

Romanticization and Demonization: Galician Landscapes in Russian Combatants' Narratives During the Great War* **

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In terms of environmental history, the First World War represents one of the most significant information gaps of the Anthropocene, where the type of warfare and the fall of empires intensified the destructiveness of the interaction between people and nature, changing the geological and cultural characteristics of Central and Eastern European landscapes. The collision of mass armies with foreign landscapes and militarized natural environments left an indelible stamp on personal accounts of the Great War. The imagery of nature, both as an uncontrollable force and as an object of impact, abounds in a broad diversity of textual and visual sources, which range from official documentation to private correspondence and from propaganda newsreels to personal photographs. It appears that pictures of landscapes destroyed or transformed by war (as well as the related epidemiological and climatic threats) contributed to shaping combatants' existential experience to the same degree as short military operations. Unlike the universalized experience of the Western Front countries in the available literature on the environmental and spatial history of the First World War, the multiple ways in which mobile belligerent landscapes of the Eastern Front were experienced and perceived are yet to be addressed documentarily as well as methodologically. The article aims to reconstruct the horizons of expectation and environment construction strategies in combatants' individual narratives and to identify the meaning of belligerent landscapes in the formation of specific behavioral strategies and practices on the Eastern Front of the world's first industrial war. The analysis of ego-documents (letters, diaries, and memoirs) left by participants of WWI has identified a diversity of models for anthropomorphizing environmental objects and phenomena on the Eastern Front, which range from romanticization to demonization. The

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author aims to establish the way the perception of belligerent landscapes depends on the cultural baggage, prior experience of warfare, military branch, and the density of contacts with civilians populating the militarized spaces. One of the key messages of this study is the suggestion that the militarised environment's signification through religious, literary, epidemiological anti-Semitic and other lenses contributed to the normalization of combatants' mortal terror of war, their negative military experience, mourning, and nostalgia for the lost life-worlds.

Keywords: World War I, Eastern Front, belligerent landscapes, war experiences, anthropomorphisation, ecological history, narrative

Первая мировая война является одной из решающих цезур антропоцена, когда тип военных действий и развал империй усилили деструктивный характер взаимодействий человека и природы, изменили геологический и культурный облик ландшафтов Центральной и Восточной Европы. Столкновение армий Первой мировой войны с чужеродными ландшафтами и милитаризованной окружающей средой оставило яркий след в источниках личного происхождения. Образ природы как неконтролируемой силы и объекта воздействия проходит через широкий спектр текстовых и визуальных источников: от ведомственной документации до личной переписки, от пропагандистской кинохроники до частных фотографий. Образы уничтоженных или преобразенных в ходе войны ландшафтов, исходящие от них эпидемиологические и климатические угрозы выступали в качестве фактора формирования экзистенциального опыта комбатантов в той же степени, что и реальные кратковременные сражения. На фоне универсализации опыта стран Западного фронта в существующих исследованиях по экологической и пространственной истории Великой войны специфика переживания и рецепции маневренных бelligеративных ландшафтов Восточного фронта остается лакуной источникового и методологического плана. Статья посвящена изучению горизонтов ожидания и приемов конструирования окружающей среды в индивидуальных нарративах комбатантов, значения бelligеративных ландшафтов в формировании специфических поведенческих стратегий и практик на Восточном фронте первой индустриальной войны. На основе анализа эго-документов определяется спектр моделей антропоморфизации объектов и явлений окружающей среды в оккупированной Галиции от их романтизации до демонизации. В центре изучения находится восприятие бelligеративных ландшафтов в зависимости от культурного багажа, предшествующего военного опыта, принадлежности к роду войск, плотности контактов с гражданскими лицами, населяющими милитаризованные пространства. Одним из ключевых тезисов является предположение, что означивание военизированной окружающей среды через литературные, эпидемиологические, антисемитские и т. п. призмы способствовало нормализации смертельного ужаса войны, негативного боевого опыта, траура и ностальгии по утратам.

Ключевые слова: Первая мировая война, Восточный фронт, бelligеративные ландшафты, военный опыт, антропоморфизация, экологическая история, нарратив

From the perspective of the rapidly developing ecological and spatial history, World War I represents one of the most significant information gaps of the Anthropocene, a period when the destructive interaction between people and nature (exacerbated by the totalized warfare and the collapse of empires) transformed the geological and cultural characteristics of the colonially peripheral Central and Eastern European landscapes [Мамин, с. 10–28]. However, until recently, researchers tended to universalize the experience of the trench war at the Western Front, whereas mobile conflict landscapes of the Eastern Front were largely overlooked due to methodological limitations and unavailability of sources.

