

Russian Local Government and the War Effort, Autumn 1914-Spring 1915: ‘A New Horizon for Russia’s *Zemstva*’

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After the catastrophes of the first months of the war, Russia’s military commanders hoped that the coming of autumn in 1914 would bring a respite from intense fighting. Colder weather and short days would make military operations a more difficult prospect for both sides and for the organisations founded to care for the wounded, the war’s first winter should provide a calmer period. When Prince G. E. L’vov, the union’s chairman, spoke at a meeting of the Union of *Zemstvo* on 15 October 1914, he believed that he had seen some signs of hope in the military situation, as he noted that ‘the dark clouds that had blown in from the west over the last two and a half months were now clearing and that rays of sunlight were beginning to appear’.¹ The apparent easing of the severity of military operations would provide an opportunity for the unions to stabilise their work and to develop a framework for their activity without the pressure of military crisis requiring immediate responses.

This article will discuss how the Union of *Zemstvo* and the Union of Towns adapted to the military situation that developed after the defeats at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes in August and September 1914. It will analyse how, after the initial panic and chaos of the first weeks and months of the war, these public organisations were able to extend the scope of their activities and to embed their work deeply into the fabric of Russia’s wartime society. Immediately war was declared in summer 1914, Russia’s elected local government institutions – the provincial and district *zemstva* and municipal councils – recognised that they could play an important part in supporting the Russian war effort. Half a century of experience organising local services had convinced Russia’s local government institutions that they had the capacity to make a substantial contribution to the war effort, and the role that local government had played during the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-05 – when they had provided care for the wounded – reinforced this belief. Russia’s military very quickly showed itself unable to deal with the tens of thousands of men who were wounded in the battles in the first weeks of the war, and the *zemstva* and municipal councils quickly stepped in to organise the evacuation of men away from the battlefield and to establish hospitals to provide medical care for Russia’s wounded.²

Russia’s experience of the First World War has become the subject of serious study in its own right in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union, and the centenary of the outbreak of the war in 2014 prompted the appearance of much academic work. Alongside major studies

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¹ *Vserossiiskii zemskii soiuz pomoshchi bol’nym i ranenym voinam. Izvestiia glavnogo komiteta (Izvestiia)*, no 2, 1 November 1914, p. 88.

² Peter Waldron, “A sad and heart-rending landscape”: Summer 1914 and the Politics of Russia’s Wounded’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 94 (2016), pp. 638-40.

of the war itself,³ there have been significant studies of national wartime politics,⁴ as well as detailed analyses of individual topics.⁵ Substantial documentary collections have appeared, encompassing many different aspects of the war.⁶ The work of Russia's local government institutions during the war was first discussed in two volumes in the Carnegie series on the history of the war, published a decade after the end of the conflict.⁷ More recent studies, notably A. S. Tumanova's 2014 book, have utilised Russia's archives and provided detailed discussion of the role of public organisations between 1914 and 1917.⁸ Tumanova argues that the Russian government failed to capitalise on the initial goodwill shown by Russia's civic society in the first months of the war, and failed to recognise the changed nature of Russian society. Her work pays less attention to the wide-ranging work carried out on the ground by public organisations and how their strength developed quickly after the outbreak of war.

The unions themselves published considerable materials during the war that described their activities and brought them to the attention of a wider public. It was important for the unions to promote communication between the many different local organisations that were participating in the broader national movement that was directed from the unions' headquarters in Moscow, as well as to stimulate engagement by local bodies in the work of the national unions. The reluctance of central government to permit frequent national meetings of representatives of the *zemstva* and municipal councils made it especially important for the unions to ensure that local organisations were kept closely informed of the empire-wide work that was taking place under the auspices of the national unions. As well as regular reports on the work of the unions,⁹ both bodies published journals, fortnightly in the case of the Union of *Zemstvo*, that provided up to date information about their work and allowed the union's leadership to communicate with local bodies. The *Izvestiia glavnogo komiteta* published in 58 issues by the Union of *Zemstvo* from October 1914 until March 1917 represent an especially valuable source for the study of the place of social organisations in the fabric of Russian society during the war. The first issue of the *Izvestiia*, published on 15 October 1914, gives a flavour of the range of topics that the journal was to cover in coming months and years. A long introduction setting out the genesis of the organisation included news of private financial contributions to the union's work, as well as noting the involvement of the imperial family in the beginnings of the union's work. The issue of state funding of the union was set out in some detail, and information provided about the numbers of wounded that would need care. The journal reported that the first *zemstvo* hospital train had departed from Moscow for Nizhnii Novgorod on 15 August and included detailed material relating to the location of *zemstvo*-organised feeding stations for the wounded and the provision of stores to ensure that hospital trains could be properly supplied.¹⁰ Rarely

³ O. R. Airapetov, *Uchastie Rossiiskoi imperii v Pervoi mirovoi voine*, 4 vols., Moscow, 2014-15 is the most comprehensive study.

⁴ See *Pervaya mirovaya voina i konets Rossiiskoi imperii*, 2 vols, St Petersburg, 2014.

⁵ For example, N. V. Surzhikova, *Voennyi plen v rossiiskoi provintsi (1914-1922gg.)*, Moscow, 2014.

⁶ *Pervaya mirovaya voina v otsenke sovremmikov: vlast' i rossiiskoe obshchestvo. 1914-1918*, 4 vols., Moscow, 2014, provides a comprehensive set of political and social opinions. *Pervaya mirovaya voina 1914-1918 gg. v dnevnikakh i vospominaniakh ofitserov Russkoi imperatorskoi armii*, Moscow, 2016 and Fridrikh Krauze, *Pis'ma s pervoi mirovoi*, St Petersburg, 2017 provide individual testimonies.

⁷ Tikhon J. Polner, *Russian Local Government during the War and the Union of Zemstvos*, New Haven CT, 1930 and Paul P. Gronsky and Nicholas J. Astrov, *The War and the Russian Government*, New Haven CT, 1929.

⁸ A. S. Tumanova, *Obshchestvennye organisatsii Rossii v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny (1914-fevral' 1917 g.)*, Moscow, 2014.

