed. Janina Gajewska earned her living as a clerk. Maria Dąbrowska also worked throughout the entire war – she wrote texts for the press, gave lectures and talks. From July 1918 she worked in the Ministry of Agriculture and State Goods set up by the Regency Council. Aniela Belinowa, a twenty-six-year-old, who married a landowner from the Radom area, on 3 August, noted:

In the pantry, emptiness: five pounds of sugar, half a pound of tea, two pounds of coffee, a little kasha for the children. On the other hand, there is a lot of milk, because the Jew from Radomsko does not take it anymore. There is a little flour for bread. Regarding money, it is completely bad. We have something like 25 paper rubles, and there is some fear of a shortage of small change so that nobody wants to take them.<sup>18</sup>

In presenting the modest state of her provisions, which also proves that the outbreak of the war was unexpected, she at the same time pointed to one of the ills of the initial period after the beginning of the war – a lack of coins.

---

<sup>16</sup> Z. Nałkowska, op. cit., p. 359 (Górki, 14 Oct. 1914).

<sup>17</sup> H. Kozicka, op. cit., p. 26 (26 Aug. 1914).

<sup>18</sup> *Notatki z I wojny światowej Anieli Jałowieckiej-Belinowej*, ed. by K. Studnicka-Mariańczyk, A.J. Zakrzewski, Radomsko, 2014, p. 177 (3 Aug. 1914).

Further in the account, she added that the supply of food products was no better, while in stores “there is nothing anymore”.

During the analysis of the writings, there are clear differences in the situation due to where the writers lived. It is clearly visible that the situation of women landowners, who remained on their undestroyed estates, is much better than the inhabitants of cities, basically for the entire war. They describe how they deal with officers and soldiers quartered at manor houses, and how they try to help relatives and acquaintances staying in towns and cities. Ludwika Ostrowska, a sixty-year-old, co-owner of Maluszyn, wrote on 4 January 1915:

These sad holidays without *Pasterka* [Christmas midnight mass], without *Wilia* [Christmas Eve], without bells – but with a military star, in the salon for the officers, in the room near the pantry for non-commissioned officers, with singing until two at night, but without any excesses or drunkenness. Our champagne and other wines cheered up our guests. They looked through the basement, pantry and library, but they did not take everything away from us, except for the all weapons they had borrowed, and did not return. They hunted for pheasants and hares.<sup>19</sup>

Maria Stecka, a landowner from the vicinity of Zakliczyn near Tarnów, wrote in her journal several times about the requisitioning of various articles by soldiers. In November 1914, she noted: “Always the same thing, all morning soldiers walk in twos and threes, who you need to give bread and sausage to, and they demand vodka, but we do not give it.”<sup>20</sup> She praised their decent behavior, however.

This information about the proper behavior of soldiers is interesting material for analysis, above all, when confronted with the almost complete absence of information about rape in diaries. Only Maria Obertyńska mentioned it, but only as “second-hand” information. Perhaps in this way, the writers try to emphasize that soldiers do not always behave brutally and improperly, so fear of dealing with them, especially with invading armies, was not justified. Their class affiliation was also certainly not without significance. However, their accounts are worth mentioning all the more so, since at the same time the press, both in Galicia and the Kingdom of Poland, was buzzing with information about the improper behavior of soldiers. They were accused not only of petty thefts,

---

<sup>19</sup> *Trochę się zazdrości tym, co nie dożyli tych czasów... Dziennik Ludwiki Ostrowskiej z Maluszyna*, ed. by J. Kita, P. Zawilski, Warszawa, 2014, p. 106 (4 Jan. 1915).

