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THE INVISIBLE ENEMY: SANITARY CONDITIONS OF THE HABSBURG ARMIES DURING THE GREAT TURKISH WAR 1683-1699

Abstract: In this paper we will shed some light on the sanitary and health conditions of Imperial Habsburg armies in Hungary during the Great Turkish War (1683-1699). Early modern warfare was quite deadly for soldiers; they had equal or greater chance to succumb to illness than to get killed in combat. The war that was fought on vast expanses of the Pannonian Basin was especially deadly in this regard; all logistical and sanitary deficiencies of the Imperial troops (that were quite typical for the armies of the era in question) were exacerbated, which led to prolonged and intensive suffering of men in the field throughout the conflict.

Keywords: sanitation, disease, Hungary

Non MeSH: Great Turkish War (1683-1699), Habsburg armies

It has long been pointed out that the non-combat losses of early modern armies accounted for the largest share of total casualties, both percentually and numerically. There were two principal reasons for this: desertions and disease. The causes of desertions were various, but the most common reasons for the abandonment of post were the inability of military authorities to provide soldier's wages on a regular basis,

or to provide them with adequate supplies. Also, harsh discipline that was enforced in European armies of the early modern era was also one of the causes for dereliction of duty. However, we are more interested in casualties that were caused by various diseases, because specific conditions of the Ottoman-Habsburg wars strongly discouraged desertion, as we shall see further on.

In 1888 Robert Koch calculated that the ratio of combat casualties to attritional casualties for early modern era was 1:6, i.e. for each soldier who was killed in action, 6 other were lost due to various other non-combat related causes, primarily because of various diseases. This is probably the highest calculated ratio; it was also argued by other researchers that this ratio was actually 1:2. In reality, the ratio varied depending on various causes and eras, and Boris Uralnis estimates its range between 1:1.5 and 1:3. For example, he argues that the ratio for general Gordon's corps of the first Azov campaign during the reign of Peter the Great (1695) was 1:1.9; the ratio for the Austrian army in the Seven Year's War (1756-1763) was also 1:1.9; the ratio of the British fleet during the wars of Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras was 1:2.4, while the ratio for the British (Wellington's) army in Spain at the beginning of 19th century was 1:2.8. [1 p260-61]

In one of the pioneering works on the subject, Melchior Landesdorfer's *Das Schicksal der bayerischen Soldaten im Türkenkrieg*, [2] author calculated that the size of the Bavarian contingents during the first ten years of the Great Turkish War (1683 – 1693) was approximately 60 000 soldiers in total. Out of this number, 30 000 never returned from Hungarian theater of war. Out of those 30 000 casualties, around 3000 were killed in combat, which means that 27 000 (90%) men died from various other causes. [2 p8] This puts the ratio at 1:9, which is, in our opinion, unrealistically high. It could be argued that this was the case only among the Bavarian troops, and that it's not applicable for the whole Imperial army. However, it is more likely that Landesdorfer had interpreted the sources literally, i.e. he took stated numbers about troop strength for granted. In reality, the number of mobilized soldiers for Bavarian participation in the Great Turkish War was probably quite lower than that. One of the peculiarities of the 17th century European armies was that the commanders purposely inflated the numbers of men at their disposal with the idea to increase the amount of money they received from the state for reimbursement of the expenses they had for keeping their units in the field. The greater the difference between the actual and stated number of soldiers, the greater the revenue is. It is also important to point out that this practice was not secret for the state authorities. On the contrary, it was seen as a legitimate way of enrichment of regimental owners (*Inhabers*) and commanders. [3] One of the downsides of this practice from the point of view of historians and researchers is that we will never be able to have full confidence in reports on army strength, which in turn makes calculations and estimates of any sort more difficult. Nonetheless, from narrative sources we could see that attritional losses were indeed significant, and that the Hungarian theater

of war could rightly be called “Kirch-Hof der Teutschen” i.e. “the graveyard of the Germans”. [2 p54]

But what are the causes for deadliness of this theater of operations? The reasons for this was the very geography and climate of Hungary, which created specific sanitary and health conditions. River basins of Hungarian rivers were veritable breeding grounds for malaria – or swamp fever – which claimed lives of many soldiers. Other diseases were also rampant, such as typhus, with frequent outbreaks during the war. Of course, there is the well known dysentery, which followed early modern armies like a dreadful shadow. [2 p54] The climate was also perceived as particularly deadly. Significant daily temperature drops were common, irrespective of the time of the year. Turns of the seasons brought change in predominant weather patterns – very high humidity during the spring, scorching heat in summer and great cold in winter. The first snowfall could arrive as early as in October, which was also the time when harsh and cold winds started to sweep over Pannonian plain. Further into the winter, more snow could be expected, and the temperature plummeted. [2 p60]