We have been living here in Galicia for one month,... our commander and our artillerist often go hunting for foxes and hares in these wonderful forests, always successfully <...> The leaves are falling off the trees in the forests; only the oaks are still covered in foliage... a thick carpet of fallen leaves rustles loudly under your feet at every step as the weather is still dry.¹

This bucolic account of the 1914 Russian occupation was left by military pilot Ivan Ognev in letters to his parents [РНБ. Ф. 1139. Д. 340. Л. 30]. The peaceful, indolent picture forms a stark contrast to Iosif Ilyin's description of his stay in Galicia during the Russian occupation:

This is where the terrible, foul-smelling, desperately ugly, wildly brutal face of the war glares at you. The feral dogs with blood-stained muzzles devour foul-smelling decaying bodies: the second you approach the animals, they run off a few yards and stare aggressively at you, waiting for you to leave so they can go on eating the corpse... [Ильин, с. 88].

What factors define the anthropological construction of natural environment (subdued but potentially still dangerous) during the war? Why are some descriptions full of terrifying naturalistic details, and why do others romanticize natural scenery, make it appear uninhabited and remote from the war? How are landscapes used by witnesses to the fall of empires to make sense of, and perpetuate, the toxic legacy of WWI, which would have a profound impact on both the painful birth of new states and preparation for the next war?

The Russian occupation of Galicia in 1914–1915 (and, for a brief period, in 1916) offers a promising area for research on perceptions of close and lasting contacts between armies many thousand strong and the alien nature. Images of the militarized environment in combatants' individual narratives provide a point of access to the interrelation between the pre-war horizon of expectations and the space of new experience, while opening vast prospects for exploring the construction

¹ This quote has been translated from Russian by N. Magnes. The translator sought to convey the meaning of the original texts rather than their style.

of combat landscapes, the development of behavioral strategies, and the mental mapping of the occupied territory [Козеллек]. In descriptions by witnesses to military events, the Galician environment emerges as a multidimensional social construct, represented in turns as a multitude of death spaces, as nature's treasure trove and as a lost and recovered homeland; this construct often performs psychotherapeutic functions.

One of the methods crucial to my analysis of references to nature in combatant narratives is the phenomenological approach to the description of relations between First World War soldiers and conflict spaces, pioneered by Kurt Lewin in 1917 in his article *Kriegslandschaft* [Lewin]. Lewin reflects on his own experience with landscape, both under warfare and during a period of comparative quiet after attacks. As Lewin points out, war structures individual perceptions of landscape in its own special way; in his work, he focuses on landscape directionality, danger zones, the rapidly alternating empty spaces of potential death and relative safety. The author argues that the perception of nature by combatants depended on their military branch, their involvement in intense military operations, the work they did in the army, and the density of their interaction with the local environment and residents.

The culturally situated perception of nature by Western Front combatants received a detailed treatment in Paul Fussell's classical study *The Great War and Modern Memory* [Fussell] first published in 1975. Fussell holds that WWI brought about a new condition of consciousness, a cardinal transformation of world outlook, which, in turn, required new literary forms as the language of contemporary fiction failed to articulate the experience of the military catastrophe. Using textual deconstruction, Fussell identified the principles and stylistic methods developed by "trench authors", and established points of continuity and departure from earlier literary traditions. Our study adopts this approach in its modified form to decode the semantic framework for the perception of conflict landscapes and to identify factors involved in both the mental construction of nature by Russian combatants and the way this construct was reflected in individual and collective communication and behavior.

The Soviet discourse on the Great War is explored in Karen Petrone's excellent work [Petrone]. Petrone claims that Soviet ideology devised a set of "standard tropes" to represent and interpret the military conflict, the most crucial of them being heroic masculinity, violence, and patriotism. In my opinion, this list of prescribed discursive practices vis-à-vis the Great War must be extended to include anthropomorphization of the environment by combatants. In numerous Soviet and émigré memoirs (both of peripheral importance to Petrone's study), natural objects and phenomena act as a discursive framework for military events: they may connote victory or defeat and provide combatants with a medium for the construction of their new identity.