<sup>20</sup> M. Stecka, *Dzienniki 19 Aug. 1914 – 10 May 1915*, Library of the Ossoliński National Institute (Biblioteka Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich, hereafter: BOss.) in Wrocław, Akc. 128/63, p. 55 (23 Nov. 1914).



but also of committing rapes, murders, etc. In any case, such information also appeared in official documents and reports written by men.<sup>21</sup>

In particular environments, you can see differences due to wealth, war experiences and personal character traits. During the war, such character traits as prudence and entrepreneurship revealed themselves. It is also necessary to be conscious of the fact that deteriorating living conditions for the aristocrat Maria Lubomirska, the landowner Maria Stecka, the resident of Płock Maria Macieszyna, and the Warsaw woman Janina Gajewska, meant different things. Women from working class families lived in incomparable conditions. The press noted the increasing prevalence of extreme poverty. For example:

Women [standing in line for bread] during this time reveal their worries from home to their neighbors, and in return receive the same. They sound a single note: anxiety for tomorrow. It towers in this gray crowd over the problems of today, which is still a day to live. But tomorrow may come a day when there may be nothing left to survive for. The factories are closed. There are no prospects for the resumption of work in them. Whatever public works are still in the long-term, and no one can predict any form or time to realize them. And children cry for food. You have to feed them, you have to feed the whole family.<sup>22</sup>

Younger women experience the inconveniences of war in other ways, unencumbered by their own family, differently if they are a bit older, especially when they alone bear the burden of the survival of their loved ones.

All the writers emphasized that living conditions, alongside the protracted war, were getting worse. For example, Maria Macieszyna recorded on 10 January 1916, when bread cards were introduced in Płock: “So far, despite the ban, the trade in flour and sugar continues on the side.”<sup>23</sup> However, a few months later, on 24 May, she wrote: “With regards to bread, things are getting worse. You cannot get anything without cards anymore and the rationed out half pound a day per person, in the absence of fats, turns out to be insufficient.”<sup>24</sup> At roughly the same time, Maria Lubomirska decided to breed piglets in her

---

<sup>21</sup> Eg., J.Z. Pająk, *Od autonomii do niepodległości. Kształtowanie się postaw politycznych i narodowych społeczeństwa Galicji w warunkach Wielkiej Wojny 1914–1918*, Kielce, 2012, pp. 92–93; M.E. Brensztejn, *Dziennik czasów okupacji niemieckiej Wilna (1915–1917)*, vol. 1: 18 May – 31 Dec. 1915, National Library (Biblioteka Narodowa, hereafter: BN) in Warsaw, II.10610, Mf. 63017, 16/29 Aug. 1915: “Soldiers’ shop robberies and raping of girls in suburbia”.

<sup>22</sup> *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, no. 36, 4 Sept. 1915, p. 539.

<sup>23</sup> M. Macieszyna, *Pamiętnik Płocczanki*, ed. by A.M. Stogowska, Płock 1996, p. 19 (10 Jan. 1916).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62 (24 May 1916).

residence in Frascati (a fashionable area near the center of Warsaw).<sup>25</sup> In turn, physician Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka reported in 1916 that “Today one-third of poor children (and there are hundreds of thousands of them), once a day eat so-called ‘committee soup’ – and the rest get something worse at home, even less nourishing food – they sleep in dirt, they wear dirty underwear on dirty skin, because the price of soap is insane.”<sup>26</sup> Maria Obertyńska mentioned that in Lwów, because the card system was not fully implemented, and the food situation was getting worse, the women standing in line looking at the cards would say “I think I will eat this paper”. She also wrote about children who were “wrapped in scarves at eleven o’clock at night at the doorstep of the shop, from which they were to receive bread the next morning.”<sup>27</sup> Reports from Tarnopol, occupied by the Russians, are also alarming, where in January 1916, food is expensive and supplies are running out. Kozicka wrote: “If hunger goes on like this, we are in danger, because there is a terrible emptiness in the stores and those without supplies are in trouble now.”<sup>28</sup>

The feeling that 1916 was a crisis point also comes across clearly in the accounts. It is usually only in 1916 that descriptions of real misery appear in the memoirs, which becomes visible on the streets of cities and towns, and both women and men notice it. Among the paupers the descriptions of women from the peasant class predominate – the attention of the writers is drawn to their darned, patched, heavily worn outfits, sometimes inadequate to the weather, emaciation, and sometimes swelling. They are often described with children or begging to ensure their survival. At the same time, such descriptions come from men only. The question arises whether this is a coincidence? Did their misery arouse greater sympathy in men because of their gender? Or maybe because men were to be responsible for the material existence of their families, when they went to war, women lost their only source of income, and given the terrible situation of the labor market, they could not find employment.