⁹ See, for example, *Vserossiiskii zemskii soiuz pomoshchi bol'nym i ranenym voinam. Obzor deialtel'nosti glavnogo komiteta, 1 avgusta 1914g. – 1 fevralia 1915 g.*, Moscow, 1915.

¹⁰ *Izvestiia*, no 1, 15 October 1914, pp. 1-42.

utilised in depth by writers on Russia's experience of the First World War, the *Izvestiia glavnogo komiteta* provide a uniquely valuable source for the study of social engagement with the war effort.

By the beginning of 1915, the unions had been able to equip more than 160,000 hospital beds for the wounded, including over 26,000 at the front itself. In addition, at the request of the Ministry of War, the Union of *Zemstvo* equipped evacuation hospitals in nine regional centres: Penza, Poltava, Orel, Khar'kov, Rostov, Kaluga, Tambov and Nizhnii Novgorod. The provision and operation of hospital trains was a central part of the unions' work, and after five months of war, it had succeeded in equipping forty trains. Initially, the trains had been intended just to operate in the interior of Russia, transporting the wounded from evacuation points to provincial towns and cities, but soon after the outbreak of hostilities the war ministry asked that the trains be used for bringing casualties away from the front with thirty of them running to and from the centres of battle in East Prussia and Galicia by the end of 1914. The unions also sent detachments to the front to assist in providing medical care and food to the wounded while they were being transported from an initial first aid point to a hospital train, and plans were being drawn up to open hospitals with 80 to 100 beds at railway stations close to the front to care for seriously wounded troops who could not be safely moved further.¹¹

Imperial and popular reaction

The imperial family showed immediate approval for the work of the two unions. Prince L'vov, elected as the chairman of the Union of *Zemstvo* in July 1914, met Nicholas II on 6 August and received the Tsar's good wishes for the *zemstva*'s work with the wounded. Members of the imperial family visited *zemstvo* warehouses the following day. The Tsarist government had shown extreme reluctance to allow the *zemstva* and municipal councils to form nationwide organisations in the decades since their initial establishment under Alexander II in the 1860s and 1870s, and Nicholas II's overt approbation for the newly founded organisation was vital in enabling Russia's local government institutions to form national bodies. Less than a week after Lvov's meeting with the Tsar, the government gave its formal approval to the establishment of the Union of *Zemstvo* for Aid to Sick and Wounded Troops. The imperial family continued to demonstrate its support for the new organisation: on 20 November 1914, Nicholas II visited the Union's hospital in Smolensk, and during December the Tsar, his wife and their children inspected the Union's 7th front-line medical detachment at Khodynka in Moscow immediately before it was despatched to the Caucasus on active duty and also visited a hospital that had been set up in the Petrovskii palace.¹² This was followed by the Tsar receiving a delegation from the Union of *Zemstva* and hearing a report on the Union's work during the four months of war.¹³ A reception in the Moscow Kremlin in the presence of the Tsar was then held for organisations providing aid to Russia's troops,¹⁴ and in late January 1915, Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich, the Commander-in-Chief, together with his whole staff, visited a *zemstvo* hospital.¹⁵

¹¹ *Izvestiia*, no. 6-7, 1-15 January 1915, p. 6.

¹² *Dnevnik imperatora Nikolaiia II 1894-1918*, t. II, ch. 2, 1914-1918, Moscow, 2013, p. 80.

¹³ Vserossiiskii zemskii soiuz pomoshchi bol'nym i ranenym voinam, *Sobranie Upolnomochennykh gubernskikh zemstv v Moskve 12-13 marta 1915 g. Zhurnaly zasedanii (Sobranie)*, Moscow 1915, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Izvestiia*, no. 5, 15 December 1914, pp. 1-2.

¹⁵ *Izvestiia*, no. 8, 1 February 1915, p. 54.

Early in March 1915, the Union received further confirmation of the emperor's approval of its work in a telegram from Prince Alexander Ol'denburgskii, the head of the army's health and evacuation department, who expressed the Tsar's thanks for the Union's work to combat epidemic disease and promised to provide the necessary funds to continue the work.¹⁶ At the end of the month, L'vov again met Nicholas II at Tsarskoe Selo and presented a detailed report on the Union's work, stressing the role of the organisation in taking action to deal with infectious diseases and emphasising the readiness of the Union to take on the task.¹⁷ The 'sacred unity' that swept through Russian society during the first months of the war saw the Tsar and the local government organisations embracing each other to support Russia's war effort. Despite the government's suspicion of allowing the formation of a national organisation of local government institutions, Nicholas II was prepared to encourage and engage strongly with the new unions and their leaders. Even though elements in the government retained a deep scepticism of the local government organisations,¹⁸ it was important for the regime to recognise that they were making a vital contribution to the war effort.

The defeats of the first weeks and months of the war resulted in more than 200,000 Russian casualties, along with 100,000 men killed. The war ministry proved incapable of coping with the task of caring for the wounded and, very quickly, the Union of *Zemstva* and Union of Towns stepped in to equip and run hospital trains to evacuate wounded men away from the battlefield, established hospitals and provided medical care for Russia's soldiers and, as the war continued, they began to provide a variety of supplies to the troops. The response to the unions' efforts from the soldiers whom it assisted was enthusiastic and demonstrated their appreciation of the work of the two organisations. Speaking at a meeting of the Union of *Zemstva* in mid-October 1914, L'vov declared that 'we can now be calm about the wounded. The feelings of pain and alarm for them have now been replaced by the confidence that every wounded soldier returning from the field of battle will find here, at home, in the heart of the empire, a peaceful bed, fraternal care and treatment'.¹⁹ His optimism was encouraged by the popular enthusiasm for providing assistance to Russia's fighting men: there were substantial donations of goods for the army from the general population. By the middle of November 1914, the Union of *Zemstva* had been able to despatch 460 boxes of material, including tobacco, to its Warsaw warehouse for distribution to the frontline, while groups of Moscow students set up a cooperative to sell evening newspapers on the streets of the city and donate the profits to the Union of *Zemstva*.²⁰

While the imperial family showed approbation for the work of the unions, the attitude of the government was much less supportive. The Tsarist regime had, since the establishment of the *zemstva* and municipal councils in the reign of Alexander II, firmly resisted any attempt by the local government institutions to establish any sort of national organisation to provide unity across the empire. It had only been at times of grave emergency that any form of united action by Russia's local government institutions had been permitted: the Volga famine of the early 1890s and the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905 were the only real occasions when the state had permitted concerted action by the *zemstva*.²¹ For the St Petersburg regime, local

¹⁶ *Sobranie*, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Izvestiia*, no. 12-13, 1-15 April 1915, p. 1.

