**Ego-Documents from the Invasion of East Prussia, 1914-15**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The historiography of Ego-documents has, from its inception, been bound up with the human experience of war, murder and destruction. Jacob Presser, the Dutch historian who coined the term in 1958, acquired his understanding of the complexity of accounts of personal experience through his use of Jewish Holocaust survivor interviews. Since his writings, the rise of ‘discourse analysis’ has cast doubt on how much Ego-documents can convey about individuals’ inner lives, yet even hardened postmodernist critics have been prepared to accept that the haze of socially-rooted discourse can be broken, if only occasionally, by cries of individual anguish.[[1]](#footnote-1) This chapter thus situates itself in a long tradition of drawing on Ego-documents to expose and understand experiences of extreme violence. It uses these sources to illuminate the travails and suffering of the victims of Russian military atrocities in the German province of East Prussia in 1914-15. It also seeks to underline these sources’ complexity by showing how these apparently individualist, personal documents could be coopted, utilised or, indeed, written for the purposes of wider groups, be it to strengthen regional community identities or mobilise still wider circles for national war efforts.

The Russian army’s invasions of Germany during the First World War, the context of the sources under investigation in this chapter, are today barely remembered. They comprised two major incursions and a bloody raid. The first attack began in mid-August 1914 when two armies invaded from the east and south-east and briefly overran two-thirds of East Prussia. One army, the Second Army under General Aleksandr Samsonov, was encircled and destroyed by the Germans at the Battle of Tannenberg in the last days of August. The Russian First Army, led by General Pavel Rennenkampf, was then beaten eastwards and hurriedly retreated from German soil in the first half of September. At the start of November, a second invasion was launched by a new Tsarist army, General Sievers’s Tenth Army. This force conquered less land, taking only one-fifth of the province, but it held the ground for much longer. Not until mid-February 1915 was the occupied territory liberated by a German counterattack. The Tsarist army’s final incursion onto German soil was a raid by 4,000 troops on the northerly city of Memel (today Klaipėda in Lithuania) in March 1915. The strategic rationale for the operation is difficult to divine, and it lasted only five days thanks to a rapidly dispatched German relief force. Although brief, it was bloody: the invaders murdered more than seventy civilians and forcibly deported another 472, three-fifths of whom were women and children, into the Tsarist Empire.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Tsarist army behaved brutally in East Prussia, and as its violence is the backdrop to our sources, it is necessary briefly to explain the reasons. Ethnic-related preconceptions were central. In the decade before 1914, the Russian officer corps had embraced ethnic profiling, and the Tsar’s General Staff had commissioned ethnographic studies of the territories over which it might have to fight. These sought to assess how their inhabitants would behave in the event of invasion. Germans were regarded as highly dangerous.[[3]](#footnote-3) When the first invasion of East Prussia began in August 1914, Russian commanders therefore advanced with the expectation of meeting civilian hostility. Among General Rennenkampf’s first actions on crossing the German border was to issue a chilling warning to the enemy populace:

**Announcement**

**To All Inhabitants of East Prussia**

Yesterday, the 4th/17th August the imperial Russian army crossed the border of Prussia and, in combat with the German army, continues its advance.

The will of the Emperor of all Russians is to spare peaceful inhabitants.

According to the authority invested from on high in me, I let the following be known:

1. Any resistance carried out by the inhabitants against the imperial Russian army will be ruthlessly punished, regardless of sex or age
2. Places in which even the smallest attack on the Russian army is perpetrated … will be immediately burned to the ground.

… Signed: von Rennenkampf.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The fast-paced, disorientating and fluid combat fought by troops who were difficult to see due to their camouflage uniforms and smokeless weapons appeared to Russian officers to confirm their presumption that German civilians would resist, either by shooting or – the primary paranoia of the Tsar’s army – by spying. Punishments and reprisals were ordered. Moreover, further endangering East Prussians’ lives was the patchy discipline of the invading forces. Under officer supervision, large bodies of infantry generally behaved well. However, rearline units and small cavalry patrols were venal and brutal. Cossack horsemen were particularly feared by the population of the invaded province, although it is difficult to know whether this was because they were indeed unusually violent during the invasion or the fear merely reflected their longstanding reputation for wild cruelty; it is unlikely that most civilians in East Prussia could distinguish between Cossacks and other similarly equipped mounted troops. Certainly, the province’s clergy regarded all small bands of enemy horsemen to be dangerous, complaining that they had ‘stolen, robbed, murdered to their heart’s content.’[[5]](#footnote-5)