The notes from the following years are dominated by descriptions of food shortages. In June 1917, Maria Macieszyna noted: “Every day, around 30 people come to the Nagórki manor house [owned by Władysław Płoski], starved, hungry, begging for food. They give them almost everything, all the milk from the centrifuge and potatoes. There is not enough bread for them.

<sup>25</sup> *Pamiętnik księżnej...*, p. 315 (23 Jan. 1916).

<sup>26</sup> J. Budzińska-Tylicka, *W sprawie naszego bytu*, Warszawa, 1916, n. pag.

<sup>27</sup> M. Obertyńska, *W kołowrocie*, introd. by B. Janusz, Lwów, 1924, p. 105.

<sup>28</sup> H. Kozicka, op. cit., p. 84 (14 Jan. 1916).

They are satisfied when they get some raw potatoes.”<sup>29</sup> She added that in other manors the situation is similar, and primarily craftsmen and workers came for food, but the intelligentsia did as well. However, it does not follow from her records whether women were predominant among the beggars. Macieszyna also reported on the activity of landowning women, which founded so-called “nests” for orphaned, homeless and undernourished children, mainly from Warsaw.<sup>30</sup> Zofia Nałkowska in her journals wrote about Warsaw in March 1916:

It is bleak, hungry and hopeless outside. The faces of beggars on the streets, like pangs of remorse in a sleepwalker’s dream. Hundreds of children cannot move from hunger. Money has a ridiculous value and high prices tighten like a buckle around the throat... We are often hungry, dreaming of a good dinner with a hunk of roast beef, shrinking from weakness on spring days, when the sun bakes and the air is cold.<sup>31</sup>

Zofia Kirkor-Kiedroniowa mentioned that her family, living in Dąbrowa in Cieszyn Silesia, did not feel any shortages, as the coal basin was better supplied and they still had a garden and a piece of field that they used and added that “it was worse in the summer in Wisła”.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, a landowner from the Tarnów region, Maria Stecka, was not doing too badly, and even delivered food to a nearby hospital. This information confirms the thesis that in the cities the provisioning situation was much worse than in the countryside and that the quality of life during the war also depended on the level of destruction of a given area as a result of wartime operations.

Women from the more affluent classes, almost from the beginning of the war, were involved in helping the poor. They established cheap kitchens. Romana Pachucka, the same age as Gajewska, and a teacher involved in the emancipation movement, mentioned two cheap kitchens founded in 1914 by the Equal Rights for Polish Women Association (hereafter: ZRKP). Unfortunately, she did not mention how long these facilities functioned. Maria Binekówna, a member of the Association and a graduate of the business school in Kruszynek, managed a kitchen that opened in the Wola District of Warsaw; the other on Książęca Street was managed by Józefa Bojanowska, the informal vice-chair of the ZRKP, and the right hand and friend of Paulina Kuczalska-Reinschmit. The activists set them up to “make it easier for workers’

---

<sup>29</sup> M. Macieszyna, *op. cit.*, p. 229 (21 June 1917).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 229–230 (21 June 1917).

<sup>31</sup> Z. Nałkowska, *op. cit.*, p. 424 (30 March 1916).

<sup>32</sup> Z. Kirkor-Kiedroniowa, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

families to survive the hard times of the war.”<sup>33</sup> These initiatives are noted here primarily because they came from a feminist organization – the kitchens were founded and led by women. Many other institutions of this type were created as part of the activities of political parties, the Central Citizens’ Committee, etc., and their activities were often represented by men, although most often women headed individual institutions. The ZRKP also looked for employment for women, among other activities, they tried to obtain orders from the Citizens’ Committee for hats and pants. However, Romana Pachucka pointed out that men dealing with this kind of tailoring very quickly blocked this initiative of women and, as she writes, “only they obtained further orders.”<sup>34</sup>