¹⁸ F. A. Gaida, *Vlast' i obshchestvennost' v Rossii: dialog o puti politicheskogo razvitiia (1910-1917)*, Moscow, 2016, pp. 380-1.

¹⁹ *Izvestiia*, no. 2, 1 November 1914, p. 88.

²⁰ *Izvestiia*, no. 3, 15 November 1914, p. 27.

²¹ T. I. Polner, *Obshchezemskaya organizatsiia na Dal'nem Vostoke*, vol. 1, Moscow, 1908, pp. 5-15.

government should remain local and must not seek to trespass on the functions and competence of national bodies. Caught unawares by the severity of military defeat in the first weeks and months of war in 1914, the regime had no choice but to allow the *zemstva* and municipal councils to unite and organise centrally, but the government was insistent that these national organisations could only exist for the duration of the war.²² Reflecting in autumn 1915 on the experience of the unions' interactions with the government, L'vov noted that it was deeply regrettable that those at the head of the government had proved unable of living up to the great responsibility laid upon them. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, in particular, had persistently placed obstacles in the way of the unions working together to combat the threat of infectious disease.²³ As political tensions intensified during the autumn of 1915, relations between government and the unions deteriorated even further, with General Mrozovskii, the commander of the Moscow military district, attempting to prevent the holding of meetings of both unions, and even characterising the *zemstvo* union as an 'unlegalised organisation'.²⁴ The attitude of the national government to the unions was to continue to be suspicious and wary.

As the unions began to supply Russia's frontline troops with a wide variety of material, soldiers and their officers wrote to express their gratitude for the work of the unions in supporting the war effort. The commander of the 1st company of the 209th Bogorodskii infantry regiment wrote on 6 December 1914 to thank the Union of *Zemstva* for its gifts, especially warm clothing, that his men had received, and emphasising how important it was for his troops to know that their motherland had them in its thoughts and was trying to ease the difficulties of military life.²⁵ Other detachments also wrote to express their thanks to the unions for sending warm clothing: a unit on the north western front wrote that life in the trenches meant rain, sleet and water everywhere, but after receiving parcels from the Union of *Zemstva* 'now things are going well, every soldier is cheerful'.²⁶ The regular soldiers of the 151st Piatigorsk regiment wrote on 15 December 1914 to thank the union for its gift of fresh underwear which had arrived late the previous day so that 'we had last night free of being bitten by insects'.²⁷ The commander of a reserve battalion wrote to thank the union for its provision of footwear and tobacco, which had been enough to supply 2,000 men and leave some material over for the next contingent of troops. The Bogorodskii regiment's soldiers wrote again on 20 December offering their gratitude for the union's supplies that had reached every man in the regiment

'We received them gladly and shared them out between us: everyone said that they would now be able to keep warm in the trenches, and not need to run about to keep warm. Tea with sugar gives us pleasure and warms our stomachs, empty from days of sitting in the trenches. Every soldier in the trenches longs for a kettle or pan so that they can make tea and quench their thirst. Tobacco and cigarettes we consider a luxury...and even non-smoking soldiers who receive them, light up and then - coughing and grimacing from the unaccustomed smoke - say that it makes the long dull hours pass more quickly'.²⁸

²² 'Osobyi zhurnal soveta ministrov, 25 noiabria 1914 goda', *Osobyi zhurnaly Soveta ministrov Rossiiskoi imperii. 1914 god.*, Moscow, 2006, pp. 545-6.

²³ Moscow, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voenno-istoricheskii Arkhiv (RGVIA), f. 12564, op. 1, d. 8, l. 205.

²⁴ RGVIA, f. 12564, op. 1, d. 9, l. 2.

²⁵ *Izvestiia*, no. 5, 15 December 1914, p. 56-7.

²⁶ *Izvestiia*, no. 6-7, 1-15 January 1915, p. 73.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

A further letter, signed by 102 men from an unidentified detachment, thanked the union for the presents it had sent for Christmas and the New Year

‘These presents for the holidays so gladdened us that there are no words to express our gratitude. Your attention has touched us to the depth of our souls and produced involuntary tears. We had thought that we had been forgotten, but no – happiness touched us and made us realise that people are thinking about us and caring for us. This is the most important thing for us’.²⁹

Many of the ordinary soldiers in Russia’s army could not read and write, and commanding officers often wrote on their behalf: there were especial thanks from officers to the unions for providing warm clothing and new underwear for the men under their command.³⁰ A group of soldiers – both officers and ordinary troops – wrote after being treated on hospital train no. 208 to thank the *zemstva* union, expressing especial gratitude for the atmosphere, care and food on the train as it carried them away from the battlefield. Soldiers from the 13th troop of the 47th Siberian artillery regiment wrote that they were touched by the generosity of the *zemstva*: ‘Now we are convinced that people living in Russia care more about us than we do about ourselves’.³¹ Not all Russian troops were illiterate: a young soldier, Vasilii Khirnyi, wrote a diary about his experience of being wounded and evacuated from the south western front and then transferred to a *zemstvo* hospital in Tarnov during January and February 1915, expressing his thanks to the Union of *Zemstvo* for its work and, especially, to the medical assistant and nurse who looked after him while he was in hospital.³² Khirnyi was especially touched when the nurse marked his name-day with gifts – white bread, cigarettes and matches, soap and, particularly valuable for him, a notebook and pencil: ‘I was overcome’ he wrote ‘and did not know how to respond to such generosity...The soldiers in the hospital ward talked all day about the nurse and each valued her dignity...Every soldier who was in the hospital run by the second detachment of the All Russian Union of *Zemstvo* will remember it and its staff’.³³

