

Chapter 9

A SEMINAL “ANTI-CATASTROPHE”?

Historiography on World War I in Poland, 1914–2019

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Memory/Commemoration of World War I

In commemorating World War I, Poland, like many countries of East-Central Europe, focused predominantly on the regaining of independence.¹ Having dragged on, the war had exhausted the human, material, and fiscal resources of the belligerents, destroyed existing social and political systems, and led to the fall of the East-Central European multinational empires. The resulting political vacuum was filled by national states.

Despite the extensive material and human losses (in the ranks of Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German armies, four hundred thousand Polish soldiers were killed and eight hundred thousand wounded, not counting Polish volunteers who died fighting in the Polish Legions or the Polish army in France),² the war's result turned out to be the fulfilment of the dreams of four Polish generations deprived of their own statehood.

As a consequence, after the war, nobody in Poland questioned the sense of it at all. From the Polish point of view, it was a “sacred war” that resulted in the almost miraculous reestablishment of an independent Poland. For a few generations of Polish activists in the long nineteenth

century, a European War between great powers had seemed to be the only opportunity to fight for independence and rebuild their own statehood. One of the architects of Polish independence, Roman Dmowski, the chief ideologist of National Democracy, put this idea as follows:

If, for the whole world, the 1914–1918 war was an unexpected, stunning catastrophe, so from our point of view it represented something which crossed the borders of our most daring, most unrealistic expectations. . . . Concerning Poland, who could even imagine that we are on the eve of a war in which one of the powers who partitioned Poland, would be incapacitated and unfit for fighting, and that the two others would have all great powers against themselves? Who could foresee that at the peace conference after this war, all three powers, which partitioned Poland, would be absent, but Poland would be present?³

On the tenth anniversary of independence, one of the most popular newspapers in Poland reminded the public: “A storm of Great War horror, a gigantic struggle, was decided 10 years ago; as the clock struck an hour of triumph of historic justice on the twitching body of the devil, the Archangel of Freedom planted his blazing standard. And in this hour of confusion of events, among the crash of failing thrones, from a sea of blood, Poland was raised.”⁴

Controversies arose, however, over the question of whom the Poles owed for this historical success. As a consequence, the discussion about the events during the Great War was strongly politicized right from the beginning. In official propaganda, school programs, and books, the role of Józef Piłsudski in regaining independence was emphasized, especially after the May 1926 coup, to the disadvantage of the other political camps such as the National Democrats.⁵ Those “historical contributions” served as one of the most important legitimizing means, for antidemocratic and authoritarian circles, of “sanatorzy.” On the other hand, National Democrats just accused Piłsudski of being an Austrian agent.⁶

It was not until 1937 that 11 November was declared an official holiday, Polish Independence Day. It is worth noticing, however, that this national holiday does not commemorate the Armistice on the Western Front but rather the seizing of executive power by Piłsudski from the hands of the Regency Council and the disarmament of the German garrison in Warsaw, which happened on 11 November 1918. Moreover, there was no political consensus regarding this holiday. For example, the socialists preferred to observe the anniversary of the establishment of Ignacy Daszyński’s leftist government, which had taken place in Lublin on 7 November.⁷

The cult of fallen soldiers during World War I was seen as an element in a long chain of struggles for national independence and sovereignty, beginning with the Kościuszko Uprising in 1794, through the Napoleonic Wars, the November Uprising in 1830, the January Uprising in 1863, and the revolution of 1905–7. It had no special features or liturgy. The war cemeteries played a role as “special commemoration places,” particularly those where fallen legionnaires were buried (about 3,000 legionnaires died on the battlefields, including 170 officers). According to international obligations and internal law, the Polish local administrations, after 1918, were responsible for all war cemeteries in the Polish territories. Many civil society organizations were involved in this, for example the “Polish Mourning Cross” (*Polski Krzyż Żałobny*) established in 1921 and renamed after 1925 as the Society for Care of the Heroes’ Graves (*Towarzystwo Opieki nad Grobami Bohaterów*), the Polish Red Cross, and, last but not least, different veterans’ associations.

For obvious political reasons, special attention was paid to the legionnaires’ graves. In 1929, the government decided that these should be separated from the general cemeteries. Additionally, the legions’ battle routes were commemorated by special memorial plaques, crosses, chapels, monuments, and schools, and the expressions used by legionnaires during the war were introduced into the official topography.