Women also tried, as I mentioned, to help the poorest. Nuns were also involved in this type of work. When word reached the house of the habitless sisters in Lwów, that hunger had taken hold in Łomna, the mother superior “prepared a large stock of a variety of food in sacks and crates, I still associate the number 18 with these sacks and crates. There was kasha, sugar, biscuits, flour, tea, coffee, soap, etc.”<sup>35</sup> Provisions were also provided by Maria Stecka, mentioned earlier. She sent wagons with provisions to friends who took in refugees, but also organized the supply of soap, sugar, salt “for the poorest mothers”.<sup>36</sup>

In the writings of women we can also find information, although not much, about reactions to the mobilization of husbands and sons, and sporadically about reactions to the deaths of loved ones on the battlefield. Maria’s letters to her husband in the German army are representative of middle-class townspeople and the way they communicate. It seems that the wife tried to burden her husband as little as possible with the cares of everyday life. She tried to fulfill his requests for sending specific products, although certainly with time, due to the deteriorating situation in the Reich, getting them in the market was not easy. Matilda Sapieżyna, née Windisch-Graetz, lost her son in the war. Unfortunately, she had earlier supported his willingness to enlist in the army. On 14 June 1916, she wrote: “I often thought more about the benefits flowing from the war, his military career and my ambitions relative to him than about the great dangers he was exposed to!”<sup>37</sup> She appreciated, however,

---

<sup>33</sup> R. Pachucka, *Pamiętniki z lat 1914–1918*, BOss., 13976/II; BN, Mf. 60612, p. 12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> A. Żukowska CSFFM, *Wspomnienia 1886–1957*, Warszawa and Niepokalanów 2008, p. 46 – a fragment of a manuscript made available to me by Prof. Agata Mirek, to whom I would like to express my sincere thanks.

<sup>36</sup> M. Stecka, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>37</sup> M. Sapieżyna z Windisch-Graetzów, *My i nasze Siedliska*, Kraków, 2003, p. 294.

that “he realized in the highest degree the ideal of masculine heroism” which she dreamed of for her sons.<sup>38</sup> She did not give in to despair – she visited the Red Cross hospitals in the Kingdom of Poland. It seems, however, that despite her active lifestyle, her despair did not diminish. In 1919, she wrote: “it is necessary to begin each day anew, with the help of Holy Communion, this arduous journey to reach the evening.”<sup>39</sup> Her mood was further aggravated by the fact that her son’s body was not found and no one knew where he was buried. The parents made various efforts over a long period of time to find his remains. The case of Sapieżyna is a good starting point for a broader reflection on defining the roles of men and women in war and for a discussion on the understanding of the patriotic duties of both sexes. Her reaction to both the calling up to the army and then to death seems symptomatic.<sup>40</sup>

Some women, working as doctors, nurses or volunteers, had contact with the wounded and this gave them an idea of the horrors of war. Often it was also a traumatic experience. Maria Czapska opened up about this years later.<sup>41</sup> A realistic description was also left in the reminiscences of Zofia Guzowska, whose motivation for commitment to her work in the hospital in Lublin was pity for the “torn, martyred shreds of people” who had no one to help them. At the same time, the authorities were held responsible for inadequately prepared medical care. She noted her impressions: “I saw long, seemingly infinite processions of the wounded, bluish, crushed, visages of corpses, unlike human faces, I heard terrible groans of those operated on without anesthesia, somewhere hastily in a shed on straw, lit by a swinging kitchen oil lamp and the blood curdling wheezing of the dying, sick with tetanus and black pox...”<sup>42</sup> Helena Kozicka, describing the hospital in Tarnopol, also pointed to the lack of space, dressing materials and personnel. She added laconically: “I’ve seen terrible things.”<sup>43</sup> Terrible things were also seen by the inhabitants of Przemyśl during its siege.

The notes of sixteen-year-old Maria Balinowska are very interesting in this context. She kept a diary for a long time. Besides the period when she worked in a military hospital, in which she was allowed to work despite her age

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 343.

<sup>40</sup> On this subject: K. Sierakowska, “Wpływ powstania styczniowego na zakres patriotycznych obowiązków kobiet”, *Rocznik Antropologii Historii*, 4, 2014, no. 2 (7), pp. 77–93.