Civilians in East Prussia thus experienced a level of violence during the Russian invasions which was comparable to that of the better known, contemporaneous German military ‘atrocities’ in Belgium and France.[[6]](#footnote-6) Worse still, this violence radicalised in ways not seen in the west. The overwhelming majority – up to 90 per cent – of the approximately 1,500 civilians killed by the invaders were murdered in the course of looting, executed or massacred during the first campaign in August and September 1914. During the second invasion, the Tsarist army relied more on forced deportation to secure the territory it had occupied. The Russians had already arrested and removed military-aged men in the summer operation, but over the winter of 1914-15 they deported whole communities. By one official estimate, around 30 per cent of inhabitants who stayed under occupation were ripped from their homes and taken deep into Russia.[[7]](#footnote-7) Among the more than 13,000 civilians forced out were 4,000 women and 2,500 children. Lethal winter journeys and hard conditions in exile resulted in the deaths of nearly a third of those deported, over 4,000 people. These deportations should be understood in the context of much wider forced removals inflicted broadly simultaneously by the Tsarist army on hundreds of thousands of German, Jewish and Muslim Russian-subject minorities living in the Russian Empire’s western borderlands and the Caucasus.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Alongside the official ‘atrocities’ of executions and deportations were ill-disciplined acts of violence such as looting or rape. The number of sexual assaults by Russian soldiers in East Prussia numbered a minimum of 338. There was plenty of robbery, often accompanied by beatings. Moreover, even if their bodies escaped harm, civilians frequently saw their property reduced to ash. Mostly through fighting, but also as the result of deliberate Russian military reprisals, more than 100,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed. By the spring of 1915, after the last Tsarist troops had been repelled from German soil, three-fifths of East Prussia’s small towns and over a quarter of its farms and villages lay in ruins. The population was also displaced. More than 800,000 people, nearly half of the province’s population, had either briefly or for longer periods abandoned their homes for the safety of nearby forests, for the provincial capital, Königsberg, or for the interior of Germany.

**EGO-DOCUMENTS**

The Russian invasions generated a diverse and very large quantity of documentation; a fact which makes it surprising that historians for so long have dismissed or doubted the violence perpetrated there against civilians.[[9]](#footnote-9) The major repositories today are the *Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz* in Berlin and the *Archiwum Państwowe* in Olsztyn, Poland. These archives contain official records of the invasion and its impact such as government minutes, police and military reports, and statistics and returns on the damage compiled by the provincial administration. Among these files are also very many sources that would fall into the category of Ego-documents: above all, eyewitness accounts of the invading Russian army’s actions and witness and victim testimony to local officials and law courts. The primary reason for their abundance is that in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, great efforts were made to encourage and collect personal accounts from East Prussians of the invasion and atrocities.

Two related but distinct drives were made to collect East Prussians’ personal accounts. The first was centrally-inspired and began early, already during the summer invasion. Determined to establish whether the reports and rumours of Russian military violence were true, the Prussian Interior Minister in Berlin ordered at the end of August the Heads of East Prussia’s three counties, Allenstein, Gumbinnen and (a little later, in mid-September) Königsberg, to organise investigative commissions. Initially, these relied principally on the accounts of local state and church officials, but in November 1914, the Prussian state’s court system was ordered to assist.[[10]](#footnote-10) For two years, until the autumn of 1916, judicial officials roved the liberated countryside, taking sworn testimonies from all who had suffered at Russian hands. Appeals were also quickly issued in newspapers across Germany for ‘reliable accounts’ of ‘atrocities and depredations by Russian troops in East Prussia.’[[11]](#footnote-11) This testimony-taking was motivated by two considerations. First, there was a financial motive. Article 3 of the Hague Convention of 1907, which laid down the laws of war, including military forces’ treatment of enemy civilians, obligated belligerents whose soldiers violated its provisions to pay compensation. Victim and witness accounts would help Reich authorities to identify such cases. The second motivation was diplomatic and propagandistic. By late August, accounts of the German army’s own violence against Belgian civilians were circulating in Entente and neutral lands. The German government wished to counter the negative international publicity produced by these reports and attract sympathy by issuing a painstakingly researched, incontrovertible diplomatic document on its own people’s suffering at the hands of barbaric eastern invaders. In March 1915, an official ‘White Book’ appeared, entitled *Atrocities of Russian Troops against German Civilians and German Prisoners of War*. Among the documentation it reproduced was a small selection of the mass of collected sworn testimonies.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The second collection of personal testimony from the invasion was run at the provincial level. Behind it stood the East Prussian Senior President (the province’s chief civil servant) Adolf von Batocki and a new organisation, the ‘Provincial Commission for East Prussian War History’, established in September 1915. The purpose was to gather material for a history of the province’s war experience. Even by today’s standards, the project was visionary and carried out with impressive systematism. Teachers, the upstanding representatives of the state in East Prussia’s many small villages, had already since the beginning of 1915 been collecting, at Batocki’s behest, the accounts of refugees. This practice was widened, so that across the province over the winter of 1915-16, hundreds of teachers interviewed their neighbours, noted down their war stories and then, following a set schema, used them to write war chronicles of their localities. These chronicles were scrutinised and given additions by both parish and district committees before being deposited with the Provincial Commission.[[13]](#footnote-13) Almost all of what must have been a fascinating archive appears to have been destroyed in the Second World War, although fortunately not before the high school teacher and later professor and director of the Königsberg City Archive, Fritz Gause, had used it to write a superb study of the invasions.[[14]](#footnote-14) Moreover, extracts from the accounts were published in the five-volume pamphlet series *Ostpreußische Kriegshefte* between 1915-17 and fragments survive, stored in Berlin, from the districts of Johannisburg and Insterburg.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Neither the state investigation nor the provincial commission was conceived as a means to incite German citizens to anger or hatred against the Russian enemy. Officials’ personal accounts of Russian violence were published in newspapers, and during the war a few wrote books about their experiences in the invasion.[[16]](#footnote-16) However, the authorities refused to release ordinary citizens’ testimonies of atrocities, for fear that they might be exploited for crude sensationalism.[[17]](#footnote-17) This did not stop private accounts of invasion from having a profound impact on the German public. The press printed letters from East Prussians detailing their ordeals, and the hundreds of thousands of refugees housed across northern, western and central Germany also widely disseminated tales, some true and others exaggerated, of horrendous violence and suffering. These moved many people: more than twelve million marks were raised by public donations in order to alleviate suffering in the invaded province. The best known expression of Germans’ shock and anger appeared in the infamous appeal issued by ninety-three intellectuals in October 1914 on Germany’s behalf ‘To the Civilized World’, which contained an anguished warning of ‘earth … saturated with the blood of women and children unmercifully butchered by the wild Russian troops.’[[18]](#footnote-18)