Other soldiers too wrote to the Union expressing their thanks for the care they had received on hospital trains: wounded soldiers on train no. 200 evacuating them to Gomel’ commented on the train’s cleanliness and on the quality of the food, giving special praise to the work of the doctors and nurses. They were particularly appreciative that, when one of the soldiers began to bleed profusely from one of his wounds, the train was stopped to allow the medical staff to attend to him.³⁴ A wounded soldier arriving at a *zemstvo* hospital in Mogilev wrote to L’vov that ‘you took care of us as if we were your own children...there are mothers who are less caring with their children...Wherever I am, be it at home or again at the front, I will always remember your care and solicitude for us wounded men. I wish you, you excellency, and the whole Union, long life and that your work will always be remembered’.³⁵ A junior officer wrote to one of the nurses who had treated him at the Mogilev hospital to thank her for the prayers and hymns that had accompanied both his arrival and departure from the hospital, while letters from soldiers still in the trenches showed how much they appreciated the work of the *zemstvo* union. One soldier wrote that he was sitting in a trench in a position

²⁹ *Izvestiia*, no. 8, 1 February 1915, p. 72.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³¹ *Izvestiia*, no. 9, 15 February 1915, p. 61.

³² *Izvestiia*, no. 12-13, 1-15 April 1915, p. 79.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁴ *Izvestiia*, no. 1 June 1915, p. 43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

where ‘the only thing between us and the enemy is a river...I am emboldened to write and send you my sincere thanks for your work and cordiality towards us, poor wounded soldiers. I can never forget all you did, and my conscience does not allow me to put off any longer thanking you for how you cared for us, such good and kind parents to your children. We arrived filthy, ragged and grime-blackened from sitting in the trenches, and you paid no attention to the dirt, but turned us into clean and calm soldiers. Thanks to your work and help, almost all the wounded have now returned to active service with our valiant troops and our brothers in the defence of our mother Russia’.³⁶

The work of the frontline detachments of the unions was given substantial praise by soldiers who had benefitted from their work. The commander of a military unit operating on the south western front in Galicia close to the rivers Dunajec and San wrote approvingly of the work of a *zemstvo* detachment, headed by V.V. Romeikov, which had worked very hard to evacuate the wounded. The commander wrote how he had witnessed ‘the boundless energy of the staff, and the care and tenderness with which they treated the sick and wounded’ and noted to Prince L’vov how the detachment had left a wonderful memory among all the troops under his command.³⁷ The commander of an infantry division wrote to L’vov that one of his regiments had been involved in hard fighting for two weeks and that, once the leader of the 5th *zemstvo* union detachment had learned of the scale of the casualties, he organised a special medical unit and ‘for two weeks [the unit] worked continuously under very heavy artillery fire to selflessly assist the regiment with first aid and moving casualties, so that the work of evacuation was carried out without delay...I have recommended the entire staff of the unit for a St George’s decoration’.³⁸

For Russia’s soldiers, the work of the two unions interposed a different tone into their military service. The first months of the war were very difficult for the Russian army as hundreds of thousands of men were killed and wounded, and the care provided by the local government organisations contrasted sharply with the often chaotic scenes on the battlefield where the war ministry experienced extreme difficulties in organising effective medical treatment and evacuating the wounded to the rear. The letters sent by ordinary soldiers and their commanders to the Union of *Zemstva* national headquarters show how much they valued the way in which the unions’ staff treated them as members of a family: ‘tenderness’ is a frequent element in the description of the attitude of the unions to the wounded. The contrast with the often harsh discipline of the army itself, and the brutal and distressing experiences that soldiers experienced as the army was repeatedly defeated in the summer and autumn of 1914, was immense and gave wounded men some respite from the hard life they endured at the battlefield. The gifts of warm clothing, along with simple pleasure-giving items such as tobacco and tea, ensured that soldiers gained a very different impression from their interaction with the unions: the army had shown itself clearly incapable of ensuring that its fighting men were properly equipped and provisioned.

The response of ordinary soldiers to the work of medical staff and, in particular, nurses, was not always wholly positive. While the work of authentic nurses was given great praise in reporting of their work in caring for the wounded, there were sometimes less complimentary judgements on the motivations for women wishing to work as nurses. Occasional newspaper reports suggested that women were becoming nurses to make it easier for them to find a

³⁶ *Izvestiia*, 1 June 1915, p. 45.

³⁷ *Izvestiia*, no. 15, 15 May 1915, p. 29.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

husband,³⁹ while there were also examples of salacious images being circulated depicting nurses. As the war progressed, these latter were especially directed towards the Empress and her daughters, and suggested more general anxiety about female roles in the masculine environment of the military.⁴⁰

Local government and the Russian state

While L'vov had hoped in mid-October 1914 that there were signs of recovery in Russia's military position, the progress that Russia had made by preventing further German and Austro-Hungarian advances into Poland did not lead to any sustained improvement in the situation.⁴¹ By the start of December, L'vov was writing that the task facing Russia's troops was on a different scale from previous conflicts and that the news from the front showed the 'exceptional resilience' of the army. He expressed the hope that the pressure on the military would ease, but acknowledged the need to be ready to provide aid to the troops in readiness for cold weather.⁴² During the autumn and first winter of the war, Russia avoided defeats of the magnitude of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes and its armies enjoyed success against Austria-Hungary with the capture of L'viv in September, and the long siege of the Galician fortress of Przemysl through the winter that ended, after more than 130 days, with Austrian capitulation in March 1915. But, at the start of May 1915, the German army launched an offensive in western Galicia, south of the city of Krakow. The Russian army found itself in increasing disarray and its position rapidly weakened. The respite from defeat and its associated casualties that L'vov and the two unions hoped for had proved to be of short duration.

