Chapter 1
Lethal Journey between Four Fronts: First World War Experiences of the Reichstag’s Deputies

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When he arrived in Moistrana-Lengefeld at the end of the summer 1915, a soldier Friedrich Stampfer, engaged in the Austro-Hungarian army, wrote: “Armed with climbing sticks and crampons, we trained for the mountain war”. Gebirgskrieg, “mountain war”, is how this socialist journalist portrays his war, far away from the trenches of the Western Front, or from the dreary stretches of the Eastern Front. “How joyful I was then, that destiny had led me to this magical land, and not to the sludge and devastation of Pinsk’s marshlands”.1 How many fronts were there for the German soldiers? For a French soldier there was almost only one: the front running from Nieuport, in Flanders, down to the Vosges, through Arras and Saint-Mihiel. For the German side, however, there were at least four, ranked in order of their importance in the imagination of the soldiers: the Western Front, the Eastern Front, the Macedonian front, and the Italian front.2 Yet despite this, the European history of the Great War is often written around only one of these theatres: that of the Western Front’s trenches. Most places of remembrance for this war are located there: from the storms of steel of the great battles of Verdun or the Somme, to the storms of paper3 of the

2 The various colonial fronts could also be added to this picture. They constitute, in many respects, a very particular experience, without mentioning the forces hired in the navy. Since naval battles are not strictly speaking “fronts”, they are not taken into account here. They nevertheless represent one of the important profiles of battles during World War One: the Jutland Battle (Skagerrakschlacht) is engraved in the memories of many soldiers. See Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch), SgY 30/1327/1–3, Lebenserinnerungen von Fritz Kahmann, 88–93. I restrict the analysis to the four important theatres of operation, namely the European fronts, conforming to the limitations of the available archives.
great war novels – Henri Barbusse, Ernst Jünger, Erich Maria Remarque. The relative lack of importance granted to the Eastern Front has become evident since then: there is no profusion of publications comparable to that following the Schützengrabenkrieg.⁴ This “unknown front”⁵ has now become a “forgotten front”⁶. Over the past fifteen years, researchers’ efforts have consisted of addressing this oriental margin in order to compensate for the imbalance. This movement has led to numerous high quality publications and hypotheses,⁷ thereby improving the current knowledge base in this area. Nevertheless, no global and comparative view of the various war spaces has emerged.

Given the central position they had in the conflict, the Central Powers – and most importantly Germany – lie at the centre of the analysis, as they provide an unprecedented experimental protocol. In fact, as far as the influence of space on the experience of war is concerned, only Austro-Hungarian and German soldiers experienced different fronts during the same war. Some of the soldiers of the French and British armies undoubtedly fought in Italy or at Gallipoli, but this experience was not as widespread as in the case of the Central Powers’ soldiers. Hence one might ask whether the statement Other fronts, other wars is valid. The Central Powers’ soldiers fought successively on these “other fronts” and were able to compare them. They travelled across the whole of Europe during these years, in a lethal journey which may have led them from Artois to Tarnopol, from Riga to Skopjé, in this gigantic field which constituted the territory of their war experience.⁸

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⁵ In Winston Churchill’s words, used from 1931 onwards. See Winston Churchill, The Unknown War. The Eastern Front (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1931).

⁶ Gross, ed. Die vergessene Front.