In Volhynia, for instance, where all three brigades fought in 1915–16, there were twenty legionnaires’ cemeteries with a special tourist route marked out and the terrain declared a historic park.⁸ These memorials, located in the eastern provinces of the country, along with the Lviv’s “Young Eagles’ Cemetery” (*Cmentarz Orłąt Lwowskich*)⁹ and the military quarter in the Vilnius Rossa Cemetery also played an important political role as “proof” of the allegedly Polish character of these nationally mixed and disputed terrains. In 1923 in the Rakowicki Cemetery in Cracow, the exhumed bodies of fifteen Polish cavalymen fallen in a charge on Rokitno in Bukovina in an attack on Russian trenches in June 1915 were solemnly buried. This battle emerged as one of the symbols of Polish self-sacrifice in the struggle for independence and became a part of Polish national mythology in the postwar period.

The memory of the struggle for independence during the nineteenth century, with its successful and dramatic climax in the Great War, was, according to the Warsaw government, crucial to the new national identity and would unite the multinational Polish postwar society, about 35 percent of which consisted of national minorities. Therefore, it became an important element of patriotic, pro-state education in all schools, including those for national minorities.¹⁰ It was not especially successful, though. For example, in 1928 during the special session of the Polish parliament

devoted to the tenth anniversary of independence, deputies of national minorities left the chamber in protest against the policy toward national minorities.¹¹

Nationally conscious and active Ukrainians had their own heroes to emulate. Generally speaking, the great numbers of ethnic Ukrainians who had become Polish citizens did not forget the attempts to build their own national state during and after World War I, thus regarding Polish rule as illegal occupation. In their eyes, Poland had no right to govern over East Galicia and Volhynia. They commemorated 1 November, when the Western Ukrainian People's Republic was declared and military struggles with Poles over Lviv began. A special place in the national memory of Ukrainians, who made up 16 percent of the citizens of the Polish Second Republic, was occupied by the Sich Riflemen. This unit, composed of volunteers, fought in the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian army against Russians and later became the nucleus of the Ukrainian Galician Army, the military arm of the West Ukrainian National Republic and the regular army of the Ukrainian National Republic. Parallel to the official Polish state's political commemoration policy, remembrance of these soldiers in Ukrainians' commemoration culture was cultivated in press, books, and various associations, by teachers and Greek-Catholic clergy, and during local celebrations, youth camps, lectures, concerts, etc.¹²

The Belarusian nationalist circles celebrated on 25 March. On that day in 1918 a Belarusian People's Republic had been declared by a small group of activists. However, this turned out to be rather a symbolic gesture. The new state did not control almost any territory and was not given international recognition. In the western part of the area, inhabited by the Belarusian population (in the vicinity of Białystok, Grodno, and Brest), there were vivid memories in the interwar period of the massive evacuation (biel. *Bežanstva*) of the whole region, forced upon the civilian population by the Russian military during the retreat before the German and Austro-Hungarian advance in summer 1915.¹³ The tsarist troops were ordered to devastate all land that was inevitably to be seized by the Germans, thus causing huge material losses and psychological trauma. Another important event in the national consciousness of Belarusians was the anti-Bolshevik uprising in Sluck, which broke out in October 1920.¹⁴

The central memorial, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, as seen throughout Europe, was erected in Warsaw in 1925.¹⁵ It represented typical commemoration practice, as in almost all belligerent countries. But from the beginning, this monument was to commemorate all freedom fighters, not only those who had fallen during the Great War. Rather tellingly, the Unknown Soldier buried there had not lost his life in World War I but during the battles with Ukrainians over control of East Galicia.

To the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier were added a few plaques with the names of the battlefields on which Polish soldiers died in the years 1914–21. They reveal, convincingly, that from the Polish perspective, the Great War finished three years later than its conclusion in the West.

This highlights a specific problem of the whole East-Central European region, where the Armistice at the Western Front did not put a stop to the fighting. Quite the reverse: with the final defeat of the Central Powers, the fragile stability reigning after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk collapsed. Violent internal and external conflicts, paramilitary violence, plebiscites, bloody power struggles, territorial demands, signings and breakings of alliances or cease-fires, and intensive backstage diplomatic negotiations could be observed from Finland to the Caucasus. In the case of Poland, this transitional, unstable period lasted until the Treaty of Riga was signed in March 1921, which set a new postwar international order. At the same time, the promulgation of the March constitution in Poland stabilized its political system. So, in Polish public memory, at least in the interwar period, the date of 11 November was important, by no means the end of the process of regaining independence and drawing the state borders.

An important part in the commemoration of the war was played by veterans' associations, the most influential of which, already established in May 1918, was the "Union of Polish Legionnaires" (*Związek Legionistów Polskich*). In 1922, the "Museum of the Pro-independency Deed" (*Muzeum Czynu Niepodległościowego*) was created by the veterans' association in Piłsudski's home in Cracow.¹⁶ A similar role was played by the "Museum of the Polish Army" (*Muzeum Wojska Polskiego*) in Warsaw. It was established in 1920.