It should also be noted that Hungary, especially Southern Hungary, where the majority of fighting took place, was a desolate, very sparsely populated area. This was the consequence of incessant Ottoman-Habsburg wars of previous centuries. Naturally, as a result of this devastation, the logistics of armies were made difficult, which in turn worsened sanitary conditions for soldiers in the field. The further among unfavourable circumstances was the vegetation – especially the very high grass, which grew above the head of an infantryman, and often to the height of cavalryman’s shoulders; the others were the non-existent road network, lack of clean drinking water and the inability to provide troops with sufficient supplies. [2 p60-61]

It is important to point out that in Hungary, unlike in other European theaters of war, desertions were almost non-existent. The reason for this was the geography and climate of Hungary, as well as the very nature of the war that was fought there. We already mentioned the influence of weather and terrain, but we must also note that fighting in these unforgiving surroundings quickly led to brutalization of soldiers on both sides. This in turn meant that the combat became a merciless, no quarter affair, which implied that surrender or desertion almost always led to a certain death. Hence, the ranks of Habsburg armies in Hungary remained tight, and soldiers maintained the compactness of their units. [4 p423-25]

It is important to note that the people then knew that sanitary and health conditions of armies in the field were influenced by the environment of the theater of war. They were aware that, for instance, drinking water from swamps, rivers and ponds would most certainly lead to diarrhea (or worse), [2 p61] however, they didn’t quite understand the mechanisms of spreading of various diseases. For example, camps of Imperial armies were full of dirt and rubbish, corpses were often

left unburied, so the commanders were forced to frequently change the camp's location. Also, when the corpses were nonetheless buried, it was done hastily and inadequately deep, which had profound effect on sanitary conditions. As one can imagine, personal hygiene was on a very low level – soldiers did very little to fend off various insects. For example, during the change of clothes, shirts and other items were not deloused. On the other hand, Ottoman armies kept their camps clean and in good order, which meant they were less susceptible to outbreaks of disease. [2 p58]

One of the good examples of the type and ratio of non-combat losses could be the fate of the Bavarian regiment after the battle of Slankamen, which was fought on the slopes of Fruška gora mountain on August 19, 1691.¹ Of course, we still have to bear in mind that quoted numbers should be taken with a grain of salt, for all the reasons stated previously. So, in the battle, which was described by the commander of Imperial forces Ludwig Wilhelm, Margrave of Baden-Baden, as the “harshest and bloodiest that happened in this century”, [6] the Bavarian regiment had a suprisingly low number of casualties – just 154 in total, and only 71 killed. [7 p274] If we contrast that to the total number of casualties on the Imperial side – around 3000 dead and 4000 wounded [8] – and on the Ottoman side ranging from 8000 [9] to 25000 [8] killed depending on the source – we could indeed conclude that Bavarian casualties were fairly light.

However, in the days after the battle it became obvious that the Habsburg army was too exhausted to continue advancing and fighting, so it began its slow return to winter quarters in northern Hungary and Austria proper. In the Bavarian regiment, the number of casualties began to rise. On August 28, the number of fallen soldiers rose to 448, who perished from disease, while there remained 919 fit men, 586 sick and 98 wounded. [7 p275] On October 20, there were 425 healthy soldiers and 130 ill. About another 600 sick men were stationed in Petrovaradin; only 169 managed to recover, while others have perished due to “insufficient care”. [7 p277] In the end, when the regiment reached winter quarters in Burgenland in January 1692, there remained only 450 men fit for service – which represented close to one fifth of the initial nominal strenght (2100). On January 18, 1692 the number was further reduced to 303 men. [7 p278] One of the ghastly notes regarding the suffering of the wounded and sick was the report claiming that they were pestered by “thousands of snakes, from which men were not safe even in their beds”, and that in these circumstances, as the regimental commader colonel Zacco wrote, “we all must die” [7 p277]

And they almost did. This heart-rending report provides an intimate account of the experiences of soldiers who fought and died during the Great Turkish War; their

¹ For a more detailed account of the battle and the whole campaign of 1691 see *Битка код Сланкамена 1691. године* [5]

sense of dread of fighting in a hostile land which was more likely to kill them than the enemy is made almost palpable.

Rezime

Ratovi u ranoj modernoj epohi bili su veoma smrtonosni za vojnike. Njima je pretila veća verovatnoća da nastradaju od bolesti nego da poginu u nekoj bici. Veliki bečki rat (1683-1699), koji se vodio na prostoru panonske nizije posebno se isticao u ovom smislu. Svi nedostaci habsburških oružanih snaga na polju logistike i higijene, koliko god oni bili tipični za epohu o kojoj je reč, ispoljili su se u punom smislu, što je za posledicu imalo dugotrajnu patnju i stradanje vojnika.

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