As the war developed, the *zemstva* and municipal councils showed substantial confidence in their competence, believing that the roots of their abilities lay in their 50 years of service in Russia's provinces and cities. Speaking on 12 March 1915, L'vov declared that

'the great ideas of the great transformer of Russian life, the unforgettable emperor Alexander II, the great ideals incorporated by their creator in the *zemstvo* institutions, through which we have gained an upbringing in the ways of the state, have borne fruit. At a moment of the greatest historical adversity, the Russian people have shown themselves, thanks to the institutions of the *zemstva*, sufficiently organised to endure the hard blows of fate and to meet them, not in a state of disunity and uncoordination, but with united force, as structured and ordered as the army at the front'.⁴³

The experience that the *zemstva* had gained in their 50 years of work was, for L'vov, an essential preparation for their wartime work. The *zemstvo* saw their involvement in the war effort in 1914 as representing the natural culmination of their decades of experience governing Russia's cities and provinces. The role that the *zemstvo* could play, they argued, was a vital component in cementing the national unity that was needed for the successful prosecution of the war and the institutions of local government.

³⁹ Melissa Kirschke Stockdale, *Mobilizing the Russian Nation. Patriotism and Citizenship in the First World War*, Cambridge 2016, p. 126.

⁴⁰ Boris I. Kolonitskii, 'Obraz sestry miloserdii' in Katia Bruish and Nikolau Katser, *Bol'shaya voyna Rossii*, St Petersburg 2014, pp. 100-26.

⁴¹ Sergei Nelipovich, *Krovavyi oktiabr' 1914 goda*, Moscow, 2013, pp. 276-91.

⁴² *Izvestiia*, no. 5, 1 December 1914, p. 1.

⁴³ *Sobranie*, p. 8.

‘The work of government has given us accumulated experience and strength’, L’vov continued, ‘and we should remember that, the as we become more experienced, older and mature, the more demands history will place upon us. But we should not fear these demands and responsibilities. The solution to all our historical tasks lies in the unity of the spiritual strengths of the country. And with the unity of the Tsar and people, with which we are experiencing these present momentous days, Russia has nothing to fear’.

The *zemstva*’s work in providing aid for Russia’s wounded was the practical embodiment of the unity between state and society that was vital for victory. L’vov declared that

‘it is frightening to think what would happen if there were no *zemstva*. We can now proudly declare that we have assisted our valiant army, organising affairs deep in the rear, providing our sick and wounded troops with necessary transport and care, and thus supporting good spirits in the country. The mood of the people is the central guarantee of eventual victory’.⁴⁴

By 1914, Russia’s local government institutions saw themselves as being integral elements in Russia’s state structures, but they believed that they were more than just cogs in the administrative machine: the *zemstva* and municipal councils held a special place in the ethos of the state since they were elected by the Russian people. Before 1905, these institutions of local government were the only bodies in the entire Russian state structure that could claim popular legitimacy through election, albeit on a very limited franchise.⁴⁵ This gave them a particular ability to claim that they had insight into the mentality and aspirations of Russians as a whole, and the local government institutions believed that they formed a vital bridge between the state and its population. In January 1915, the Perm provincial *zemstvo* wrote to L’vov, declaring that the *zemstvo* work to assist the wounded ‘again eloquently demonstrates the historical vitality of the *zemstvo* base to the state’s structure’.⁴⁶ No other organisation in the Russian empire could claim to have the same level of day-to-day contact with the ordinary people of the empire, and to operate not, as the masters of the population, but as its elected representatives. Even after the introduction of the nationally elected Duma in 1905, the *zemstva* and municipal councils remained uniquely close to the everyday needs of the Russian population, providing schooling, health care, agricultural advice and a host of other basic services.

Ever since their establishment during Alexander II’s reign, local government institutions had believed that they should act as the base on which the principle of popular participation in government could be extended to the national level. Successive generations of *zemstvo* and municipal council members had made the case for some form of elected national assembly, and the campaigns during 1904 and 1905 for national popular representation had *zemstvo* and municipal council members at their heart.⁴⁷ The Tsarist regime resisted all attempts by local government organisations to form any sort of national body but, during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, local government organisations were able to act in a concerted way to provide assistance to the wounded.⁴⁸ They were unable, however, to sustain their national

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Kermit E. Mackenzie, ‘Zemstvo organization and role within the administrative structure’, in Terence Emmons and Wayne S. Vucinich (eds.), *The zemstvo in Russia. An experiment in local self-government* Cambridge, 1982, pp. 31-78.

⁴⁶ *Izvestiia*, no. 8, 1 February 1915, p. 55.

⁴⁷ Shmuel Galai, *The Liberation Movement in Russia 1900-1905*, Cambridge, 1973, esp. pp. 109-76.

⁴⁸ Moscow, Tsentral’nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Moskvy (TsGAM), f. 179, op. 60, d. 791, l. 34.

role beyond the end of the war, but the experience gained in Russia's Far East was significant in enabling local government to organise itself rapidly when war broke out in summer 1914 and the *zemstvo* and municipal councils saw the war as providing a political opportunity for them. Writing at the beginning of March 1915, L'vov declared that

'when the blessed day of victory arrives for our motherland, when all our national forces can be devoted to peaceful, creative work and cultural construction, a wide new horizon will open for Russia's *zemstva*, demanding fresh urgent and loving work. Our readiness for such work is shown by the fifty-year history of our *zemstva* and by the great patriotic inspired enthusiasm of *zemstvo* Russia over the current unforgettable year'.⁴⁹

New horizons

The *zemstvo* and municipal councils believed that they had unique and unparalleled characteristics that qualified them to play a central part in Russia's war effort. Their initial focus on providing immediate care for the many men wounded in the battles in the first months of the war was soon extended to a much wider range of functions. Writing in early January 1915, L'vov declared that 'the *zemstvo* union, initially intending to restrict its activity to the evacuation [of troops] has, by force of necessity, been drawn in to a whole range of measures, closely associated with military activity right at the front'.⁵⁰ The two unions had envisaged their role as being to receive wounded men, once they had been transported away from the front by the army itself and then to evacuate them into the rear where they could be provided with proper medical treatment. But the inability of the war ministry to organise the initial transportation of the wounded from the battlefield meant that the *zemstva* and municipal councils very quickly became involved close to the front line. By 1 November 1914, 30 of the 40 hospital trains that the *zemstvo* union had equipped had been sent to the battlefield in East Prussia and Galicia. At the same time, the unions realised that they needed to be able to provide complete care for the wounded as soon as they had arrived from the battlefield at first aid points. Detachments to provide immediate medical care and food for the wounded were despatched to the front, while it was also proposed that the unions should open hospitals at the initial first aid points for men who were so seriously wounded that they could not easily be moved.⁵¹ In the Caucasus, the entire responsibility for caring for the wounded fell upon the two unions: this posed especial difficulties, given the often isolated mountain locations of military units and the inadequate railway network in the region. The challenges posed to the unions' work by the Caucasus front were sufficient for L'vov to address the issues directly in early February 1915: he discussed the problems posed by the Caucasus theatre of war, and noted that the *zemstvo* union was taking a range of measures, including developing a range of evacuation routes through the mountains, establishing feeding stations for the wounded and providing help for refugees who were trying to escape the war. 'These' declared L'vov 'are our direct tasks, our direct responsibilities'.⁵² The extent of fighting in the Caucasus placed other stresses on the *zemstvo* union, as it needed to recruit additional staff to work in the area, and also required the establishment of a dispersal centre for the wounded in Rostov in southern Russia. The Caucasus continued to pose problems for the *zemstvo* union, given the rapidly changing nature of the war in the region, together with the difficulties for the *zemstvo* union involved in operating across such a large area.⁵³