In his analysis of the perception of exotic Middle Eastern nature by Europeans, Oliver Stein argues that descriptions of nature were used

by servicemen in communications with their families and friends in the rear to avoid references to mortal danger and frontline hardships which the combatants were subject to [Stein]. Being based on sources similar to ours (ego-documents of German servicemen in the Middle East), Stein's methodology appears particularly relevant to this study. The researcher notes that letters by soldiers and officers often evoked a form of travel narrative shaped by pre-war fiction. The impressions from the unusual climatic, topographical, and infrastructural situation in the previously imagined Orient catalyzed the use of pervasive cultural canons in descriptions of new shocking experiences. Images of the exotic environment in ego-documents were replaced by descriptions of horrors of the war and personal suffering. On the contrary, the end of the war and the formation of the memorial narrative led to a gradual transformation of nature into the main adversary and key threat. The perceptions of nature by Russian soldiers and officers as well as the role of landscapes in the development of existential experience of the participants of the Great War will be approached here from the point of view of interdisciplinary analysis of combatants' individual narratives which form part of the communicative memory about the past conflict. I will proceed from the assumption that the perception and construction of conflict landscapes in ego-documents depended on the cultural baggage of the author, their past and subsequent military experience, the military branch and the density of contacts with civilians residing in militarized spaces.

The image of nature in Russian military propaganda during the First World War

In Russia, the discursive construction of Galicia as a potential battleground had started long before the First World War. The public horizon of expectations developed under the influence of academic publications by university professors, who shared Russophile views on the history of the Austrian province which was to be annexed by Russia. The Galician–Russian Charitable Society established in 1902 specialized in the publication of conservative-nationalist propaganda materials (books, brochures, pamphlets and transcripts of public letters) in support of a war for Galicia [Бахтурина].

The publications called for a liberation war in the name of saving the Galician population from Austrian oppression. The propaganda sources focused on the ethnic kinship of the peoples of Galicia and Russia and their shared historical past; the authors sought to "... rediscover this part of historically Russian, Orthodox land, its history and its present condition on the eve of a war" [Бурчак, с. 1].

However, the historical and cultural connectedness of Russia and Galicia was not the only recurring theme in propaganda literature. D. Vergun, the chief ideologue of the Galician–Russian Society, associated the ethnic unity of both countries with a specific type of landscape:

What makes Galicia so dear to us? Like an adult reveres the cradle he lay in during his infancy, we must take interest in the Carpathians, the cradle of our people, the very place which historians link with ‘the origin of the land of Rus’ [Бергун, с. 54].

The author’s argumentation is metaphorically emphasized by the imagined steadfastness and immutability of the Carpathians, with their geographical location in the heart of Europe and their historical role as the cradle of Russians and Ruthenians enhancing the geopolitical message.

Overall, the analysis of the publications by the Galician–Russian Society demonstrates that appeals to similarity of the natural environments of Russia and Galicia were intended to mobilize Russians for the war: “East Galicia with its loess soils is also rich in black earth, which is not much different from the chernozem found in the neighboring Podolsk Province” [Танфильев, с. 11]. Parallels between Russian and Galician forests, steppes, and river landscapes were invariably accompanied by the same refrain:

Like in Russia, the steppes in Galicia are incised by an extensive network of ravines... Likewise, the vast interfluves are mainly taken up by fields, with just a few villages; like their Russian counterparts, the villages are generally situated along the banks of rivers, small and large [Танфильев, с. 12].

Besides the geographical and environmental considerations, Russophile pamphlets abounded in linguistic arguments; the forged semantic closeness of names for natural objects was an attempt at “inventing traditions” [Hobsbawm]:

The Carpathians are the only mountain ridge in the Russian land where nearly all names of mountains and hills, rivers and valleys sound endearingly familiar, and every blade of grass, every bush is stirred by memories shared by our tribe [Бергун, с. 54].

By constructing a mental map of Galicia, this discourse strengthened the province’s links with the imagined imperial community.

The pamphlets characterized Galicia as a bountiful land with rich natural resources and considerable economic potential:

“The conditions for the development of commerce in Galicia are nothing short of brilliant” [Там же, с. 59]. Some of the expected economic benefits from the annexation are associated with natural landmarks such as healthy waters: “There are many mineral springs with a long tradition of use on both slopes of the Carpathians. The spas at Szczawnica, Krynica, Iwonicz, Dornavátra, etc. have become widely known across Middle Europe” [Там же, с. 54].