<sup>41</sup> M. Czapska, *Europa w rodzinie. Czas odmieniony*, Kraków, 2004, p. 237.

<sup>42</sup> Z. Guzowska ze Świącickich, *Za moich czasów. Pamiętniki z lat 1877–1948*, BN, Akc. 8036, p. 247.

<sup>43</sup> H. Kozicka, op. cit., p. 32 (28 Oct. 1914).

because her father was a doctor there, the diary is a typical record of a teenager and her problems. She wrote about this period in a completely different, much more mature language, abandoning any descriptions of her emotional states. Were it not for the same type of handwriting, one would have doubts as to whether the same person wrote both parts of the diary. This example shows how the war changed the perception of reality and how it forced maturation. The accounts collected by Feliks Gross in the interwar period among workers, also shows this process. Many boys from this milieu had to look for sources of income and help their mothers with the upkeep of families, most of all due to the mobilization of fathers. Years later, they concluded that the period of the war had conclusively ended their childhood.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Attitude of Women to the Issue of Regaining Independence, Their Views and Political Aspirations**

It is clearly visible that in the Polish case the thesis of Western historiography about the mobilization of women for the sake of war cannot be fully defended. Women in the Polish lands were mobilized for national rather than state activities, and this is, in my opinion, constitutes a significant difference. Mobilization on behalf of the partitioning powers made itself known, but only in the initial period of the war.<sup>45</sup> Maria Lubomirska, for example, recalled the enthusiasm of women who accompanied the Russian troops going into battle, emphasized the enthusiasm with which the recruits went to the army and astonishment of the Russian authorities, for whom it was totally unexpected.<sup>46</sup> From her journals, indeed, the excitement accompanying the start of the war clearly showed. And although she did not directly call the Russian army “our army”, she nevertheless condemned those adhering to a pro-German orientation. On the other hand, Helena Kozicka, living in Tarnopol, described the panic relating to the outbreak of the war, and unequivocally stressed that Poles were waiting for precisely such a situation. “We dreamed of such a war

---

<sup>44</sup> Z. Mysłakowski, F. Gross, *Robotnicy piszą. Pamiętniki robotników. Studium wstępne*, Kraków, 1938.

<sup>45</sup> For more on the subject of the double mobilization of Cracow’s population, see: A. Watson, “Kształtowanie się narodu, upadek społeczności lokalnej: Kraków w czasie wojny, 1914–1918”, in: *Studia i materiały do dziejów społecznych Polski 1914–1918*, ed. by K. Sierakowska, Warszawa, 2018, pp. 259–284.

<sup>46</sup> *Pamiętnik księżnej...*, pp. 14–15 (4 Aug., Tuesday).

after all, expecting freedom afterwards, Piłsudski was preparing the youth for it for many years in the *Strzelcy* [Riflemen's Association]".<sup>47</sup> She also definitely stood on the anti-Russian side, writing: "Indeed, under the word 'we' I mean only Poles and no one else, but I cannot consider one who fights with Russia an enemy..."<sup>48</sup> A similar attitude was presented by Zofia Romanowiczówna – a resident of Lwów.

In turn, Zofia Zawiszanka, engaged in Riflemen activities, recognized the Polish Legions as "our" army in her diary. She felt that she was a part of them, though she stressed that her job was to help her friends going into battle. However, she wanted to be active, and therefore she fought for the opportunity to serve as a scout. In her diary she expressed conviction that presenting women's activity in this area would show their indispensability in the struggle for independence.

The range of tasks on behalf of the Polish national question in which women were involved was very broad: care for soldiers, first-aid, charity, fundraising. They also organized celebrations of national anniversaries, for example, the Constitution of 3 May 1791, which the press meticulously noted. Apart from the lofty patriotic goal, celebrations were usually used to collect donations for various charitably activities. This connection was to guarantee, as you can expect, a greater turnout. Various forms of women's involvement in activities for the benefit of the national community during the First World War were described in two-volumes of remembrances issued on the tenth anniversary of independence.<sup>49</sup>

When analyzing personal documents, one should also ask about the aspirations and political awareness of the women. It seems that women had more of a social rather than political sensitivity. In their writings, they rarely expressed their political views. They also rarely were involved in typical political activities.