Many veterans published their memoirs during the interwar period. On the one hand, this was a way of coping with traumatic "front experiences," and on the other, it allowed the writers to commemorate fallen brothers in arms. High-ranking politicians and military commanders utilized these memoirs as a tool to influence public opinion, by presenting their own interpretations of the Great War and stressing their role in regaining independence. Despite the formal apolitical, pro-state, and patriotic character of the veterans' organizations, this milieu was deeply divided along political lines, as opposing groups cultivated their own memory and interpretation of history and had their own heroes and traditions. Unification of the veterans' movement was also made impossible by the personal ambitions of leaders such as Józef Piłsudski, Józef Haller, and Józef Dowbór-Muśnicki. Apart from the memoirs, the veterans endeavored to influence wide public opinion through the press, ritualized conventions, and, of course, by taking part in official celebrations for World War I anniversaries.

After 1926, a process of politicizing the veterans' associations and subordinating them to existing political parties took place, thus relegating them to predominantly political and propaganda functions. The autocratic government, using flattery but also financial and administrative pressure, took control of the main veterans' associations step by step, while the rest were marginalized.¹⁷

Official propaganda tried to force millions of Polish soldiers who had served in foreign ranks out of the public discourse. This could be seen, for example, in the new plaque on the central monument in the Gorlice military cemetery, which in 1928 replaced the original Austro-Hungarian one. This new plaque commemorates "the Polish brothers who, though serving in three different armies, all fought for the Polish cause and died in that region in the years 1914–1918."¹⁸ In fact, World War I had the character of a Polish civil war. Between 1914 and 1918, about 3.5 million Polish soldiers fought in the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and German armies. On the battlefields, many of them met with their compatriots, fighting against them. After the war, many Polish officers who had served in the former Russian, Austro-Hungarian, or German armies and joined the Polish Military after 1918 felt aggrieved when former legionnaires were promoted.¹⁹

World War I was also present in the Polish cinematography of the interwar period. Many films were produced in Poland, glorifying Piłsudski's legionnaires (e.g. *Maraton Polski*, 1927, dir. Wiktor Biegański; *Dzikie Pola*, 1932, dir. Józef Lejtes; *Rok 1914*, 1932, dir. Henryk Szaro) or the Polish-Soviet War (e.g. *Dla Ciebie Polsko*, 1920, dir. Antoni Bednarczyk; *Cud nad Wisłą*, 1921, dir. Ryszard Bolesławski; *Tajemnice medalionu*, 1922, dir. Edward Puchalski; *Mogła Nieznanego Żołnierza*, 1927, dir. Ryszard Ordyński; *Z dnia na dzień*, 1929, dir. Józef Lejtes). Their screenplays predominantly presented typical, banal, pseudo-romantic, pathos-filled stories depicting a readiness for self-sacrifice for the sake of the fatherland, thereby promoting the legion's myth. On the whole, these productions, which were partly cofinanced by the state, did not reach a high artistic level. Probably the most successful of them, the 1936 comedy *Dodek na froncie* (Dodek at the Front) directed by Michał Waszyński, told the story of a Polish soldier serving in the Austro-Hungarian army who accidentally found himself in a Russian uniform.²⁰

The unprecedented scale of the tragedies of World War II eclipsed commemoration of World War I. In its rivalry with World War I, World War II, with its tremendous human and material losses, occupation terror, Holocaust, the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, mass migration, reshaping of borders, and subjection to the Soviet Union, held a much more important place in the Poles' historical consciousness. The memory of the

events between 1914 and 1921, compared to the incomparable cruelty of the next world war, therefore faded after 1939.

Furthermore, the new Communist rulers tried to impose their own vision of history on society and to establish new traditions to celebrate and heroes to emulate. In 1944, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier certainly did survive the destruction of the Saski Palace, where it was located. But this was not without being emptied of its symbolic content: after its reconstruction in the form of a symbolic ruin, new commemorative plaques relating to World War II were added, while the old ones, commemorating battles between 1918 and 1921 (that were essentially battles against Soviet Russia), were moved to the Museum of the Polish Military. When, after the fall of Communism in 1989, the new authorities decided to bring them back and hang plaques commemorating the battles from 962 up until 1863, the tomb finally lost its character as a memorial place dedicated mainly to World Wars I and II. Instead, it commemorates all who have fallen for the country's independence from the very beginning of Polish statehood in the tenth century, thus playing the role of a general pantheon of the country's defenders.

After 1945, many World War I cemeteries fell into ruin and oblivion. They could not "compete" with new memorial places, such as former Nazi concentration camps in Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Majdanek and Polish military cemeteries all over Poland (Military Cemetery Powązki in Warsaw), Europe (Monte Cassino in Italy, Narvik in Norway), and North Africa (Tobruk in Libya). After 1980, the attention of political elites and public opinion concentrated on the memorials to the victims of Communist repression in Gdańsk, Szczecin, Poznań, and Katowice.

