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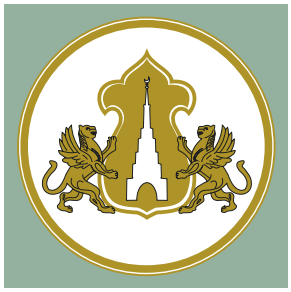

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SCHOLARS IN THE SERVICE OF WAR: THE CENSORSHIP OF LETTERS BY TATAR PRISONERS OF WAR IN GERMANY DURING WORLD WAR I

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The article examines one of the interesting and little-known episodes from the history of World War I, telling about orientalist scholars involved in censoring letters from prisoners of war in German camps. This large-scale involvement of scholars in the censorship of letters from prisoners of war was a forced measure, since the military censors did not speak oriental languages. Among such letters, there were many written in the Tatar language, which was not taught at German universities before World War I. It can be assumed that it was the censorship of letters from prisoners of war in the Tatar language that to a certain extent influenced the emergence of a noticeable interest in the Tatar language in German Turkology. This is evidenced by the research work of the famous Turkologist Gotthold Weil who was responsible for the censorship of Tatar letters during the war and taught the Tatar language at the University of Berlin from 1918.

Key words: World War I, Germany, Muslim prisoners of war, censorship, censorship of letters

Introduction

During World War I, thousands of Russian soldiers found themselves in German and Austro-Hungarian captivity. In one of the publications, made public almost immediately after the end of the War, Wilhelm Doegen gave the following figure: 1,420,479 Russian soldiers and 14,050 officers were in German captivity [1, p. 56]. In émigré literature, one can also find more “serious” figures: according to N. Golovin, on November 1, 1917, the total number of Russian prisoners was 2 million 417 thousand people [2, p. 207].

Modern researchers generally agree with the figures given by W. Doegen. In their opinion, during World War I, the total number of prisoners of war in Germany was 2.5 million people, of which about 1.4 million were Russian soldiers [3, pp. 53–54; 4, p. 68].

Using pre-war Russian statistics on the confessional structure of the Russian army, O. Nagornaya derives an approximate number of representatives belonging to various confessions among prisoners of war: in her opinion, about 80% of them were Orthodox, 9% were Catholics and Protestants, and

6% were Muslims [5, p. 186]. If we base our conclusions on these approximate figures, we can assume that there were up to 85–86 thousand Muslim soldiers and officers in German captivity during World War I.

In relation to Muslim prisoners of war, the German military and political authorities began to pursue a very specific policy with the aim of the so-called "revolutionization" of the Muslim world. Germany intended to use propaganda to influence such soldiers in order to subsequently make them fight against the Entente countries – England, France and Russia. For this purpose, some Muslim prisoners of war (about 16,000 people) were deliberately grouped in special propaganda camps – Halbmondlager and Weinberglager [6].

According to the international legal documents concerning the rights of prisoners of war, which were recognized by both Germany and Russia during World War I, one of the conditions for detaining enemy soldiers in captivity was the provision of a postal service. Article 16 of the Hague Convention on the Laws and Customs of War on Land of October 5 (18), 1907 stated: "Letters, money orders, sums of money, as well as postal parcels addressed to prisoners of war or sent by them, are exempt from all postal charges both in the countries of departure and destination, and in intermediate countries. Donations and assistance in the form of things sent for prisoners of war are exempt from all customs and other charges, as well as from freight charges on state-run railways" [7].

The specific subject of this article has not been considered in domestic or foreign historiography so far. The reasons for this include the low availability of existing sources, language barriers and a certain exoticism of the subject. In fact, the topic of censorship of letters from prisoners of war in Germany has never been an object of academic study, while historical research, at best, has studied only general aspects of the history of the postal service for prisoners of war and its censorship during World War I [8, 9]. Letters from Russian, including Tatar, prisoners of war were used to a certain extent in the works by Elik Abdrashitov [10] and Ingeborg Baldauf [11]. The involvement of German orientalist scholars in the censorship of letters from prisoners of war, those coming from among non-Russian peoples of the Russian Empire, was briefly described in the above-mentioned monograph by I. A. Gilyazov and L. R. Gataullina.