A special moment reflected in the notes was in November 1918. At the beginning of the month, Janina Gajewska, who claimed that in every company all talk was now almost exclusively about politics, she noted: "Some want the Regency Council, others do not want it. There is some directorate being formed in Cracow; in Lublin, they are forming some sort of democratic government"<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> H. Kozicka, op. cit., p. 21 (15 Aug. 1914).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 29 (10 Sept. 1914).

<sup>49</sup> *Wierna służba. Wspomnienia uczestniczek walk o niepodległość 1910–1915*, ed. by A. Piłsudska, Warszawa, 1927; *Służba ojczyźnie. Wspomnienia uczestniczek walk o niepodległość 1915–1918*, p. 29, comments by A. Piłsudska, ed. by M. Rychterówna, Warszawa 1929.

<sup>50</sup> J. Gajewska, op. cit., p. 298 (9 Nov. 1918).

expressing her concern about the divisions, but also her own distance towards the political game. The rhetorical question about the sense of the existence of political parties instead of the simple criterion of being Polish, strengthened this distance. It also showed that she had not really opted for any particular political grouping. A few days later, however, she clearly stated that she does not like socialism, identifying it with radicalism, she noted: "I am sure that this socialism is not a declaration of national faith, it is not the spirit of our soul."<sup>51</sup> However, she still did not refer to a specific political option, but rather she was fascinated by specific people such as Wojciech Korfanty.

It is difficult to say to what extent Gajewska's attitude can be perceived as typical for women. Certainly not for Zofia Moraczewska or Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka. Moraczewska was the organizer of the Polish Women's League in Galicia and one of its leading activists. Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka – was active before the war in the ZRKP in Warsaw and in other social organizations. During the war she led sanitary courses for women, organized a sanitary department, and then became the commandant of a field hospital in Pułtusk. In September 1917, which is particularly important for the discussions presented here, she organized a women's congress in Warsaw along with other activists, whose aim was to demand women's electoral rights, organize strategies on how to convince others to it and stress the role of women in various national activities during the war. Maria Macieszyna wrote about the moods prevailing in Płock and her own in her journal in the first days of November. At the news of the formation of the state, "I drenched myself with tears of joy", she noted. The people hung flags, spilled into the streets and showed their joy. The next few days brought more information about ever newer events. Macieszyna stated that "we read the newspapers passionately [...] and the *Kurier Płocki* keeps printing special updates. For half of a *Kurier*, with a few lines, printed in thick fonts, they make us pay 20 pfennigs. But everyone is buying: expecting news of peace, about the organization of the Polish government, about borderland issues."<sup>52</sup> She also meticulously reported the taking over of power from the Germans and their disarmament. Finally, on 12 November, she wrote: "Overall excitement! Overall joy! Everything elates, everything amuses!"<sup>53</sup> In the following days, she described in detail the shaping of power in the city, relations between various groups, the elections to the City Council and the activities of the Workers and

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>52</sup> M. Macieszyna, op. cit., p. 369 (7 Nov. 1918).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 375 (12 Nov. 1918).



Soldiers Council. The notes in her diary are evidence of Maria's interest in politics, both at the local and national level. However, it is worth adding here that the author was part of the intelligentsia, engaged in activities in Płock, as well as the wife of one of the more well-known inhabitants of Płock, the doctor Aleksander Maciesza. All of these circumstances undoubtedly influenced Maria's range of interests.

In her memoirs, Gajewska drew attention to Pilsudski's and the Regency Council's, appeal, which began with the words "*Obywatele i obywatelki*" [male and female citizens] – "I see this for the first time, that the *obywatelki* have not been omitted in appeals to the nation."<sup>54</sup> She also noted that the first days of independence did not reflect her imaginations of the moment: "confusion and rallies – this is the present moment", she declared on 29 November.<sup>55</sup> It seems that the November days were reflected in almost all women's diaries that I know of. Zofia Nałkowska wrote that she was "made anxious by politics", but nevertheless keeps her distance from it. She remains "in the rear, full of disbelief and deaf, feminine fear for what I will have to suffer".<sup>56</sup> There is concern by the writer about the politically involved Jan Gorzechowski and his consistency. Nałkowska does not allow herself to be carried away by the carefree joy of the end of the war, instead she perceives a revolutionary threat and sees national unity as illusory.