Commemoration of World War I moved, predominantly, to the private sector and churches, and was cultivated by oppositional circles and emigrants. This changed, fractionally, with the establishment of the trade union "Solidarność" in 1980, which referred to the independence tradition. People tried to celebrate Independence Day publicly, but unofficially, by attending special masses or by putting flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Observance of Independence Day was seen as a demonstration of anti-Soviet attitude, an opportunity for resistance against state Communism, which, in the eyes of an increasing part of Polish society, was illegitimate. After 1980, every year on the anniversary of the advance from Cracow of the First Company of legions, a few dozen oppositionists tried to march along the August 1914 route of this troop between Cracow and Kielce. In many eyes, Lech Wałęsa played the role of the leader of the Nation, just as Piłsudski had.²¹

After 1989, more changes in commemoration of World War I in Poland can be seen. First of all, 11 November was reestablished as a state

holiday, the central celebration being the changing of the guard of honor by the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Warsaw, as well as a military parade. Another symbolic return to the pre-1939 tradition and political culture, a vivid breach with the Communist practice, was reestablishing 15 August as “Armed Forces Day” (*Święto Wojska Polskiego*), in honor of the decisive, totally unexpected Polish victory on the Vistula River in August 1920. The battle that resulted in a strategic pushback of the Red Army was the turning point of the Polish-Soviet War of 1920–21. It was and still is commonly referred to as the “Miracle on the Vistula.”

In the years 1995–98, two statues of Piłsudski were erected in Warsaw, one of them facing the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Despite criticism from the left side of Polish public opinion, a statue of Roman Dmowski was unveiled in Warsaw in 2006. Left-wing politicians are now demanding the erection of a statue of another father of Polish independence, the socialist Ignacy Daszyński. Since 1985, a statue in Warsaw of Wincenty Witos, also credited with the reestablishment of Poland, stands as a representation of the peasant movement.

More generally speaking, there is a noticeable increase in interest in World War I in recent years. Local communities have started to rediscover local war cemeteries, and local schools are taking care of their maintenance. After decades of oblivion, they have been accepted as part of the local heritage and as an important element of the cultural landscape. For many years in the region of Little Poland, a nonprofit organization, *Crux Galiciae*, has existed. Its members restore and maintain the war cemeteries in that region on their own initiative and lobby local authorities to restore the most neglected ones.²² A vivid sign of the public’s increased interest in the events of 1914–18 is the publication of many detailed monographs on World War I cemeteries throughout Poland.²³ I would attribute this phenomenon, at least in part, to the decentralization of Poland after 1989 and to a process of building civil society. In this context, a new, popular, “entertainment” aspect was added to the memory of the Great War. Very popular in Poland are reconstruction groups that reenact historical battles²⁴ and take part in official ceremonies to commemorate victims of the war.²⁵

The Polish memory of the Great War period has strong regional components. In the Great Poland region, local authorities and inhabitants are proud of the so-called Great Poland Uprising, which broke out against the Germans in December 1918. In Upper Silesia, memory of the Silesian Uprisings of 1919–21 remains dominant, and in southeastern Poland the memory of Piłsudski’s legions and fights with Ukrainians over Lviv (Lwów) and Eastern Galicia is especially cultivated. These local memories highlight the fact that the memory of the war is still overshadowed

by the struggle for independence, which lasted between 1918 and 1921, climaxing in the Polish-Soviet War. It is well reflected in popular culture. The newest Polish movie superproduction, *Bitwa Warszawska 1920* (directed by Jerzy Hoffman, 2011) is centered around the successful repulsion of the Red Army on the outskirts of the Polish capital, the so-called “Miracle on the Vistula.”

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the centenary of the Great War has been celebrated by the Polish authorities to a considerably lesser extent than it has been the case in France or Great Britain. From the Polish perspective, other historical events from the tragic twentieth century are simply of greater importance when it comes to memory and identity politics. Especially after the electoral victory of the right-wing party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość in 2015, a cult of anti-Communist military resistance after 1944 (the so-called *Żołnierze Niezłomni* [Enduring Soldiers]) has been strongly promoted in media, school, and official state celebrations. However, this does not mean that the World War I-centenary passed unnoticed. To be sure, the Polish central government did not stage any official commemorations to mark the outbreak of the war, but this should not come as a surprise given the fact that Poland did not even exist as a state when the July Crisis escalated into a fully blown-out European war. However, as the centenary of the German defeat drew closer, much more attention started being paid by the Polish authorities, media, and public opinion to the reestablishment of an independent Polish state in November 1918, as well as to the subsequent border struggles, climaxing in the Polish-Soviet War 1920–21. In this context, the Polish discourse remained necessarily idiosyncratic, at least by Western European standards: the celebratory note of the various Polish ceremonies dedicated to national independence could not fail to be at odds with the emphasis on the soldiers’ sufferings in the trenches and the idea of the war being a catastrophe that prevailed in the huge international commemorations in Western Europe. This fundamental asymmetry could maybe best be seen on 11 November 2018 when Poland was not represented among the more than seventy heads of state or government who gathered in Paris to commemorate the end of the war. The Polish president and prime-minister instead attended the Warsaw ceremony celebrating national independence. Polish public opinion would not have understood (or, for that matter, accepted) their absence on that particular day that marked the high point and culmination of many regional and nation-wide festivities celebrating the rebuilding of the Polish State in 1918.