⁴⁹ *Izvestiia*, no. 10, 1 March 19015, p. 2-3.

⁵⁰ *Izvestiia*, no. 6-7, 1-15 January 1915, p. 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵² *Izvestiia*, no. 8, 1 February 1915, p. 1.

⁵³ *Izvestiia*, no. 10, 1 March 1915, pp. 36-9.

The local government organisations quickly found that they not just needed to provide care for soldiers wounded on the battlefield, but also became responsible for the provision of general medical services to Russian troops. Early in 1915, a report by the Moscow regional military medical inspector noted that Moscow's military hospitals were overflowing and that this was forcing men into the care of the *zemstvo* and municipal unions. More than a quarter of the soldiers in military hospitals were there for general medical treatment, rather than having been wounded in battle and only some 10 per cent of available hospital beds were actually occupied by the wounded. Substantial numbers of men required hospital treatment for sexually transmitted diseases, with 34 officers and 1,333 ordinary soldiers occupying almost a quarter of the available beds in the Moscow general military hospital. Prisoners of war took up almost another 40 per cent of the hospital's beds, and this placed huge pressure on local government-run medical services. Hospitals run by the Moscow municipal administration were already having to cope with significant numbers of men with serious infectious diseases, such as typhus and dysentery, but Moscow's mayor had notified the military administration that the hospitals would soon be full and that military hospitals would have to find space to treat men with infectious diseases arriving from evacuation hospitals close to the front.⁵⁴

The issue of how best to combat the spread of infectious diseases occupied the *zemstva* and municipal councils for significant periods during 1915. As winter had approached in late 1914, the *zemstvo* believed that the onset of cold weather meant that gastro-intestinal disease would not be easily spread. There was, however, concern in Moscow about the possibility of the spread of cholera, since the experience of the Russo-Turkish war in the 1870s had shown that around half of all hospital admissions during the conflict arose as a result of infectious disease.⁵⁵ L'vov addressed the question during February 1915, when he noted that each battle front presented different problems in terms of the challenge of dealing with infectious diseases. The large numbers of soldiers and intense fighting on the western front made it difficult to provide adequate food and clean drinking water for the army: a lack of clean water could easily lead to stomach disorders and the evacuation of sick soldiers, making it even easier for infectious disease to spread. In the Caucasus, Turkish prisoners of war, L'vov argued, had brought infectious diseases into *zemstvo* hospitals. He was especially concerned that infection could spread from the army into the civilian population: he noted that typhoid fever was already evident on the western front, with spotted typhus in the Caucasus. The broader health issues encountered in Galicia also concerned L'vov: there was a particular lack of clean drinking water and proper sanitation in the region, and the *zemstvo* needed to enforce proper sanitary and hygiene standards at its evacuation transfer points in Galicia. When the Union of Towns met in mid-February 1915, the central item on its agenda was discussion of the need to deal with infectious disease. Mikhail Chelnokov, the union's chairman, noted that these diseases were an inevitable accompaniment to war, but that they presented an especial threat to Russia, given the long history of epidemics that the country had endured. For Chelnokov, this was evidence that the two unions needed to take their work even closer to the front line to support the maintenance of good public health.⁵⁶ Local government, with its experience of managing public health, had to take the lead in planning to cope with infectious diseases.

⁵⁴ TsGAM, f. 179, op. 3, d. 48, ll. 1-2.

⁵⁵ TsGAM, f. 179, op. 60, d. 770, ll. 60-1.

⁵⁶ RGVIA, f. 12593, d. 6, ll. 9-17.

When L'vov met Nicholas II at the end of March 1915, he reported to the Tsar on the *zemstvo* union's readiness to tackle the problem of infectious diseases; this had formed a major part of the discussion at the meeting of *zemstvo* representatives held earlier in the month.⁵⁷ The meeting heard reports from *zemstvo* representatives stationed at the battlefield about the situation: on the Warsaw front there were significant issues surrounding drinking water quality, along with contamination from poorly situated graves for soldiers who had perished during the fighting. With the coming of spring, *zemstvo* representatives foresaw the danger of outbreaks of cholera, typhus, dysentery and other gastro-intestinal diseases: the provision of clean drinking water to the army was essential to avoid large-scale illness among Russia's fighting men.⁵⁸ It was also essential to improve the wider environment in which the army was operating: the *zemstvo* noted the collapse of rubbish collection services in most towns and villages in the region and the risks this posed to public health and the army. It was essential to reinstate rubbish collections and to take decisive measures to protect the wellbeing of the troops.