A few surviving examples from the archives can give a taste of the type of source material collected by the provincial teachers, administration and state courts. They also illustrate the ordeals through which East Prussians passed in the years 1914-15.

i.) A refugee interview collected under the President of East Prussia’s historical programme.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Recorded

by H. Klaber,

I. Teacher

Home District: Johannisburg

Parish: Arys

District of Residence: Mohrungen

Place: Himmelforth, 18 February 1915.

The farmer’s wife Anna Salamon from Schlagekrug states the following:

We had to flee from the Russians several times. The first time, we fled on 3rd August. The Cossacks had set alight houses and killed people in the area, e.g. in Klanßen and in Drygallen. Our soldiers withdrew and urged us to withdraw. We travelled as far as Kokosken. After a few days we could return again, as our soldiers marched towards the border. After a few weeks, the Russians broke in again and burned. We headed to the nearby forest. There we stayed, day and night, one week long. Late in the evenings we crept home, in order to feed the domestic animals. There, late one evening, Russian infantry marched through our village. As we noticed that they were marching towards Johannisburg, we went from the forest home and stayed there three weeks. … After three weeks they were beaten and marched back through our village. We hid ourselves again in the forest. The Russians searched for us. It’s said that in the village of Drygallen they killed people.[[20]](#footnote-20) After a few weeks the Russians broke in again. We didn’t manage to evacuate and had to stay at home. Many hid themselves again in the forest. The Russians took from us several men with them, including the farmer Johann Lidwin. His wife and his children remained. Two men escaped from them in Poland. In our house, a Russian officer came and demanded roast goose. I went outside with a burning lantern, in order to fetch a goose. Outside I encountered Cossacks. As these saw me, they opined that I was signalling to [German] troops to come over, und one shot at me, but without hitting. The Russians retreated again. However, they came for a fourth time and we had again to evacuate. We travelled on the cart to Arys and then from one village to another, until we came to Rastenburg. On the journey we often had to sleep with the small children in barns. In Rastenburg we gave up the horses and travelled with the railway to Mohrungen und are now lodged in the village of Him[m]elforth.

[signed] Anna Salamon

ii.) Anna S. (a different woman from above) was the wife of a wealthy farmer in the district of Rössel, in the south of East Prussia. This story was taken down in mid-September 1914 by an official at the Allenstein County offices, where she had gone to plead for help. Her account was corroborated and confirmed by a witness and by the local Catholic church.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Heard

Allenstein, 11 September 1914.

The farmer’s wife Anna S. (maiden name B.) from Lokau near Seeburg appears uninvited and gives the following statement:

On 31 August, a Cossack patrol rode by our farm, which lies around 100 metres from the railway line. They shot at our German [military] patrol and it returned the fire, but had to withdraw in the face of [the enemy’s] superior numbers. The horse of one Cossack was shot, and was left lying on our farmyard. Immediately afterwards came what appeared to be Russian infantry, who asked everyone where the German soldiers were hidden. All residents were threatened with bayonets and they were told to state our soldiers’ hiding place.

My husband had hidden himself in the haystacks. These were set alight by the Russian soldiers. When my husband rushed out, he was asked by the soldiers to hand over all his cash. My husband gave them 200 marks and pleaded for his life, for the sake of his eight children. The Russians said to him, after they had the money, he need not worry and could go; they wouldn’t do anything to him. Scarcely had my husband taken a few steps, when he was shot down by them.

My fourteen year-old son Paul was likewise shot by Russian soldiers. He has several bullet splinters in arm and foot.

My husband died from his wound – a serious stomach shot – on the next day.

After that all buildings apart from the labourer’s cottage were totally burned to the ground. Contents and all cattle were victims of the flames. My six year-old son Joseph burned with them, as did the nurse and a female labourer. I fled barefoot without any possessions with my seven remaining children. The day labourer Kalski, employed by us, was likewise shot by the Russians. As I am totally without means, without accommodation and beds for the children, I beseech you, give me in my hand whatever is necessary to enable me to prepare the remaining labourer’s cottage as a makeshift shelter and for the coming period to purchase food.

read out, approved, signed

Anna S. (maiden name B.)

iii.) Reproduced in full below are the sworn testimonies of two women raped by Russian soldiers, given at the court of Bialla, in East Prussia’s south-eastern corner, on 19 July 1915. Gottliebe P.’s testimony, which was read out in Polish and unsigned, offers a reminder of East Prussia’s 340,000-strong Polish-speaking Masurian minority and of the importance of these legalistic Ego-documents in providing a voice for the illiterate.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Labourer’s wife Gottliebe P., born J., from Bialla, 48 years-old, protestant.

