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“Roof over Their Head” for Soviet Soldier in Europe and Asia: From the Epistolary Heritage of Front-Line Soldiers: 1944–45

Abstract

The article reconstructs practices for solving the “housing problem” in the front-line everyday life of Soviet soldiers and officers in 1944–45, when advancing through the territory of a number of European states and participating in the Far Eastern military campaign. The topic is in the

mainstream of military anthropological research and has been developing in the Russian historiography for over 25 years. Such studies are based on sources of personal provenance, which are being actively introduced into scientific use, interpreted, and compared with official documents. The article throws light on housing situation of the Red Army soldiers, a poorly studied aspect of their daily life at the final stage of the Second World War. It fills the gaps concerning living conditions of Soviet combatants, dynamics and practices of their housing outside the USSR, and their interactions with local population. The author aims to prove that living situation of Soviet soldiers and officers was important for defeating the enemy. The research methods are content and discourse analysis of epistolary documents, private correspondence of the front-line soldiers with their family and friends (both published and unpublished). The study confirms correlation between everyday life of combatants and combat effectiveness of the army. It clarifies the concept of “front-line life” and its structure. During the hostilities that took place abroad of the USSR in 1944–45, Soviet soldiers and officers visited a number of European countries (Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, etc.). They were housed in forests, temporary dwellings (dugouts) and endured great inconveniences. However, billeting for overnight or prolonged housing was also a common practice. Letters of front-line soldiers describe living conditions in cities and villages of several countries, demonstrating interest of the Soviet people in the living conditions abroad. They note comfort of the housing and availability of the amenities, features of the architecture and interior. There is much information on the living conditions in Germany, and we see contradictions in the attitude of Soviet combatants to the German housing and things. Letters about the living conditions in China show that they seemed exotic to the Soviet people.

## Keywords

Historical sources, epistolary sources, military anthropology, World War II of 1939–45, front-line everyday life, Soviet soldiers and officers, private correspondence, European countries, China, housing and living conditions.

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