Interesting and noteworthy is the way of presenting the profiles and activities of men close to the writers – fathers, brothers, husbands, friends. Maria Lubomirska repeatedly invoked the actions of her husband, usually not expressing her views or agreeing with the opinions of "Zdzisiek". She is also worried about his health, whether stress will harm him. Similarly, Maria Macieszyna described her husband's activities in superlative tones. Aleksander Maciesza, like Zdzisław Lubomirski, is the person appearing most frequently in the diary's pages. Maria wrote about her husband thus:

Before our arrival, the German authorities, seeing everywhere traces of the social activity of Oleś [because he was the editor of *Głos Płocki*, chairman of the Academic Society, chairman of the People's House, member of the School Council, it was not possible to do anything in Płock without Maciesza] they asked what person this is, who everyone is talking about, and to whose authority they all defer?<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> J. Gajewska, op. cit., p. 300 (12 Nov. 1918).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 304 (29 Nov. 1918).

<sup>56</sup> Z. Nałkowska, *Dzienniki*, vol. 3: 1918–1930, Warszawa, 1980, p. 40 (Górki, 11 Nov. 1918).

<sup>57</sup> M. Macieszyna, op. cit., p. 65 (25 May 1916).

Aleksander also served in various functions in Płock later; among other things, he was the mayor in 1917–1919.

In general, however, in their reminiscences, especially in diaries and memoirs written during and shortly after the war, women devote quite little space to their involvement. Zofia Romanowicz recalls a proposal for her to take the chairmanship over the then-forming League of Women in Lwów. She agreed, but only after many pleas and she still reproached herself for not being active enough. She wrote: “Why am I not twenty years younger – how fervently and intensely I would work! Today I feel very unhelpful and I still want to remove myself, make way for someone more courageous, wise and resilient than me – I keep fighting for it – but in vain...”<sup>58</sup> Helena Kozicka in Tarnopol went to visit the wounded in the hospital.<sup>59</sup> Halina Rodzińska from Lilpop family recalls the preparation of meals for refugees who reached Warsaw thanks to their mother. In turn, women’s reminiscences also contain descriptions of the work of women in hospitals – both as medics and volunteer nurses. I have described this activity in more detail above and I recall it here because it was perceived by women themselves as a job for and in the Homeland, and so meant to prove their patriotism. The evidence for this is given by the interested parties, for example, this particular modesty can be attributed to the traditional understanding of their role. One can refer to Danuta Dąbrowska’s concept of the home as a refuge for a man in which a woman is waiting for him.<sup>60</sup> Thus, activity on the “home front” connects in a sense such a conception of a home with activity for the benefit of the community. Women are provoked to step out, in the opinion of Dąbrowska, by a “broadly understood, defending of the home and family for which they feel responsible.” And although she writes that unmarried and young women did not have such burdens, and therefore showed much greater political involvement, it is difficult to agree with her. The diary evidence clearly shows that many of them took over the burden of supporting parents and siblings during the war or had to contribute to the common budget due to the high prices of war.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Z. Romanowiczówna, op. cit., pp. 262–263 (4 Sept. 1915).

<sup>59</sup> H. Kozicka, op. cit., p. 31 (28 Oct. 1914).

<sup>60</sup> D. Dąbrowska, *Udomowiony świat. O kobiecym doświadczeniu historii*, Szczecin, 2004, p. 25.

<sup>61</sup> E.g., Janina Gajewska, who contributed to supporting her household from her salary, for example, by buying food at work at “more or less normal” prices. See: ead., op. cit., p. 122 (15 Nov. 1915).