Materials and methods

This article is based on the Secret Archive of the Prussian Cultural Heritage in Berlin (Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GSAPK)), namely on the collection of the Seminar for Oriental Languages at the University of Berlin. This is mainly the correspondence between the Seminar's management and individual employees, as well as specific statistics related to the translations and censorship of letters from prisoners of war. In doing so, we reviewed and analyzed almost all materials from the collection of this Seminar related to the topic of our interest. Although the statistical and general numerical information about these sources is sufficiently complete and convincing, neither the letters themselves nor their copies or translations have been preserved in the archive. Nevertheless, the sources give a clear idea of the extent to which German orientalists were involved both in the censorship of the letters and, generally, in servicing the German military machine during World War I.

The article uses the comparative-historical and problem-chronological research methods.

Discussion

It is clear that during World War I the correspondence of prisoners of war in the camps was strictly controlled by the camp administration - the texts of the letters were perused by censors and the parcels were opened. In each of the camps, a special service of military censors was created whose duty was to decide whether to allow the correspondence to be sent to the address or not.

Gradually, the military authorities determined the range of topics to be controlled in letters. This list was printed in a special document adopted by the General Staff on August 11, 1916. When working with the mail from prisoners of war, translator-censors were to pay attention to whether the texts of the letters contained:

1. Military news – addresses of specific individuals, individual units, the data on the deployment of military units, reports on troop movements, airfields, conscription, construction of railways and bridges, army supplies, production of ammunition, the navy and military losses;

2. Information about the people and the army's mood, whether there are doubts about victory, whether there is a sense of war fatigue, a desire for peace, how the goals of the war and domestic political events are assessed, what the author's attitude towards the government and government measures is, whether the relations with the allies

are mentioned, what attitude is expressed towards Germany, what are the thoughts and ideas about the time after the conclusion of peace;

3. Information on the economic situation - the lifestyle of individuals, the need for certain things, tax burdens, changes in income, prices of goods, food, various types of fuel, the availability of fuel, reserves, harvest assessment, attitude to work, the situation in agriculture (farming, viticulture, cattle breeding, forestry, damage caused by wild animals, weather conditions, harmful insects), the situation in industry (raw materials, development and change in production, coal supplies), the situation in trade, export and import opportunities, money circulation, gold availability, government measures in the economic sphere;

4. Enemy censorship characteristics;

5. Characteristics of the press and the people's attitude towards it;

6. Information on the escape of prisoners of war;

7. Information on the secret correspondence of prisoners of war [12].

It is quite understandable that if any of the above-mentioned facts was described in the text of the letters, they could hardly have been sent to the addressee. In general, each war camp had a body responsible for military censorship (Prüfungststelle), which carried out the censorship of letters on the spot. However, the fact that the letters were written in different languages, and in different fonts, created additional difficulties. In such cases, the following procedure was developed – all "incomprehensible" letters were sent by "checkpoints" to the address of the Seminar for Oriental Languages – Seminar für orientalische Sprachen (hereinafter – SVYA) of the University of Berlin (letters in Russian were not sent to SVYA). During World War I, the Seminar became a kind of censorship institution, although its employees were only involved in the technical work - they translated letters from prisoners of war upon the corresponding requests from the camps. True, the translation was not complete; translators were supposed to pay attention only to the subjects noted above. Later, the camp services themselves, having received the translation from the SVYA, made a decision about either sending or, on the contrary, not sending the correspondence. This was the additional route that the letters of Muslim prisoners of war had to take.

At first, such a cumbersome structure led to some very comical situations. For example, a message from the Van camp on April 4, 1915, to the SVYA contained a request to clarify which of the two languages the letter was written in – Urdu or Kirghiz (note what an exotic pair it turned out to be!). Or a request from the headquarters of the 6th Army Corps on April 23, 1915, contained the assumption that the letter was written in one of the "Negro languages" [13]. At times, senders demonstrated amazing "erudition" regarding Tatar letters. Thus, on February 1, 1916, Captain Schott from the Ebenberg-Landau camp (Pfalz) sent a postcard to the SVYA "with Turkish written signs" and noted: "According to one gentleman who previously worked in our institution, we are having here the Tartar dialect spoken in the Nizhny Novgorod Region" [14].