Apart from honoring and commemorating the endeavors of various political parties (with the exception of the extreme left) and military units that strove for a united, sovereign state, the official narrative features “the

civil war character” of World War I for Poles, who were mobilized into Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian armies and thus had to fight against each other. The public is also reminded of the material losses suffered by Polish towns and rural areas.

The anniversaries of the dramatic events of 1914–18 are also used by central and local authorities to foster memory tourism in Poland. For example, the city of Łódź “reinvented” the Battle of Łódź of 1914 to promote tourism in the region.²⁶ In 2009, the authorities of eight Polish regions (voivodeships) signed an agreement to bring into being, until 2014, “the tourist route of the First World War Eastern Front.” It leads through the material remains of the battles, such as cemeteries, monuments, museums, fortifications, trenches, and field narrow-gauge railway lines, with a center in the vicinity of Łódź. The route includes the two Polish towns that suffered the greatest destruction in World War I, namely Kalisz and Sochaczew. It also highlights, among others things, the civil war character of World War I seen from the Polish perspective.²⁷ The municipal authorities of Przemyśl wanted to facilitate access (among other means, by building approach roads) to the remains of the Austro-Hungarian fortress, one of the biggest attractions in this border city.²⁸ In many cases, local commemorations on the former battlefields are being planned by local activists and authorities with financial support from local business. One particularly striking example of one of these commemorations was the centenary of the battle of Gorlice in May 2015. Lectures, exhibitions, an international scientific conference,²⁹ a concert, ecumenical prayers on the war cemetery, and, last but not least, a reenactment of the fighting³⁰ underscore the multifaceted appropriation of World War I from below.

Polish Historiography on World War I

The Interwar Years

First of all it must be emphasized that Polish historians have not and do not participate particularly actively in big international debates on the war. Rather, they concentrate on internal Polish issues and the relations with neighboring nations. What are the reasons for this state of affairs? Firstly, as in the case of all nations in Eastern Europe, Poles had a specific war experience and set of problems, which directly influences the historiography. Poland did not enter the war as an independent actor in international relations. There were no state organs, no control over territory, no regular army, and of course no possibility of conducting foreign policy. For that reason, at least in the first phase of the conflict, Poles should rather be treated as subjects and supplicants, involved in the in-

ternal affairs of their state, rather than independent political actors who could forge the surrounding environment. This influenced historiography as much as memory culture.

In the interwar period, many studies on World War I's battles, written by former officers, were used as manuals for students at military academies, and many books by foreign military men and politicians were translated and published in Poland at that time.³¹ Clearly, the Polish book market was deluged with the memoirs of the Polish participants in the Great War.

From the very beginning of independence, Polish historians started to research the war and the military activity of the Polish national units during the war.³² Of prime interest for historians and the general public, of course, was the process of reestablishing Polish statehood. This most important topic from the Polish perspective aroused the greatest dispute and controversy. The first books were published only a few years after the war.³³ Incidentally, during the war, many historians took part in political discussions, engaged in peace negotiations in Paris (e.g. Oskar Halecki, Waclaw Sobieski), or joined the Polish national military units.³⁴

It has to be emphasized that the war on Polish soil did not end in November 1918—during the next two and half years, violent border conflicts with all of Poland's neighbors apart from Romania and Latvia erupted. As a consequence, from the Polish perspective, it did not make sense to separate World War I (understood as the years 1914—18) from the ensuing military conflicts, which were not resolved until the signing of the Polish-Soviet Peace Treaty in Riga on 18 March 1921. Of course, 1918 was a turning point in Polish history, but not nearly the end of the process of reestablishing Poland.