The position of Galicia was seen as especially dangerous as, alongside the difficulties that were being experienced on the north western front, 'Galicia has always been considered unpropitious in regard to outbreaks of all types of epidemic disease'. The *zemstvo* representatives noted that 'now that almost the whole country has become the scene of military action, when the majority of the population has lost not just bread, but also blood, the danger of outbreaks of epidemic diseases has become almost inevitable'.⁵⁹ The *zemstvo* representatives working in Galicia recognised the steps that both the military and local government were taking and hoped that it would be possible to revive the medical services that the Galician population had received before the war: the *zemstvo* would be able to work together with existing structures to improve healthcare. In the interim, however, the *zemstvo* could take additional steps to counter the spread of disease: it was important to improve the condition of the evacuation stations for wounded soldiers: healthy and sick men were constantly passing through these stations, giving the opportunity for infection to spread. The *zemstvo* argued that they must organise baths, disinfection facilities and water boilers at evacuation stations, as well as providing medical inspection of soldiers' barracks at the evacuation stations. The sum of 48,000 rubles was allocated to the provision of bathhouses and laundries, with an additional 25,000 rubles each month for running costs.⁶⁰

The final component of the *zemstvo* campaign to contain the spread of disease in Galicia was to set up large isolation hospitals at railway stations on the borders of Galicia where soldiers being evacuated to the rear could receive full medical examination and be isolated in case of disease. The *zemstvo* union envisaged four isolation hospitals being set up, with up to 2,000 beds each so that soldiers suffering from infectious diseases were not evacuated further east.⁶¹ Prisoners of war also presented problems for local government attempts to contain the spread of disease. Early in 1915, an outbreak of typhus occurred among Turkish prisoners who had been sent to Kaluga after being captured in the Caucasus: the only *zemstvo* hospital in Kaluga became filled with ill Turkish prisoners and, to accommodate them, the sexually transmitted disease ward in the hospital had to close and patients sent home. Temporary hospitals had to be established to cope with the sick prisoners, and only then could the *zemstvo* hospital again admit local people as patients. In addition, the Kaluga provincial

⁵⁷ *Izvestiia*, no. 12-13, 1-15 April 1915, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Sobranie*, p. 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶⁰ *Izvestiia*, no. 8, 1 February 1915, p. 61.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-2.

zemstvo had to rent bathhouses solely for the prisoners of war, since bathhouse owners would not otherwise allow prisoners to use them.⁶²

The need for the *zemstvo* and municipal unions to provide medical services, not just to the wounded, but potentially to people suffering from a wide range of diseases, placed strains upon their ability to recruit sufficient staff. It was especially difficult to attract doctors, and by March 1915 the *zemstvo* union was only able to recruit two thirds of the number of medical staff it needed.⁶³ The system of exemptions from military service also produced problems for the *zemstvo* and municipal unions: while Red Cross doctors and the medical staff of existing large *zemstvo* hospitals could claim exemption from military service, other doctors did not qualify and while the *zemstvo* union received more than 1,600 applications from doctors to work in its units, the exemption rules means that it had been able to accept fewer than 300 of them.⁶⁴

Combatting infectious disease showed the *zemstvo* and municipal unions the extent of the tasks that faced them in supporting Russia's war effort and the continuing weakness of the war ministry in anticipating the consequences of the war. There was, however, a political dimension to the unions' ambition to extend their activity: after half a century of being excluded from work on a national scale, the unions were determined not to lose the opportunity that had been presented to them by the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914. L'vov was very keen to stress in March 1915 that a united national effort was needed to deal with the threat of widespread disease, evidently fearing that the *zemstvo* and municipal unions could be side-lined by national government. Unity, L'vov suggested, was the natural outcome of nine months of war and, in any case, as the unions would continue to have the responsibility of caring for the wounded who had contracted infectious diseases, it was appropriate for them to take a central part in the work nationally.⁶⁵

The *zemstvo* and municipal unions realised quickly that they needed to take responsibility for a wide range of other services as a consequence of their involvement with the wounded. A report to the Union of Towns in October 1914 had identified the extremely serious position of wounded men who had lost limbs and proposed that the union open a workshop to manufacture prosthetics.⁶⁶ By the end of 1914, the Moscow city Duma had established a commission to deal with the provision of prosthetics and other assistance to soldiers who had lost limbs during the fighting; it drew up plans for establishing a workshop to manufacture prosthetics and contributed 10,000 rubles to the associated costs.⁶⁷ Significant numbers of soldiers also suffered from severe mental health problems as a result of their experience of warfare: in February 1915 the two unions allocated 650,000 rubles to help provide for these men.⁶⁸

The unions recognised that, as well as requiring basic equipment such as surgical instruments, for their evacuation trains and hospitals they needed to provide everything that wounded troops required while they were receiving medical treatment. As autumn arrived,

⁶² *Izvestiia*, no. 10, 1 March 1915, p. 55.

⁶³ *Izvestiia*, no. 11, 15 March 1915, p. 38-41.

⁶⁴ *Izvestiia*, no. 6-7, 1-15 January 1915, p. 3.

⁶⁵ *Izvestiia*, no. 12-13, 1-15 April 1915, p. 2.

⁶⁶ RGVIA, f. 12593, d. 46, l. 79.

⁶⁷ TsGAM, f. 179, op. 60, d. 770, ll. 121-2.

⁶⁸ RGVIA, f. 12593, d. 6, l. 24.

warm clothing and footwear were a priority for the unions, along with bed linen and soap.⁶⁹ The *zemstvo* union agreed to purchase 40,000 warm winter coats, 50,000 fur hats and 40,000 pairs of winter footwear. These items were expensive and the Moscow military commander was requested to contribute 50,000 rubles to provide clothing for ordinary soldiers as they left hospital, while the *zemstvo* union estimated that supplying 40,000 wounded men with basic supplies - bedding, towel, slippers and socks - while they were in hospital would cost 1.3m rubles.⁷⁰ Procuring these supplies also presented a challenge for the unions, since the Russian textile industry was giving priority to producing uniforms for front-line troops and the possibility of importing the necessary supplies was severely limited by restrictions on both the availability of foreign currency and the limitations on trade as a result of the closing of much of Russia's western land frontier. By the beginning of 1915, the *zemstvo* union was employing 15,000 soldier's wives to make clothes for the wounded, as well as to provide supplies to the army itself. By 1 January 1915 the *zemstvo* workshops had manufactured 2.5m shirts and 1.8m sets of underwear, with a further 600,000 shirts and 1.1m sets of underwear ready to be completed.⁷¹ Individual *zemstva* and municipal councils also contributed clothing: Tver provided 3,000 sets of clothing, with Tula producing clothing for both the wounded and soldiers at the front. The Tver provincial *zemstvo* also requested an advance of 300,000 rubles from the national union to buy material to make boots for troops; rapidly rising prices meant that the *zemstvo* wanted to buy leather immediately.⁷² The Vologda *zemstvo* organised the sewing of linen for the wounded, producing more than 7,400 items between September 1914 and January 1915, while the Viatka *zemstvo* board provided 100,000 pairs of warm woollen leggings and more than 555,000 *pud* of grain to the army itself. In Perm, the provincial *zemstvo* organised a women's sewing circle to produce linen for *zemstvo* hospitals: more than 17,000 pieces of clothing and linen had been supplied by February 1915.⁷³ The Novgorod *zemstvo* also established a women's committee but, instead of sewing linen themselves, they raised funds for a disinfection station for clothing and bedding.⁷⁴