Around the middle of August last year three Russians forced their way by night into my home. My husband and I were already asleep. The Russians dragged me violently out of the bed in front of the house door of our farmstead, threw me to the ground and, while one Russian raped me, both of the other Russians positioned themselves on either side and prodded my legs and left-side hip with their bayonets. They inflicted 6 wounds on me, so that I had to place myself in medical care. My husband could give me no help, because he feared the Russians, as the Russians threatened to stab him.

Read out in Polish and approved and due to illiteracy not signed.

Witness was sworn to truth.

Bricklayer’s wife Heinriette P., born R., from Bialla, 51 years-old, protestant.

At the beginning of September [1914], I stayed with my husband in Bialla in a lodging that was not my own because I believed that I would be safer there than in my own. Nonetheless, in the night Russian soldiers broke into the house and one among them – a Cossack – dragged me into the back room and raped me. The Russian abused me in many ways and held my mouth shut and since that time I have been sickly.

read out, approved, signed

signed Heinriette P.

Witness was sworn to truth.

iv.) A letter written by a small landowner, Bernhard F., in Bischofstein, to the chief civil servant of Allenstein County, 29 September 1914. His son, Josef, was one of the several thousand unfortunate young German men arrested and deported by the invader during the summer invasion. The Russians may have suspected the youth to be a soldier in disguise. He had volunteered for the army on the first day of mobilisation, and although he had been sent home after a week, he had been wearing a blue military tunic with civilian trousers at the time of his capture. This case was also noted by the local police.[[23]](#footnote-23)

To

the President of Allenstein County

According to newspaper reports, atrocities by the Russians should be brought to the attention of the County administration.

On 29 August, 40 or more Cossacks stormed onto my land, which lies by the town. Bullets whistled, the main yard was suddenly full of Russians. My wife, my only child, my 17-year-old sturdy son Josef, and I fled from one room to the other, and finally in the furthermost chamber fell together on our knees and jointly prayed. The savages fell upon us like a cat or a wild beast falls on a bird family in its nest. We were mercilessly punched, pushed, thrown about. My wife screamed, was punched half to death, body searched. They pushed me to and fro with their rifles and mercilessly carried away my only son. The boy cried … ‘Father, save me, father save me.’ I pleaded, implored, cried as only a father can for his only child. Nothing helped. I would have gladly given everything, my farmstead and cattle and stocks and everything gladly [sic], if only it could have rescued my child. … My child was stolen. It was in broad daylight. My God, my God! I ask you to assist me to get back my child, dead or alive. …

Yours respectfully,

Bernhard F.

v.) The account below of a soldier given on oath to a military court of investigation differs from the above sources in a number of ways. The soldier is not a victim, but purports to be a witness. Unlike the above, his account is also a clear fabrication. Fritz Gause’s history of the invasions looked closely into stories of mutilation and torture, and found them to be untrue. Whether the soldier believed his own tale and what his motives were in relating it must remain open questions.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Heard Schwerin[[25]](#footnote-25), 24 January 1915

[List of officers and court functionaries present]

Summoned: *Wehrmann* [Private in the *Landwehr*] Aug. Schult, at this time of E Company, *Landwehr* [Infantry Regiment] 76, born 13.5.1880, protestant, labourer by occupation[,] resident in Lehsten.

The Private Aug. Schult … belonged on active service to the 8th Company, *Landwehr* Infantry Regiment 76 and testifies the following:

To the Matter: In a village near Hohenstein, whose name I do not know, when I withdrew with a comrade into a house in order to escape machinegun fire, I saw lying in the rooms a dead woman. She was clothed, with disemboweled abdomen and children who had been cut into pieces were hanged on hooks on the wall.

read out, approved, signed.

signed August Schult.

Private Schult swore to the truth of his statement after the interrogation, according to §§ 191 ff of the Military Criminal Law Regulations, after he was advised by me of the significance and sacredness of the oath.

signed Entholt, Lieutenant signed Bokranz, Corporal

and Court Officer as Military Court Clerk

**ANALYSIS**

These accounts of the experience of Russian invasion and violence in East Prussia in 1914-15 have a strong claim to be classed as Ego-documents. The court testimonies, provincial interviews and appeals to local authorities provide insight into how events usually recounted only in narrow military terms swept up civilians, and changed their lives. Many were people belonging to groups such as peasantry with only quite basic literacy, who rarely leave private narratives to the historical record. The documents’ content could scarcely be more personal. All powerfully reflect the horror of war. These sources recount experiences of abandoning home in fear, of watching helpless as loved ones were taken away or witnessing their violent deaths and of suffering the violation of one’s own body. They break customary silences on taboo subjects, and leave a rare record of lives broken and personal anguish.