The issue most discussed regarding World War I was not, as in Western historiography, the “war guilt” problem. Without going into details, Polish historiography took for granted the German and Austro-Hungarian responsibility for the outbreak of the Great War, on which the Versailles Peace Treaty was based. Interwar Poland had no interest in a revision of this treaty, which was profitable for Poland, as such a revision was potentially destructive to the existing international order. Poland benefited from the Versailles Treaty, had very strained relations with the Weimar Republic, and was keenly interested in keeping the territorial status quo in postwar Europe. For most Polish historians of that time, there was nothing to be gained from engaging critically with revisionist currents of international historiography that were gaining momentum in the second half of the 1920s.³⁵

As the Polish historian and officer Stefan Rowecki wrote, “Pre-war Germany, with full impetus, took action to gain control over the economy

in all parts of the world, to convert itself into a single, huge fortress, bristling with bayonets, guns and battleships, and, with far-reaching plans, aspired to crush all neighbors and gain a hegemony in the world. These invasive plans, based on power, violence, and the rule 'strength before law' caused the world war."³⁶ Later on, in his monumental history of the Great War, Jan Dąbrowski adopted a more balanced narrative toward the "war guilt" question, stressing the inevitability of the war and readiness of the Russian political and military elite to solve international problems by force.³⁷ But on the whole, this did nothing to change the prevailing consensus regarding German responsibility.

On other World War I-related aspects, however, there was certainly no lack of controversy. From the very beginning, the question of who could claim the greatest credit for the reestablishment of Poland was a most controversial issue, with politicians and parties of all shades of opinion boasting about their achievements. In the interwar period, the biggest political parties, the National Democrats on the one hand and Piłsudski's followers on the other, claimed the credit for achieving independence. In Poland, as well as in many countries in Eastern and Southern Europe, World War I delivered legitimacy for those who wanted to seize or keep political power and influence. "Only those could be hosts here, who paid the right of being host, not by money, but by sacrifice of blood," stated the General Assembly of the pro-Piłsudski Union of Polish Legionnaires in November 1923.³⁸ The authoritarian regime, Piłsudski's followers after 1926, tried to convince Polish public opinion that Poland existed thanks to them and that due to their role in the war they should now have political power. This political dispute was reflected in historiography.

One of the most respected historians in governing circles, Waław Lipiński, thus stated that after the fall of the 1905 Revolution, "the independence movement had only one road—the building of force, a brutal physical force, which could break the power of the [Russian] government."³⁹ According to this interpretation, the greatest credit for Polish independence could be claimed by Piłsudski and his legions, who achieved the resurrection of Poland on the battlefields with arms in their hands. Of course, during the war the international outlook turned out to be pro-Polish. Nevertheless, the simultaneous fall of the three partitioning powers did not automatically mean the rebuilding of the state.

The other powerful political camp, the National Democrats, regarded their main ideologist, Roman Dmowski, as the person who resuscitated Poland. In the first phase of the conflict, Dmowski strove to unite all Polish territories under the Russian regime and, in the second, convinced the Western allies that an independent, republican Poland was in their interest. From the very beginning, his political camp on its own initiative

entered into alliance with the eventually victorious coalition, and had a decisive voice in the shaping of the postwar order.⁴⁰ As put bluntly by Dmowski, “In comparison to the armies counted in millions, the participation of Polish military forces was dim and had no bearing on the result of the war.”⁴¹ After 1926, the authoritarian government repulsed such an interpretation of history. In 1935, when a historian from Jagiellonian University, Waław Sobieski, in his manual on Polish history challenged the role of Józef Piłsudki in planning and carrying out the successful campaign against the Red Army in the summer of 1920, the Ministry of Education fired him from the job.⁴²

Michał Bobrzyński, historian and conservative politician in pre-1914 Galicia, attempted, among others, to reconcile these two contradicting standpoints. In his eyes, both camps indisputably deserved credit for the independence of Poland. The pro-Austrian option (upheld by Piłsudki) helped to keep the Poles from being subsumed into the huge Russian nation and pushed through the idea of an independent Poland until the 5 November Act of 1916, by which the Central Powers promised the creation of a Polish Kingdom on the territory of Congress Poland. This brought about the internationalization of the Polish cause, after decades in which this issue was regarded as an internal affair of Russia, Germany, and Austro-Hungary. On the other hand, Piłsudki’s opponents, pro-Russian politicians like Dmowski, promoted the unification of all Polish territory, not allowing Polish territory to be limited solely to areas under Russian control and, finally, uniting the Polish cause with the victorious Western coalition.⁴³

Contrary to the discussion described above, economic and social topics lay on the margin of Polish historians’ interest in the interwar period. Worthy of mention is the three-volume edition edited by Marcełi Handelsman with financial support from the Carnegie Foundation of studies on the social and economic influence of the war, focusing primarily on financial aspects of the occupation regimes, the influence of the war upon different sectors of the Polish economy, labor issues, and charity.⁴⁴ Despite the fact that this edition was published over seventy years ago, it is still a fundamental source of knowledge for us today on the economic and financial aspects of the war on the Polish terrain.

