

German Wends in World War One

Gerald Stone in his recent book, *Slav Outposts in Central European History*, makes some interesting comments about the situation of the Wends in Lusatia during the First World War.

Throughout the 19th century the Wends had struggled to assert their right to maintain their own language and identity in Germany. They published their own newspaper in the Wendish language. They held Wendish song festivals. They supported Wendish school instruction and Wendish church services.

However, the German government hoped that the Wends would be Germanised and assimilate into German society. Thus when war broke out there was concern about the loyalty of the Wends. It was feared that they might support Russia, who was Germany's enemy, as the Russians were fellow slaves with the Wends.

Wendish leaders were kept under police surveillance. Wendish newspapers were subject to censorship and copy had to be approved before publication.

In April 1915 the censor considered a letter sent to the Wendish newspaper *Serbske Nowiny*, written by a Wendish soldier to his relatives in Rohne, in the parish of Schleife, describing events at the front at Easter 1915:

‘On Easter Day we lay in our trenches near the little Polish town of Łopuszno facing the Russians. It was a fine day and peacefully quiet around us. Suddenly a few Russians came running from their trench and placed a pot of Easter eggs in the middle between them and us, saying “For the eggs – vodka”; then they went back again. It wasn't long before we had replaced the eggs with a bottle of good schnapps. The Russians didn't wait, but quickly took it. After a little while we saw to our surprise a crowd of Russians coming up out of their trench, stopping in front of it, and starting to dance. We didn't need asking twice, but climbed out of the trench, with a concertina, of course, and twirled in competition with the Russians. When we had amused ourselves like that for quite a while, they offered us their hand to say goodbye, promising not to shoot at us that day, and went back to their trench. And they kept their promise too, for there wasn't a single shot the whole day and so we could continue to celebrate our Easter in peace. H.K.’

The censor informed the editor that accounts of ‘so-called scenes of fraternisation between friend and foe’ were forbidden and that the letter could therefore not be published.

This account reminds us of the Christmas truce on the Western Front in December 1914. If you google ‘Easter Truce’ you will also find a reference to an Easter truce on the Eastern Front in 1916 when the western and orthodox dates for Easter coincided.

The case of Jurij Delenk, a Catholic priest and editor of a Wendish Catholic paper, also indicates the distrust of Wends. He was conscripted into the German army and selected to be an army chaplain. However, because he had been publicly involved in Wendish activities he was considered as politically unreliable and rejected as chaplain.