After the intense battles in May, the situation of the Finnish Sharp-Shooter Battalion remained dire. As mentioned before, the May encounters with the Polish enemy had practically decimated the Battalion, and the unit was subsequently placed in reserve, guarding the rear flank of the Russian Guards on the Narew. The battles on the road to Wąsewo had forced Grand-Duke Mikhail to call a general retreat of the Imperial Life-Guard from Mazovia to Podlasie. Having pushed the Russian Guards’ forces across the borders of the Congress Kingdom, the advancing Polish army paused on 19 May. Partly this was because of the necessity to secure supplies, partly because General Skrzynecki now decided to send the first long-range detachments to assist the Lithuanian insurgents. Commanded by General Chłapowski, this small expeditionary force crossed the river at Łomża and continued its advance towards Lithuania, living off the land. Skrzynecki’s main force continued its pursuit of the Guards almost immediately, driving the Russians across the northeastern marshes and reaching the banks of Narew at the crossings of Żółtki and Tykocin on 21 May.

The Polish offensive was finally halted on the river Narew, where the Russians succeeded in destroying the bridges at Żółtki on 21 May. The fast Polish advance prevented the Russians from doing the same at Tykocin, and the river crossing at this ancient Podlasian settlement now became a scene for intensive fighting. On the Polish side, the charge to the bridge of Tykocin was commanded by Colonel Daniel Gottfried Georg Langermann, originally from a Lutheran family in Mecklenburg, who had served in the Napoleonic Wars, remained in the French army and arrived in Poland as a volunteer. On the Russian side, the Guard’s Finland Regiment, which included several Finnish officers, was involved in the fighting. At the end of the day, the Poles had to withdraw, leaving the opposite banks of the Narew in Russian hands.

During the same week, Field-Marshal Diebitsch and the Russian main army marched from the south to support Grand-Duke Mikhail’s men, forcing Skrzynecki to withdraw and regroup. On 26 May, relying on their artillery superiority, the combined Russian forces were able to defeat and destroy the bulk of

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1 Brzozowski 1833, pp. 147–150; Hordyński 1832, pp. 274–275.
Skrzynecki’s infantry in the decisive battle of Ostrołęka. The battle was the bloodiest encounter of the entire war, and decided the outcome of the hostilities. Both the Polish and Russian casualties in the confrontation reached approximately 6000 dead and wounded, but Diebitsch’s army remained intact, and he stayed on the field. Meanwhile, the defeated Poles were only saved by artillery commander Józef Bem’s skillful deployment of a new invention. Having observed the effectiveness of the British Congreve-rockets in the siege of Danzig during the Napoleonic Wars, Bem had established a special rocket corps, Korpus Rakietników, to augment the artillery forces of the Congress Kingdom. The rocket fire provided cover for the retreat of the remaining Polish forces, who now had to scramble back towards Warsaw in disorder.

This chapter shall explore the experiences of the Finnish soldiers in the early summer of 1831, immediately after the battles in Mazovia and the decisive battle of Ostrołęka. Most of the surviving primary evidence, namely the letters written by Finnish officers, date from this period. Aside from Lieutenant Colonel Lagerborg’s detailed and informative letters, which have already been discussed in the previous chapters, the material also consists of letters written by Lieutenant Adolf Aminoff and Port d’epée Ensign August Cronhjelm. Whereas Lieutenant Colonel Lagerborg was the acting commander of the Finnish Guards Battalion, both Aminoff and Cronhjelm served in the Guard’s Finland Regiment, and participated in the defense of Tykocin on 21 May.

The letters by Lagerborg, Aminoff and Cronhjelm provide unique personal narratives of the Polish campaign from the viewpoint of Finnish upper-class military men. They can be approached as individual examples of wartime Alltagsgeschichte, ‘everyday history’, as well as interesting and revealing discourses of militarized masculinity. Such personal, grass-roots experiences of 19th century military campaigns, and the significance of war in shaping masculine identity, have been explored quite thoroughly, especially in German historiography. At the forefront of this approach has been female historians such as Ute Planert, Ute Frevert and Karen Hagemann, who have focused on German-speaking Europe, particularly Bavaria and Prussia. Aminoff’s letters, in particular, provide a glimpse of his direct experiences of combat, physical injury

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3 According to the contemporary figures, the Russians lost 5,868 men in the battle, whereas the Polish casualties reached 6,418. Leslie 1956, p. 212.