Marxist Historiography on World War I

World War II dramatically changed the perspective on World War I. The 1914–21 events rapidly came to exist in the shadow of the next world war. Nevertheless, the history of the last few decades did remain, as before 1939, a politically fragile topic. Due to the installation of a Commu-

nist regime in Poland and, consequently, subjection to the Soviet Union, freedom of research was severely limited and strictly subordinated to the party line. In the process, the administration put tremendous pressure upon historians to cling to the official line in their research orientation and publications.⁴⁵

From the perspective of Marxism, Poland regained independence due to the success of the Great October Revolution, not to the efforts of the Polish nation.⁴⁶ As the Marxist historian Leon Grosfeld wrote, “The fundamental breakthrough in the development of the Polish cause during the First World War took place as a result of the Great Socialist October Revolution. It alone established real conditions allowing for the re-establishment of the Polish independence, as only due to the revolution: 1. Russia ceased to be an imperialistic state, 2. the fall of monarchies in the Central Powers happened in strict relation to the outbreak of revolutions in Germany and Austro-Hungary.”⁴⁷

Piłsudski was labeled a dictator and fascist. According to official Communist interpretation, his legions served the imperialist interests of the Central Powers, just as National Democrats allegedly served the imperialist aims of the Entente powers. Roman Dmowski and his National Democrats were also criticized for their nationalism and anti-Semitism, and their activity was denied any patriotic inspiration.⁴⁸

There was no atmosphere for genuine historical research. The greatest role in establishing Polish independence and the most important event in the modern history of mankind, the beginning of the new era, per official Communist interpretation, simply had to be the Great October Revolution. During the Eighth Convention of Polish Historians, held in September 1958, a high-level Communist activist and historian, Henryk Jabłoński, presented a paper on the establishment of the Second Polish Republic in 1918, in which he presented the official party line on this issue. According to it, the main causative force should be the Russian Revolution.⁴⁹ This interpretation was confirmed at the Tenth Convention of the Polish Historians, held in Lublin in 1969,⁵⁰ and was popularized, among other things, by a popular monograph on Polish history during the Great War.⁵¹

On the other hand, historians who stayed abroad after 1945, as political exiles, continued the course of prewar historiography.⁵² However, the conflict between National Democrats and Piłsudski's followers over who could claim the greatest credit for regaining independence gradually abated as it lost its significance in current politics.⁵³ Generally, historians tended to recognize the role of politicians and soldiers from both political camps.

With the end of the Stalinist era, the atmosphere for research improved sensibly. This allowed Polish historians to engage more objectively and

impartially with World War I, provided one did not venture too far beyond the official line of thought. In that period, one can observe a slight liberalization of historical policy and weakening control over the historical milieu of the government institutions. In this context, the Communist Party tried to mobilize the inveterate memory of a long national history of struggles for independence, often straining facts and arguments by overstating the services of the left-wing and Communist politicians to the reestablishment of Polish statehood after 1918 in the process.⁵⁴ To be honest, the party certainly had a point there: up to then, historiography had not paid enough attention to the role of the radical left during the war, but, of course, this is not to say that the combination of pressure and encouragement it deployed was conducive to an objective assessment of the importance of Polish left-wing groups and Communists during World War I.

This change in the official course of the party illustrates one important factor, namely that the Communist regime, which was conscious of its deep unpopularity among the vast majority of Polish society, tried to use national rhetoric to improve its legitimacy.⁵⁵ In popular culture, this new tactic of official propaganda found its reflection, in 1981, in the broadcast of the TV series *Polonia Restituta*, directed by Bohdan Poręba, who was well connected with the government. He examined the role of Piłsudski and Dmowski in the regaining of independence, clearly reflecting the change in government policy regarding interpretation of the Great War.

After the fall of Communism, a new interest in World War I studies emerged, while at the same time the rest of the political and ideological restraints placed on historiography vanished. Polish historiography began to open itself, more widely, to the inspiration flowing from Western historiography and started to research topics that had been omitted or neglected in studies up to that time.

Military and Political History since 1990

Polish historiography on World War I is still dominated by a political (including diplomatic) and military history approach. The most important classical studies on the war were written by Janusz Pajewski, Jan Molenda, Jerzy Holzer, and Marian Zgórniak. Janusz Pajewski is regarded as the doyen of Polish World War I historians. For a long time, he enjoyed the well-deserved status as the most prominent expert on this conflict in Poland. His books, including a general history of the war,⁵⁶ a history of the reestablishment of the Polish state,⁵⁷ and a study on German *Mitteleuropa* plans, are still in use.⁵⁸ In his opinion, the Great War was more of a European war than a world conflict, with some total war features. It

accelerated the process of deep change in the social and political map of Europe, also initiating the process of diminishing of the Old Continent's position in the world. The war, resulting in the disappearance of the conservative, monarchical, and imperial order of multiethnic empires in East-Central Europe, meant for the nations of the regions—using Pajewski's words—the “Great Unknown” and the need to work out a new international order, which, due to many conflicting, hardly reconcilable national aspirations, turned out to be an extremely difficult task.⁵⁹ Pajewski noticed continuity between the German war plans of World Wars I and II, though in the latter, the plan was realized with more brutality and ruthlessness.