It was not just material for the soldiers themselves that the *zemstvo* union needed to procure: at a meeting in the city of L'viv on 19 January 1915, representatives of the *zemstvo* and municipal unions met the Red Cross and agreed to procure 15,000 *pud* of hay and 15 wagons of oats for the unions' use. The *zemstvo* union also needed to purchase horses for its work, a task that was made difficult by the priority given to the war ministry in requisitioning horses for the army's use. Horses were only available for purchase by private organisations in a few districts of the Russian empire, and during 1915 the *zemstvo* union needed to procure an average of 1,500 horses each month and transport them from far-flung corners of the empire to the front.⁷⁵

The *zemstvo* and municipal councils also provided assistance to families where men had been conscripted into the army. The Perm provincial *zemstvo* reported in March 1915 that some 100,000 families in the province had seen men being recruited for military service, with 60,000 now needing assistance with agricultural work.⁷⁶ In February 1915, the Bessarabia provincial *zemstvo* board set up a charitable committee to support the conscripts' families,

⁶⁹ *Izvestiia*, no. 6-7, 1-15 January 1915, p. 3.

⁷⁰ RGVIA, f. 12593, d. 1, ll. 238-48.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, l. 44.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, l. 38.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 62.

⁷⁵ Polner, *Russian Local Government during the War*, pp. 252-3.

⁷⁶ *Izvestiia*, no. 12-13, 1-15 April 1915, p. 111.

allocating 34,000 rubles to support its work, while the Saratov *zemstvo* committee had agreed at its first meeting in August 1914 to provide support for wounded soldiers' families until a soldier had recovered completely from his injuries, and the Ostrogozhskii district *zemstvo* committee in Voronezh province established 29 local committees to provide help to soldiers' families.⁷⁷ Moscow's provincial *zemstvo* allocated 150,000 rubles at a meeting in February 1915 to provide additional assistance to conscripts' families.⁷⁸ The need to offer support to conscripts' families had been discussed in the first months of the war, when L'vov had noted that public organisations must be agile and ready to deal with any eventuality.⁷⁹ The *zemstvo* and municipal councils recognised that, even though conscripts' families were entitled to support from the government, they were likely to need additional food rations and that this could pose significant financial challenges to local government. By the end of 1914, it was clear that the war would not come to a rapid conclusion and that the finances of the *zemstvo* and municipal councils would be stretched by the calls on their resources.⁸⁰ The Tsarist regime, was, however, extremely reluctant to allow local government organisations to stray outside their areas of responsibility as set out in law. The Ministry of Internal Affairs wrote to M. Brianksii, chairman of the Union of Towns, in September 1914 permitting the union to hold a congress, but insisting that it must not discuss any areas that lay outside its competence, including aid to soldiers' families and the issues of food supply to Russia's cities.⁸¹

Conclusion: autonomy and tension

Despite approbation at the highest level for the work of local government institutions, the Tsarist government retained a deep suspicion of their activities, believing that the *zemstva* and municipal councils were seeking to take advantage of the war to extend their own powers. At the same time, on a local level, the regime initiated surveillance of the staff of the unions' hospital trains, seeing them as playing a part in the dissemination of revolutionary propaganda among soldiers. In December 1914, the Department of Police in the Caucasus requested information on the entire staff of the trains operating in its region from local gendarme units.⁸² The government while, however, recognising the threats that the work of local government could pose to its own authority on both the national and local levels, was reliant on the work of the *zemstva* and municipal councils to provide essential parts of Russia's war effort. The exigencies of the war, even during a period of relative calm on the battlefield after the initial military disasters in East Prussia, meant that the government was powerless to prevent the Unions of *Zemstva* and Towns expanding their activities away from simply caring for sick and wounded soldiers so that, by early in 1915, local government organisations had gained a significant foothold in wider work both close to the battlefield and in the rear. Ordinary Russian soldiers and their officers reacted to the work of the *zemstva* and municipal councils with gratitude and enthusiasm, and this everyday contact with the Russian population was an important means of enhancing the position and image of local government among the army. The activities of the unions in providing basic services to the army and, increasingly to a wider segment of Russian society, were essential in positioning them not just, as adjuncts to the army and war ministry, but as autonomous bodies which could stand independent of the Tsarist regime and which identified themselves with Russia's

⁷⁷ *Izvestiia*, no. 8, 1 February 1915, pp. 36, 43; no. 9, 15 February 1915, p. 43.

⁷⁸ *Izvestiia*, no. 10, 1 March 1915, p. 60.

⁷⁹ *Izvestiia*, no. 1, 15 October 1914, p. 4.

⁸⁰ TsGAM, f. 179, op. 60, d. 770, l. 123.

⁸¹ RGVIA, f. 12593, d.1, l. 270.

⁸² Moscow, Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, f. 102, OO, op. 244 (1914), d. 243 z.s., t.2, l. 469.

people. When the Duma met for a brief three-day session at the end of January 1915, the rhetoric was still universally pitched towards maintaining national unity and the budget was passed without opposition.⁸³ There was as yet then little sign of overt opposition to the government from the *zemstva* and municipal councils, but the renewed failure of Russia's army in the Great Retreat during the summer of 1915 was to fundamentally change the national political landscape.

⁸³ F. A. Gaida, *Liberal'naia oppozitsiia na putiakh k vlasti (1914-vesna 1917 g.)*, Moscow, 2003, pp. 69-70.