Nonetheless, these sources, gathered by the courts investigating Russian atrocities, the East Prussian administration and the Provincial Commission for East Prussian War History, are both more and less than Ego-documents. To an unusual degree, most of the accounts belong not solely to their narrator. The person who recorded the oral account had an important influence over both how the story was related and what remains of it in the written document. More than that, these tales belong to the state and provincial authorities without whose actions most would never have been recorded. The will to preserve them came from and had motives beyond the individual who experienced and related the events. Once taken down as statements they became possessions of a collective. The testimonies helped a national community to wage its war effort: they were mobilised as material proof of enemy barbarity and German suffering in order to sway international opinion. For provincial authorities they were never primarily private documents but rather the building blocks for a communal war narrative which during and after the conflict would succeed in reshaping and strengthening East Prussian identity.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The state or provincial involvement in the creation of these sources places limitations on how much light they can shed on individuals’ perceptions and interpretations of their experiences. The mediation by a second party (the interviewer, judge or clerk) in the transmission of these accounts is especially important. The questions asked (of which we have no record) in the course of the interview or cross-examination surely influenced the shape and structure of the narrative. Moreover, local officials, such as the county administrator who took down Anna S.’s terrible and well-attested story, tended to filter out emotion. Interviewees relating their traumatic or humiliating experiences to teachers or before court officers may also not have wished to display their feelings. It is significant that the most unequivocal expression of emotion in the sources above appears in the one narrative which was written by the subject himself, rather than by an intermediary: the letter of Bernhard F. recounting the arrest of his son. The letter begins formally, justifying itself with reference to the official appeal for reliable accounts of Russian atrocities published in newspapers. However, raw emotion quickly spills into the text, as the farmer breathlessly recounts his family’s panic as the Russians arrived, the brutality of the encounter and his powerlessness to prevent his son being led away. The incongruity between the two styles of writing in the document – the initial static, formal language of address to authority and the sudden rush of personal narrative and broken syntax – accentuates the account’s drama and the impression of deeply felt desperation, despair and bereavement.

The court testimony and provincial war history commission’s interviews lack such clear and unambiguous marks of emotion, but they can still offer suggestive insight into subjects’ inner states. Anna Salamon’s sequential narrative of flight and encounters with Russian troops focuses on the events themselves, with few explicit reflections on how it felt to pass through them. Yet the choice of vocabulary in her interview – ‘flee’ (*flüchten*), ‘crept’ (*schlichen*), ‘hid’ (*versteckten*) – as well as the circumstances she described are resonant of extreme anxiety. The same is true of the stylistically similar interview extracts reproduced in the *Ostpreußische Kriegshefte*. Thus, for example, the exclamation of a labourer’s wife and daughter to their interviewer that ‘the 9th August will remain unforgettable for us and all inhabitants of Dluggen’, surely indicates feelings of deep shock. On this day, Cossacks had clashed with German cycle troops in their village, and then callously murdered a wounded soldier.[[27]](#footnote-27) In Anna S.’s account of the murder of her husband and burning of her farm there are similar clues. Her testimony is presented as pragmatic and does not dwell on how she felt at losing her partner and her six-year-old son. It provides no information on how she looked or whether she wept. Nonetheless, her mention of fleeing barefoot and her plea at the end of her account for money to provide at least the barest provision for her seven remaining children testify to her desperation.

In victims’ court testimony, an apparent lack of emotion might have been not solely because an official or interviewer had filtered it out in his report. It could also signal a distancing strategy for psychological coping. This is particularly notable in cases of rape. The brief, matter-of-fact way in which both Heinriette P. and Gottliebe P. recounted their rapes was a style frequently used by other female victims of sexual assault. French women sexually attacked by Germans in August 1914 commonly adopted a similar tone, and the official German ‘White Book’, *Atrocities of Russian Troops*, published similarly styled rape victims’ testimonies.[[28]](#footnote-28) Even if the court clerks charged with transcribing these traumatic accounts were responsible for imposing a distanced, factual tone, the notable brevity of some narratives may indicate that the women recounted only the bare essentials of their experiences from shame or to protect themselves from emotional pain. The lasting psychological suffering inflicted by these attacks is alluded to in Heinriette P.’s final admission after recounting her rape that ‘since that time I have been sickly.’

Close reading of interviews and court testimony also offers deeper insight into East Prussians’ understanding of their experiences. The historian Robert Traba has examined memoirs from the 1914-15 invasions and identified three core themes: defence, flight from the invader, and the material and psychological suffering inflicted on the inhabitants. In the crucial question of the invaded population’s perception of the enemy he notes a pronounced distinction between ‘Russians’ and ‘Cossacks’. Russians appeared in memoirs frequently as ‘good’, humane’ and ‘normal people’. Cossacks, by contrast, were always ‘evil’, ‘wild’, ‘cruel’ and perpetrators of atrocity.[[29]](#footnote-29) Ego-documents gathered by the courts by contrast reveal a far more universally threatening environment. Anna S.’s husband and six-year-old son were murdered by Russian infantry, not roving Cossack cavalry. Russian soldiers also raped Gottliebe P. For Heinriette P. and Bernhard F., Russians and Cossacks appear to have been interchangeable. The official German ‘White Book’ broadly supports these impressions. Among its civilian victims’ and witnesses’ sworn testimonies, ‘Russians’ predominated as perpetrators, although fourteen identified Cossacks. If Cossacks were therefore overrepresented among troops who committed violence against German civilians and especially feared, this court testimony evidence nonetheless implies strongly that for the latter all enemy troops were highly dangerous. Lastly, suffering, not flight or a heroic defence, is understandably the central theme of these legal documents. They remind us of the intense vulnerability of civilians in the war zone.[[30]](#footnote-30)