Let's take a closer look at the situation with the letters from captivity written in the Tatar language. The biggest difficulty for all parties - both for the senders and for the German censorship services - was the fact that at that time Germany did not have qualified (or even not very qualified) personnel who would be able to understand Tatar texts. Letters in the Tatar language, judging by the archive materials, began to arrive for translation at the University of Berlin around the beginning of February 1915. But the Seminar simply did not know what to do in this case. All letters that were sent from the camps to the SVYA were first looked through by the secretary who made a note in pencil as to whom or where a particular letter for translation should go. So, from February 1915, requests for letters in the Tatar language contained either a note with a question mark (i. e. the secretary did not know where to send it) or the note "back" (i. e. the letter was returned to the camp without translation). It went on in the same way until August 1915 (!). One can only guess what happened to the returned letters – most likely, they were not sent anywhere, since there was no information about their contents…

Nevertheless, gradually a solution was found for the matter of checking the correspondence from Muslim prisoners of war. From the beginning of August 1915, all letters, sent to the SVYA in the Tatar language, were forwarded to the Eastern Information Service[1] – the first note on a request to the SVYA was made on August 6, 1915 [18]. Almost a year had passed since the beginning of the

[1] The Eastern Information Service (Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient) (hereinafter referred to as NFO) was a special agency of the General Staff and the German Foreign Ministry during World War I, it was responsible for organizing propaganda in the countries of the East (see: [15, 16, 17])

war, and more than six months had passed since Muslim camps for prisoners of war were created, but it was only then that some kind of order with checking letters was established... Apparently, the fact that the SIPV had a staff of propagandists-translators who spoke Tatar was taken into account. It is clear, however, that such a procedure greatly complicated the cumbersome scheme of checking correspondence in the Tatar language.

This continued until February 1916 – Tatar letters were also sent to the SIPV. However, on February 16, 1916, when compiling a detailed report on the translators working with the letters, the head of the SVYA, Zakhau, noted that the letters in Tatar were being translated by the employees of the SIPV, after which the words "Eastern Information Service" were crossed out and the name "Bedri" was put in their place. "Bedri" was Badretdin Kamaletdinovich Seifulmulyukov (in German papers, most often written as Bedri Kemaleddin[2]).

He was born to a merchant's family on May 22, 1896, in Kazalinsk and got his primary education in Orenburg. According to some sources, in 1907, according to others, in 1910, he left for Istanbul, where he studied at the Sultan's College of Galatasaray. After completing his studies in Turkey, he moved to Berlin in August 1915, and in October 1916 took a course in dentistry at the University of Berlin. He had Turkish citizenship, although he did not break ties with his homeland. The result of his studies was a dissertation on the topic "Teeth of the Tatars. Dental and craniological research" [19][3] defended in 1921. From April 1918 to February 1925, he was a lecturer in the Tatar language at the Seminar for Oriental Languages at the University of Berlin, although the director of the SVYA, Eduard Zachau, noted in one of his reports that Bedri Kemaleddin had been assisting the Seminar "in working with various Tatar written texts" since March 1916 [21]. These texts clearly referred to letters from prisoners of war. Bedri Kemaleddin subsequently played a major role in the work of the "Society for the Support of Russian-Muslim Muslim Students". In 1925, allegedly for the purpose of vacation, he went to Tashkent; his subsequent fate is unknown[4].

In the case of censoring correspondence from the Muslim prisoners of war in the SVYA, Bedri Kemaleddin hardly played a leading role - after all, he had moved to Germany relatively recently and it was unlikely that he had good knowledge of the German language at that time. This role was played by a much more famous researcher - at that time a librarian, later Prof. Gotthold Weil[5]. Apparently, it was precisely in working with the letters from prisoners of war that G. Weil improved his knowledge of the Tatar language, which he began to teach at the University of Berlin together with Bedri Kemaleddin - from March 4, 1916, the messages from the camps, regarding the translation of Tatar letters, had a note that the letters were to be transferred to Gotthold Weil. In fact, until the end of World War I, it was this man who translated all letters in Tatar that arrived at the SVYA. In addition to letters, he had to provide information about books, magazines, newspapers and diaries that the camp administration took away from prisoners of war (however, in the case of a "positive" assessment of their content, they were returned to their owners). Quite a few such testimonies have been preserved in the Seminar's collections: thus, in April 1916, five books and one newspaper in Tatar were received for verification from the Wittenberg camp at intervals of two weeks; G. Weil sent them back quite quickly [27], and in May 1916, he also gave a positive review of the content of two notebooks in Tatar from the Shpottau camp [28]. There were also truly "emergency" situations in this work – for example, on July 17, 1916, the commandant's office of the Van camp simultaneously sent 168 letters from prisoners of war to the SVYA, of which 56 were in Lithuanian, 44 in Tatar and 22 in Latvian [29].