Prior to the immediate contact with the enemy, the idea of a potential battleground was promoted by targeted propaganda and social mandate. This explains why individual narratives by Russian combatants initially

excluded Galician landscapes from the “image of the enemy”: indeed, Russian publications about Galicia, particularly its eastern part, represented the province in a positive light and differentiated it from the hostile Austria, with Carpathians as the natural boundary. In ego-documents from the Eastern Front which reflected individual perceptions of the new military experience, references to natural phenomena and landscapes were used to convey and emphasize the author’s emotions. One recurrent descriptive strategy aligning the writer’s inner state with the Galician landscapes was the anthropomorphism of natural forces, which combatants endowed with human qualities and characteristics. Depending on the period of the occupation, this trope manifested itself in two principal forms: landscapes could be romanticized or demonized.

Romantic travels across Galicia during the war

Born into an educated family in Vyatka, Ivan Ognev graduated from the Gatchina School of Military Aviation and joined the army as a volunteer in 1914. The letters Ognev sent his parents from Galicia contain detailed, almost photographic accounts of his wartime experiences. Today, being aware of the circumstances under which the letters were written, one cannot help wondering how the following passage could have originated amid a war:

The weather is wonderful; however, the flights are rare as the high altitudes are bumpy. The trees are dropping their blossoms, but the meadows are bursting with color, and new greenery has been popping up everywhere... especially after several thunderstorms. We have literally nothing to do; we take strolls in the countryside and go swimming in the Aa. It’s a beautiful river; when you stand neck-deep in the water, you can see your toes clearly; the fast current flows over a pebbly bed, and the sand is very large” [PHБ. Ф. 1139. Д. 340. Л. 19].

Many letters present a stark contrast to the established “horrors of the war” canon:

In the evening, you can go for a long walk and stop by a brook on the slope; if a hare comes running or a fox steals to the waterside, you will hear it in the quiet from far away. When the moon rises, you can see everything clearly as the nights here are wonderfully transparent... [Там же. Л. 30].

The writer carefully avoids any mention of everyday life in the army, most likely in an attempt to safeguard his family from worries and fills the voids with peaceful nature scenes. The invisibility of war in Ognev’s narrative may also be explained by his job: as a mechanic of the Ilya Muromets biplane, he oversaw the repairs and maintenance, and never had to destroy the enemy or conduct bombing himself.

Apart from idyllic portrayals of the scenery, the combatant writers that romanticized Galician landscapes also produced “travel narratives” [Stein]:

“The headquarters have moved... much closer. This is all for the best, because we can get to see new places” [РНБ. Ф. 1139. Д. 340. Л. 34]. The motif of new impressions features prominently in Iosif Ilyin’s accounts of his journeys across Galician conflict landscapes: “I stopped for the night in Podberesie-Germanovo” [Ильин, с. 115], “I passed through a lovely, remarkably clean town of Brzeżany...” [Там же, с. 117], “Zaleshchyky is a semi-ruined town on the side of the Dniester” [Там же, с. 119]. Contacts with new locations are described in a style strongly evocative of peacetime family outings to the countryside. Ilyin provides detailed, expressive depictions of Galician scenery: “The site looks quite beautiful from the southwest: the mountains are thickly forested, with lakes and a river at the foot” [Там же, с. 117].

Experienced travelers would compare the Galician landscape with places they had previously visited. Artillery lieutenant Fyodor Stepun, who had spent several years studying philosophy at Heidelberg University, included a nostalgic reminder of a German landscape in his Galician diaries, even though the features he referred to were part of the enemy territory: “How strange it was to see a familiar Russian troika amidst the romantic Galician landscape, which vividly reminded me of the Heidelberg hills and the quiet Neckar valley!” [Степун, с. 24]. Officers, besides the desire to adapt to the alien environment, showed a passion for exoticism and a natural curiosity, attempting to link the new spaces and cultural context with familiar imagery: “At about four o’clock, I crossed the fast and broad San. It is a beautiful river, particularly amid this majestic mountainous landscape with steep banks. It reminded me of my childhood and the Caucasus...” [Ильин, с. 87].

On one hand, the environment and nature landmarks are seen as sources of aesthetic pleasure:

The Vistula is very beautiful, fast-flowing and broad” [Там же, с. 70], “The panorama is wonderful: the landscape spreads out in front of you as far as the eye can see. The town lies on a peninsula formed by the curve of the Dniester, and wears a hat of greenery, with towering poplars scattered around like sentinels [Там же, с. 120].

On the other, the pervasive theme of the change of scenery and the focus on the beauty of the landscape rather than on the hardships and dangers of the march betray the writer’s wish to cling to the illusion of a peaceful life despite the changed circumstances. The flamboyant metaphors, the fairy-tale motifs in landscape descriptions and the language of Symbolism used by the writer to convey his emotions help to gloss over the unappealing military everyday:

The road after Brzeżany looks as if it has come out of a fairy-tale: the highway meanders through the mountains between the forests and valleys. The panorama from the top of the mountain ridge is amazing: the road we walked on winds through the curly crowns of giant trees like a white ribbon.