That vulnerability brought particular problems for German men. Military-aged males were most likely to become victims of atrocities: the Russian army executed only men, although some women, such as Anna S.’s nurse and female labourer, were killed through arson or in massacres or died in the mass deportations of the winter occupation.[[31]](#footnote-31) Moreover, beyond its physical danger, invasion posed a stark challenge to male inhabitants’ masculine pride. Male identity in Germany had been heavily shaped by the experience of peacetime military service during the second half of the nineteenth century, and was defined by the image of the man as defender and protector of family and Fatherland.[[32]](#footnote-32) The intrusion of enemy troops onto one’s own soil was thus a humiliation for civilian men, exacerbated by the distinctly unheroic and even perceivedly feminine behaviour – passivity, flight or the concealment and then begging for one’s life that Anna S.’s husband unsuccessfully tried – to which it reduced them. Sexual anxieties were triggered by invasion. Some diarists betrayed paranoia about the possible attraction of the Russian troops (‘for the most part strong, stalwart men’) for local women.[[33]](#footnote-33) Distressingly, invasion also brought brutal demonstrations of men’s powerlessness to protect their womenfolk. Bernhard F. faced this when his wife was violated and beaten. Emasculation was at its most explicit and traumatic in the ordeal of Gottliebe P.’s husband, cowed at the point of a bayonet and impotent while a Russian soldier raped his wife. Heinriette P. was also clearly with her spouse on the night she was attacked, but he receives no mention once she begins to recount her rape. His presence is an irrelevance; he may as well have ceased to exist.

The male anxieties unleashed by invasion were shared by German soldiers fighting in defence of East Prussia. Private August Schult’s horror fantasy of stumbling across a disemboweled woman and dismembered children hanging off hooks was far from unique. Stories of Russian barbarity, also taken up by some newspapers, proliferated within the German army’s ranks in the summer of 1914. Other troops claimed to have seen women with breasts cut off and vagina sliced open or nailed through the tongue to a table.[[34]](#footnote-34) There was cross-fertilisation of rumours between terrified East Prussian civilians and German soldiers: Schult’s *Landwehr* Infantry Regiment 76 had encountered refugees even before it arrived at the front, who told exaggerated stories of Russians cutting off women’s breasts and nailing down infants.[[35]](#footnote-35) Investigating eerily similar tales circulating contemporaneously in the French army on the Western Front, the historian Ruth Harris has argued convincingly that they reflected male subliminal fears. The imaginary mutilated women may have embodied men’s anxiety about the dismemberment of their invaded nation, typically represented in female form. The consistent choice of young women and children, figures instantly and emotively recognisable as ‘innocents’, as the victims in these atrocity fantasies emphasised Russian barbarousness and probably reflected great apprehension for the safety of one’s own family in defeat. Tales of civilians’ vicious mutilation may well also have been projections of troops’ dread at the prospect of their own wounding and maiming.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The disturbing atrocity fantasies of August Schult and other German soldiers offer shocking reminder that Ego-documents, whether transmitted firsthand or through an interviewer or court official, should never be treated in Rankean terms as wholly authentic accounts of the past – history, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. They are warnings of the malleability of memory. Perhaps Schult and all other men who recounted these brutal stories to the courts deliberately lied, but the solemn admonitions to truth, the oath they swore, the lack of profit in deceiving and the criminal consequences if one were exposed make it improbable. Psychiatric research has revealed how easily false memories can be constructed.[[37]](#footnote-37) Suggestion – from frightened civilians in the battle zone, comrades or officers spreading rumours and press accounts of Russian brutality – amplified in effect by the confusion of combat and genuine memories of seeing soldiers’ bodies mutilated by shot or shellfire, provides a more convincing explanation for these convinced atrocity testimonies. Dissociative psychobiological responses to trauma obstructing the conscious recall of experience may also have contributed to such testimony.[[38]](#footnote-38) Today too, veterans’ statements can be highly unreliable. A 2005 study of Vietnam veterans in treatment for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder found that many who had served in non-combatant roles nonetheless reported firsthand memories of atrocities and other traumatic battle phenomena.[[39]](#footnote-39)

**CONCLUSION**

The Ego-documents from the invasion of East Prussia in 1914-15 are testaments to a new type of warfare. Ethnic stereotyping – the idea implanted in Russian officers through their training that not just German soldiers but all Germans, even women and children, would behave with implacable hostility and posed a threat – lay behind many of the killings and deportations that they describe. The approximately 5,500 East Prussians who died on the battlefield or in the harsh conditions of internment were but a tiny fraction of the civilians who were persecuted and killed due to similar prejudices in the First World War and in millions throughout the twentieth century. Highly significant too is the way in which the stories of civilians in the invasion zone were co-opted by the German state and propagandists. The conflict of 1914-18 demanded not just unprecedented economic resources but also the direction of public opinion, both domestic and international. As the history of these East Prussian Ego-documents reveals, even human suffering could be usefully mobilised in the pursuit of victory. This really was a ‘total war’.

These sources from East Prussia also illustrate the complexity of Ego-documents. Analysis of individuals’ interpretations of and emotions during their experiences from these documents requires close and careful reading, and the conclusions cannot be definitive. As the readiness of people to swear under oath to having witnessed the most ghastly atrocity fantasies attests, memory is fickle, capable of confusing, conflating or even fabricating past experiences. Interpretation is further complicated where the narrative is transmitted by a second party, such as an interviewer or court official. Yet Ego-documents are never wholly owned by their narrator. Their content is shaped by the audience at whom they are directed, the environment in which they are recounted and manifold external influences that might prompt or intervene between the experience and its narration. The testimony on Russian war crimes collected by the German state and the interviews gathered by the Provincial Commission for East Prussian War History demonstrate with unusual clarity how apparently intensely personal narratives could in fact also be the possessions of local or national collectives, who sponsored, preserved and utilised them for their own ends. In this sense, these sources from wartime East Prussia are not simply Ego-documents; to keep with the Latin, they are ‘Nos-documents’.