During 1916–1917, the work of translating letters from prisoners of war by the staff of the Seminar for Oriental Languages at the University of Berlin became increasingly intensive as it involved many additional difficulties. This was specifically mentioned in a letter sent on behalf of Eduard Zachau, the head of the Seminar, to the General

[2] To avoid confusion, his name will be referred to below as it appears in official German documents – Bedri Kemaleddin.

[3] In 2013 this text was republished by Sebastian Cwicklinski [20].

[4] All the details of Bedri Kemaleddin's activities at the Seminar on Oriental Languages at the University of Berlin can be found in the documents of his personal file [22] See also: [23, p. 27]

[5] Gotthold Weil (1882-1960) was a major orientalist. He worked at the University of Berlin in 1914 where he taught the Tatar language from April 1918 to 1931. From 1931, he worked at the University of Frankfurt am Main. From 1935, in emigration, he worked at the University of Jerusalem. G. Weil is the author of a collection of Tatar texts recorded in the prisoner of war camp in Wünsdorf. See about him: [24, 25, 26]

Staff on April 4, 1917 [30]. The author reported that the number of letters from the camps had recently increased many times over. According to his information, the Seminar translated from 44 languages (!), and the letters were sent from more than 100 prisoner of war camps, on some days that number reached up to 1,000. Therefore, the Seminar's authorities noted that "we cannot fully meet all the requirements. Even purely mechanical work (gluing, stamping, counting, tidying up) takes a lot of time."

Based on the above, the head of the SVYA asked for more military personnel to be assigned to assist the Seminar.

Apparently, considerable preparatory work preceded the writing of this letter, and meticulous calculations had been made. Let us cite the most important information from these preparatory materials: the SVYA compiled a complete list of camps from which letters from prisoners of war were received, there were 94 of them in the list (although in his letter the head speaks of "more than 100" camps...). It should be noted that neither the Wünsdorf, nor the Zossen camps were mentioned in the list. One can only assume that the censorship of letters in these camps was carried out either by their own efforts or through direct communication with the Eastern Information Service.

A total of 25 people were involved in the translation, they translated from 38 languages (they were all listed and Dr. G. Weil was named as the person responsible for the Tatar language). Interestingly, among these 38 languages, Chuvash was initially mentioned (!), however, this mention was crossed out with the note "cannot be counted". The total number of letters sent in the last week was 3122. Of these, the majority were in Lithuanian – 1000, Latvian – 350, Romanian – 350, Tatar – 200, Jewish – 130, Bulgarian – 130 (apparently, the data are rounded up, there were less than 100 letters written in other languages) [31].

Even if we assume that the figures were not absolutely accurate and the texts of the letters were not translated completely, we can see that the amount of work done by the Seminar staff was truly colossal. Yet, there seemed to be constant shortage of trained and qualified personnel, in any case, the representative of the Ministry of War, Rode, in a request to the SVYA on October 26, 1917, bitterly noted: "Censoring letters from prisoners of war is complicated by the fact that there are no suitable personnel with knowledge of languages. Therefore, in extreme cases, it is necessary to resort to the help of state institutions and private individuals, and this sometimes leads to certain 'unpleasantries'" [32].

This hard work allowed the Seminar's management to subsequently petition for rewards for particularly distinguished translators: for example, in the summer and fall of 1918, E. Zachau, the director of the SVYA, repeatedly appealed to the War Ministry with a request to reward his employees, as well as to award some of them with the "Cross for War Merit" [33]. Incidentally, we do not find the name of Gotthold Weil among those nominated for rewards…

The SVYA continued working with the texts of letters in different languages after the end of the war, since a part of prisoners of war remained in the camps. Although many of them had already been repatriated in 1919–1920, the rules required control over those who remained. The last letter, written in Tatar arrived at the Seminar for translation on January 26, 1920, from the camp in Münsingen [34].

Results and conclusions

As we can see, the censorship of letters from prisoners of war during World War I was carried out with great accuracy and precision. Unfortunately, the texts of the letters themselves have not survived in German archives. We believe that the search and further study of these texts in different archives is an interesting and promising area of study devoted to one of the largest military conflicts in the 20th century, in which a wide variety of peoples were involved. We would also like to note that it was the familiarity with numerous Tatar texts during World War I, which influenced the famous orientalist Gotthold Weil who, based on the experience gained, began teaching the Tatar language at the University of Berlin in 1918. Thus, it turned out that at first, being called upon to help the military in the matter of censoring letters from prisoners of war, the scholars actually were involved in the service of the war; however later, this work with letters had a particular influence on the development of new trends in German oriental studies.

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