Sometimes it vanishes from sight, sometimes it resurfaces among the green trees. The vegetation is very diverse, with a lot of leafy trees and many oak groves [Ильин, с. 117].

This trend may manifest itself in the “dehumanization” of spaces: being the living embodiments of hardship, suffering and a way of life destroyed by poverty, people (locals in particular) are completely absent from the narrative.

The militarized space in Ognev’s letters is represented in natural and historical terms:

I wish you were here! There are some very interesting places: enormous ravines with fossils; forests which look nothing like Russian ones, teeming with squirrels, hares, and other animals; in places, you stumble upon whole mazes of abandoned, half-overgrown trenches, with dugouts and bunkers inhabited by wild goats [РНБ. Ф. 1139. Д. 340. Л. 40].

The descriptions of burgeoning wildlife which can thrive only in peaceful times and in an environment undisturbed by shell explosions, take the threat out of the landscapes; even explicitly military structures are transformed into imaginary ruins deserving slow, absorbed contemplation. The writer seems to invite his parents on a country trip, as if paying homage to a long-standing family tradition.

Attempts to escape from the dreary reality of the army and immerse oneself in the customary cultural practices of reading and romantic solitude in the lap of nature demonstrate the resilience of pre-war youth fiction canons:

There is a cave about 500 yards from us... a whole labyrinth, some parts of it have crumbled... I nearly fell through the overgrown mouth of the cave, then climbed in: it was spacious inside. I wanted to make a “fireplace” there but could not get rid of the smoke; however, I will think of something: it will be nice to spend some time there and read a book in absolute quiet [Там же. Л. 31].

Demonized nature in narratives of military defeat

The traumatizing experiences of the Russian defeat and retreat in 1915 shifted the horizon of expectations for Russian combatants, altering the ways Galician landscapes were represented in individual narratives. It was a time when propaganda clichés and the canons of romantic symbolization of nature lost their appeal. Not only did the environment and separate spaces come to be perceived as hostile; they were demonized by the writers, who saw them as an enemy even more dangerous than the Austrian and German armies. Negative anthropomorphism is used by Fyodor Stepun to describe his experience of retreat from Galicia: “The retreat was extremely difficult,

with Austrians behind, Austrians ahead and more Austrians flanking us. To make things worse, there were two other far more dangerous enemies: the total incompetence of the commandment and the enraged nature” [Степун, с. 37].

After the collapse of the Russian offensive, the militarized Galician landscapes in servicemen’s narratives came alive with people – both the local residents and the enemy. The descriptions of nature still bordered on propaganda, but were now a far cry from glorification:

Again we find ourselves on the side of the majestic Danube. How many times Russian armies crossed the Danube in centuries gone by to protect their younger Slavic brothers! And now we are retreating in shame. It is galling to understand one’s helplessness [Там же].

The turn in the portrayal of conflict landscapes is best exemplified by diaries which Ilyin kept at the end of May 1915 when withdrawing from Galicia with the Russian army: his lost illusions about the war are projected onto his perception of the environment; hence the attempts to compensate for the unflattering comparison of his home country with the enemy territory:

Motherland! How I understand this word now. I can sense Russia in everything I see: the bad roads, the disorder. Where are you, the cleanliness and civility of Galicia? And yet I feel at home now. Even the Jews here are different, much nicer, and more agreeable [Ильин, с. 12].

The anti-Semitic remark at the end betrays the writer’s gloating over a weakness of the enemy, i. e. the disparity between the impoverished Jewish villages and the tidy, well-groomed Galician towns.

A graphic description of the military catastrophe and the heavy losses of the Russian army can be found in V. Belov’s journal; the episode is organized around the “blood river” metaphor, easily decodable by any Russian reader:

Clutching the trunk of an old, melancholic willow and holding the branch with his injured hand, he bent down to scoop a handful of wholesome water, dampened his burning forehead and temples, lifted another handful to his mouth. He was struck by the unusual salty taste and the faint foreign smell of the water. He looked at his palm, then instantly opened his hand, horror-struck, and looked in front of himself; a lonely desperate cry shook the silence of the old forest. Breaking through the branches of the sparse trees, the copper-colored slanting rays of the setting sun were gliding over the lazy, oil-like ripples of a vast lake, where the water was crimson... [Белов, с. 123].