## Conclusion

The topic of the influence of women's wartime experience on social relations and various spheres of life in the interwar period has not been studied thus far. This is a pity. The share of women in the population of Warsaw in the immediate post-war period was 55 per cent (52 per cent before the war), but adding the losses from the war in 1920, in 1925 there were still 119 women per 100 men.<sup>62</sup> In Łódź, the situation was even worse. The research of Bartosz Ogórek on Cracow also indicate a significantly disturbed proportion of men, especially between the ages of 20–29.<sup>63</sup> And though the numerical ratio evened out, it certainly influenced the modeling of social roles and gender relations. Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz also noticed that during the entire war, more girls than boys were born, so this trend probably later affected various spheres of life. It is also difficult to assume that the experience of war did not leave any mark on the way women thought and acted. As the analysis of the content of women's memoirs shows, the life of women during the war was no less affected by the war than that of men. They also experienced traumas connected with, for example, being evacuated, being locked in internment camps, and being in contact with soldiers. Often, they did not eat enough or even starved, and what could have been even more traumatic, they watched how hunger plagued their children, their diseases and often death.

Women in their journals, diaries and memoirs present the evolution of attitudes, but also the conditions of life, from the outbreak and the first contact with real war to everyday life in wartime. The most space is occupied by descriptions of the difficulties of provisioning and the deteriorating conditions of everyday existence. Often, at least periodically, they are quite meticulous. There is much contemplation regarding the progress of the war. The war forced many of them to take on new challenges. Almost all of them were involved in activities for the benefit of fellow countrymen – the wealthy established hospitals, cheap kitchens, orphanages, etc. Sometimes, they also worked in them. Others became medics, and were active in committees to help prisoners of war and refugees. They experienced separation from their loved ones – sometimes longer and sometimes shorter – and felt anxiety about them. Generally, they did not write much about politics, but in sum, their accounts contain a lot

---

<sup>62</sup> J. Homolicki, "Ludność Warszawy", *Kronika Warszawy*, 1925, no. 1, p. 11.

<sup>63</sup> B. Ogórek, *Niezatarte piętno? Wpływ I wojny światowej na ludność miasta Krakowa*, Kraków, 2018, p. 464.

of references to it. This indicates that the authors were interested in what is happening around them. One might agree with Anna Pekaniec, who writes:

If you can talk about the shared features of female autobiography about World War I, certainly one of them was/is the constant oscillation between the desire (felt or imputed by the rules of autobiographical discourse, of a duty that mainly resulted from the obligation to submit what is public/political over private), a precise report of observed historical events, and a desire to record yourself in words, write intimate sensations, personal thoughts, understood as a story about difficulties masking the wartime background of what was written, stubbornly returning, forcing the resignation from particular interests and aspirations.<sup>64</sup>

A reading of women's memoirs on the Great War also leads to the conclusion that the events of 1914–1918, for many women, became an education in independence in every possible sense of the word. Surviving the wartime turmoil, saving the family, and securing at least part of their assets showed that women are able to cope without the help of men. In this context, the lists of women published in *Piast* and advice published for them in this magazine seem very interesting. Both readers and editors realized that the men, after coming back from the war, would be different and that women were also changed by the war. Let the last sentence ending the discussions here be the quotation from the pages of *Bluszcz* as part of a response to a survey published by the editors of this magazine in 1932, which illustrates well, though in a somewhat simplified way, the change that occurred as a result of the war in the mutual relations of women and men:

He returned. Glued together with difficulty, patched, hysterical, neurasthenic. He came back to find out that his job was taken, that in the race of life he was left far behind in every stretch. And then she, the weak, unreasonable, and helpless being who was to have inevitably died without his care, said: "Do not worry, darling. When you were gone, I learned how to work..." Comforting? No, humiliation. Degradation. From the family head – to the family ballast.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> A. Pekaniec, "I wojna światowa w kobiecej literaturze dokumentu osobistego. O czym, jak, dlaczego (nie) pisano?", *Ruch Literacki*, 2017, no. 1, p. 35.

<sup>65</sup> "Ankieta 'Bluszczu'. O nowy typ mężczyzny" (a reply by J. Kiewnarska), *Bluszcz*, no. 47, 19 Nov. 1932, p. 3.