1. For accounts of the origins of the term Ego-documents and a survey of their use by historians, see R. Dekker, ‘Introduction’, in R. Dekker (ed.), *Egodocuments and History. Autobiographical Writing in its Social Context since the Middle Ages* (Hilversum, 2002), esp. pp. 7-13 and K. von Greyerz, ‘Ego-Documents: The Last Word’, *German History*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (September 2010), 273-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The military history of the first invasion is best recounted in D. Showalter, *Tannenberg. Clash of Empires* (Hamden, CT, 1991). For the other invasion and raid, see Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918. Der Herbst-Feldzug 1914. Im Westen bis zum Stellungskrieg. Im Osten bis zum Rückzug* 14 vols. (Berlin, 1929), v, pp. 542-8; idem, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918. Der Herbst-Feldzug 1914. Der Abschluß der Operationen im Westen und Osten* 14 vols. (Berlin, 1929), vi, pp. 324-40 and idem, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918: Die Operationen des Jahres 1915. Die Ereignisse im Winter und Frühjahr* 14 vols. (Berlin, 1931), vii, pp. 282-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For this military ethnic profiling, see P. Holquist, “Les violences de l’armée russe à l’encontre des Juifs en 1915: Causes et limites,” in *Vers la guerre totale: le tournant de 1914-15*, ed. J. Horne (Paris, 2010), pp. 191-219. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Bekanntmachung allen Einwohneren Ost.Preussens [sic]‘ signed by Rennenkampf, 18 August 1914 in Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv: Plakate und Kriegsdocumente: Nr. 3012/3472. Rennenkampf, like General Sievers, the Commander of the Russian Tenth Army which later invaded East Prussia, was a Baltic German. Baltic German aristocrats had loyally served Tsars since Peter the Great in both administrative and military capacities. See A. Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow, 2001), esp. pp. 73-5 and 134-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Report of Königliches Konsistorium der Provinz Ostpreußen to Evangelischer Ober-Kirchenrat in Berlin-Charlottenburg, 23 October 1914. Geheimes Staatsarchiv, Berlin [hereafter GStA,Berlin]: I. HA Rep. 90A, 1059: page 3 of report. For the great fear inspired by Cossacks, see M. von Gallwitz, *Meine Führertätigkeit im Weltkriege 1914/1916: Belgien-Osten-Balkan* (Berlin, 1929), p. 30 (entry for 3 September 1914). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This and the following paragraph are based on the full analysis of the violence in A. Watson, ‘“Unheard of Brutality”: Russian Atrocities against Civilians in East Prussia, 1914-15’, *Journal of Modern History* 86(4)(December 2014), 780-825. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the report by Regierungspräsident Gumbinnen to Unterstaatssekretär Heinrichs, 21 April 1915. GStA Berlin: I. HA Rep. 90A, 1064, pp. 7-8 of report. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For the wider context of the Russian army’s deportations, see E. Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire. The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2003), pp. 121-65 and M.A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires. The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908-1918* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See I. Geiss “Die Kosaken kommen! Ostpreußen im August 1914,” in I. Geiss, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Erste Weltkrieg* (Munich and Vienna, 1978), pp. 58-66. J. Horne and A. Kramer in *German Atrocities 1914. A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2001), pp. 78-81 do accept that some violence took place, but underestimate its extent and brutality. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See letters of Minister des Innern to Regierungspräsidenten, 28 Aug., 12 Sept. and 18 Nov. 1914. Archiwum Państwowe [hereafter AP] Olsztyn: Oberpräsident [hereafter OP] Ostpreußen: 3/528, fo. 5-6 and 86-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, the appeal in the *Frankfurter Zeitung und Handelsblatt. 59. Jahrgang, Nr. 244. Zweites Morgenblatt* (3 September 1914), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Auswärtiges Amt, *Greueltaten russischer Truppen gegen deutsche Zivilpersonen und deutsche Kriegsgefangene* (Berlin, 1915). A copy is held in Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg: RM5/2514. For the county commissions and process of collecting testimony, see F. Gause, “Die Quellen zur Geschichte des Russeneinfalls in Ostpreußen im Jahre 1914,” *Altpreußische Forschungen* Vol. 7, No. 1 (1930), pp. 86-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gause, “Quellen zur Geschichte des Russeneinfalls”, 89-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. F. Gause, *Die Russen in Ostpreußen 1914/15. Im Auftrage des Landeshauptmanns der Provinz Ostpreußen* (Königsberg, 1931). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See A. Brackmann (ed.), *Ostpreußische Kriegshefte* 5 vol. (Berlin, 1915-1917). The surviving material from Johannisburg and Insterburg districts is held in GStA,Berlin: XX. HA, Rep. 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, for example, the account of *Amtsvorsteher* Graap of the massacre in the village of Abschwangen, the bloodiest atrocity of the invasion in which 61 people were killed, in the *Frankfurter Zeitung und Handelsblatt. 59. Jahrgang, Nr. 249. Zweites Morgenblatt* (8 September 1914), p. 2. Also, for a mayor’s autobiographical account of invasion, A. Kuhn, *Die Schreckenstage von Neidenburg. Kriegserinnerungen aus dem Jahre 1914* (Minden, n.d.). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Letter of Regierungspräsident Allenstein to Minister des Innern, 8 October 1914. AP Olsztyn: Königlicher Regierungs-President zu Allenstein (Rejencja Olsztyńskie) [hereafter RP Allenstein]: 176, fols. 25-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. J. von Ungern-Sternberg and W. von Ungern-Sternberg, *Der Aufruf ,An die Kulturwelt!‘ Das Manifest der 93 und die Anfänge der Kriegspropaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg. Mit einer Dokumentation* (Stuttgart, 1996), p. 162. For the public donations, see Watson, ‘Unheard of Brutality’, 818. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Refugee interview. GStA, Berlin: XX. HA, Rep. 235, 16 (Kreis Johannisburg): fo. 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This was true. See Gause, *Russen in Ostpreußen*, p. 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Anna S., testimony (and supporting statements by others, including the local Catholic church), 11 September 1914. AP Olsztyn: RP Allenstein: 178: fos. 3–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Gottliebe P. and Heinriette P., sworn statements to the court in Bialla, 19 July 1915. AP Olsztyn: RP Allenstein: 180: fos. 220-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Bernhard F. to Regeriungspräsident Allenstein, 29 September 1914. AP Olsztyn: RP Allenstein: 179: fos. 85-7. The police report, ‘Bericht des Fußgendarmerie-Wachtmeisters Sahm I aus Bischofstein vom 11. September 1914’ mentioning the case is in the same file, fo. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Military court record. AP Olsztyn: RP Allenstein: 179: fo. 465. For Gause’s discussion and rejection of the verity of atrocity stories, see Gause, *Russen in Ostpreußen*, pp. 229-30. J.M. Read reached the same conclusion in his *Atrocity Propaganda, 1914-1919* (New York, 1941, 1972), pp. 48-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The *Landwehr* Infantry Regiment 76 had its recruit depot in the town of Schwerin, the Grand Duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin. It is probably for this reason that the testimony was given here, around 700 kilometres west of where the events described purportedly took place. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See R. Traba, *Ostpreußen – die Konstruktion einer deutschen Provinz. Eine Studie zur regionalen und nationalen Identität 1914-1933*, trans. P.O. Loew (Osnabrück, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See A. Brackmann (ed.), *Ostpreußische Kriegshefte. Auf Grund amtlicher und privater Berichte. Erstes Heft. Die August- und Septembertage 1914* (Berlin, 1915), esp. p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Auswärtiges Amt, *Greueltaten russischer Truppen*, see esp. Anlagen 47, 48, 49. Archived rape testimony can be found within files entitled ‘Völkerrechtswidrige Handlungen der Russen’ in AP Olsztyn: RP Allenstein: 181-200. For the rape of French women by German soldiers, see Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, pp. 196-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Traba, *Ostpreußen*, pp. 288-304. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Auswärtiges Amt, *Greueltaten russischer Truppen*, Anlagen 3, 6, 9, 12, 17, 18 (2 testimonies), 19, 21, 23, 25, 26, 42 and 51 refer to Cossack atrocities perpetrated against East Prussian civilians. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Gause, *Russen in Ostpreußen*, pp. 168-9 and 175-6. See also ‘Auszüge aus den Akten der Kriegskommission Allenstein zur Untersuchung Völkerrechtswidriger russischer Grausamkeiten’, 29 October 1914. AP Olsztyn: OP Ostpreußen: 3/528, fo. 43-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. U. Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Modern Germany, Military Conscription and Civil Society* (Oxford and New York, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Rittel, ‘Aus meinem Tagebuch während der Russenzeit’. AP Olsztyn: Akta Miasta Olsztyn 259/ 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Auswärtiges Amt, *Greueltaten russischer Truppen*, see Anlagen 41 and 74. Most newspaper reporting of Russian atrocities avoided such brutal examples or graphic details, but there were exceptions. See T.R.E. Paddock, *Creating the Russian Peril: Education, the Public Sphere and National Identity in Imperial Germany, 1890-1914* (Rochester, NY, 2010), p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. H. Holsten (ed.), *Landwehr-Infanterie-Regiment 76 im Weltkriege* (Stade, 1938), pp. 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. R. Harris, “The ‘Child of the Barbarian’: Rape, Race and Nationalism in France during the First World War,” *Past & Present* 141 (1993), esp. 188-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. E.F. Loftus and J.E. Pickrell, ‘The Formation of False Memories’, *Psychiatric Annals* 25(12) (December 1995), 720-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See B. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London, 2014), esp. Ch. 11 and B. van der Kolk, ‘The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress’, *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1(5) (1994), 253-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See B.C. Frueh, J.D. Elhai, A.L. Grubaugh, J. Monnier, T.B. Kashdan, J.A. Sauvageot, M.B. Hamner, B.G. Burkett and G.W. Arana, ‘Documented Combat Exposure of US Veterans Seeking Treatment for Combat-related Post-traumatic Stress Disorder’, *British Journal of Psychiatry* 186(6) (June 2005), 467-72 and S. Wessely’s discussion of this paper in the same issue, 473-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)