The political context of the source must be taken into consideration if we are to fully appreciate the implications of this passage; indeed, an officer’s journal published at the height of the military campaign was bound to

contain propaganda messages. The overused “blood river” metaphor aims to elicit a strong emotional response on the part of the audience and to promote patriotic feelings by concentrating the readers’ attentions on the great sacrifices made during the liberation war.

In Stepun’s diary, landscape serves to illustrate the dehumanizing effect of the war, which found its most visible manifestation in the new weapons. The text abounds in gruesome naturalistic details and shocking descriptions of the smells, corpses, and mass graves:

To my left and right, bodies lay scattered. The bodies of Russian soldiers and enemy soldiers; some were fresh, others had been lying there for days; some were whole, others mutilated. It was especially painful to look at their hair, partings, nails, hands... In places, I could see dead people’s feet sticking out of the shallow graves”. Apart from destroying the environment, the new type of warfare pollutes the nature with human presence and deprives it of original purity: “...the abomination of desolation is everywhere. All around the church and our house the trenches are littered with waste, blooded cotton, and bandages [Степун, с. 19].

One of the most extreme examples of the destructive human impact on the landscape in the occupied areas was the scorched earth policy, references to which occurred in combatant narratives from the earliest stages of the war. However, the first instances of this strategy were associated with the enemy: “They say the retreating Germans poison fodder with strychnine before the arrival of the Russian army” [Смирнов-Рунский, с. 24]. To justify the extensive damage caused to the environment by the Russian army, the combatants would demonize the local landscape, presenting it as a real enemy: “The retreat was highly organized. We took no prisoners and left no wounded. The countryside which our troops crossed was put to fire. Villages and heaps of grain were set ablaze; the cattle were either destroyed or ran off by the troops” [Торнау, с. 73].

Memoirs recording war devastation explicitly state that the destruction of the environment was intended to weaken the enemy:

When orders had been received to withdraw from the Carpathians in spring 1915, the army headquarters commanded to set fire to the lumberyard in Turka and the oil wells near Drohobych. The blazing lumberyard produced so much heat that Turka nearly went into flames. The colossal black cloud from the burning oil stretched over several miles, making it hard to breathe [Экк, с. 559–574].

Many strategic sites were demolished: “...we set out to destroy the bridge. The charges were planted and set on fire, and the bridge went up; what remained from the bridge on the banks was covered in pitch and burned” [РГИА. Ф. 834. Оп. 4. Д. 605. Л. 15]. Notably, reminiscences of high-ranking Russian officers are free from any personal reactions to such

acts: the imperative to destroy the enemy's resources was prioritized above the necessity to protect the natural wealth and technical facilities for the former "Ruthenian brothers".

* * *

The image of nature as an uncontrollable force and an object of impact is a recurrent theme in written testimonies of the First World War which range from official documentation to personal correspondence and from propagandist newsreels to private photographs.

Individual narratives (letters, diaries, memoirs) of Russian combatants during the Great War construct rivers, mountains, and forest landscapes of occupied Galicia via anthropomorphism: natural objects and phenomena are romanticized or demonized, stripped of the polluting human presence or associated with scorched earth practices and emphatic anti-Semitism.

Romanticized images of Galician landscapes predominate in documents that originated during the early period of the Russian occupation. The writers that evoked bucolic scenes in their diaries or personal correspondence with relatives in the rear generally displayed a high level of education and erudition and, in some cases, had had prior travelling experience. In general, romantic descriptions of Galician nature are free from obvious signs of war; imaginary landscapes are forcibly "cleansed" from any presence of the devastated, suffering Galician people who bore witnesses to the tragic events. The demonization of Galician landscapes, on the contrary, stemmed from the necessity to make sense of the negative military experience associated with the catastrophic retreat of the Russian army. The environment, reinterpreted as a mortal enemy, suddenly filled with people representing the hostile local community; nature itself turned into an insuperable force which allied with the enemy and contributed to the military defeat.

The role of conflict landscapes in the development of specific behavioral strategies and practices at the Eastern Front during the world's first industrial war is not readily definable. On one hand, the aesthetic perception of the natural environment by combatants helped normalize the mortal dread of the war, the negative battlefield experience, the mourning for the perished servicemen, and the nostalgia for the lost life worlds; in short, it performed a therapeutic function. On the other hand, the existential experience of the combatants was determined by images of landscapes destroyed or devastated by people or epidemiological and climatic threats to the same extent as the actual hostilities.

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