Recently, the centenary of the war in 2014 has seen the publication of a new Polish-language general history of the Great War by Andrzej Chwalba, the first of its kind in almost a quarter century. Unlike Pajewski at his time, Chwalba looked thoroughly into cultural, social, economic and gender aspects of the conflict, thereby catching up with trends in Western historiography, particularly in regard to the war experiences of soldiers and civilians. Already the title emphasizes that the author has come to regard World War I as a European civil war, the suicide of the “old continent.”⁶⁰ Four years later, he also published a monography of the Polish Legions as well as a Polish history of the Great War.⁶¹ Another recent publication project worth mentioning is Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny's attempt to write a comprehensive history of Eastern and Southern Europe during World War I and its aftermath. As the authors put it in the introduction, one of the aims of their study is to emphasize the specificity, but also the importance, of the war experience in Eastern Europe, thereby developing a much less Western Europe-centered narrative of the war. In line with the Greater War thesis that has been developed in international historiography, they insist on, among other things, the fact that the Eastern European war experience allows in fact to question the idea of a four-year war lasting from 1914 to 1918 that is based on the Western European perspective. Therefore, the first volume starts with the outbreak of the First Balkan War in autumn 1912. The second volume covers the period 1917–23.⁶² In another recent book, Jochen Böhrer develops a similar argument, insisting on the continuity of war in Central Europe as well as on its civil war character.⁶³

As far as military history is concerned, Mieczysław Wrzosek's classical study on the participation of Polish national units in the war still stands out as a useful and comprehensive analysis of their creation, structures, numbers, training, armaments, and battle routes.⁶⁴ Since the early 1990s, our understanding of Polish units and their combatants has been further enriched by a number of publications.⁶⁵ These generally acknowl-

edge that, though small in size, the Polish units played an important role in mobilizing Polish society and in influencing the attitude of the Great Powers toward acknowledging the need to rebuild the Polish state. Their existence contributed to the recognition of Polish political aspirations by the belligerents and the internationalization of the Polish cause, as opposed to it being regarded as an internal issue of the powers who at the end of the eighteenth century divided Poland among themselves. After the war, veterans of these troops made up the core of a new Polish army, which along with diplomats defined boundaries and successfully defended independence against the Bolshevik threat.

Beyond that focus on the Polish national units, Polish soldiers fighting as part of the partitioning powers' regular armies have also received scholarly attention. In that regard, a collection of different studies was written by Marin Zgórnjak.⁶⁶ He was interested in the fate of the Polish soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian army.⁶⁷ Jan Rydel, Michał Baczkowski, Alex Watson, and, more recently, Ryszard Kaczmarek have continued in that vein.⁶⁸ According to them, Polish soldiers and officers served loyally in the ranks of the imperial armies of Russia, Austro-Hungary, and Germany and kept their military oath till the end of hostilities. However, their morale gradually declined for complex reasons during the lengthy war.

Studies on the Polish political scene and illegal activity are part of another important field of interest in Polish historiography. Andrzej Garrowicz reminded public opinion of Piłsudski's ideological about-turns before and during the Great War, of his socialist origin, and the development of his political camp, which after the coup of 1926 dominated the Second Polish Republic's political scene.⁶⁹ The same could be said about Tomasz Nałęcz's book in which he told the story of the Polish Military Organization, a secret political-military group founded in 1914 and controlled by Piłsudski. In the first three years, it functioned mainly in Russian Poland, after 1917 in Galicia too, having a maximum of twelve thousand members. Nałęcz reveals the growing importance of the organization as time went by.⁷⁰ On the other hand, in the opinion of Janusz Karwat, in Prussian Poland an illegal, underground group consisting of a small faction of members and supporters had limited public support and did not engage in active anti-German actions, instead waiting for the end of the war, which should see the start of an anti-German uprising. They were more connected with the adversaries of Józef Piłsudski's policy, namely the National Democrats.⁷¹

Polish historians are still researching the internationalization of the Polish cause during the Great War and the belligerents' policy toward Poles, and in this area one can see a continuation of the trends that already existed in the interwar and Communist periods.⁷² According to a historian

from Poznań, Damian Szymczak, the two Central Powers could not realize their plans regarding occupied Russian Poland due to the fundamental differences in their interests and political conception. Any attempt to implement their policies for Poland could endanger their alliance. That stalemate went on till the last weeks of the war.⁷³ Cracow historian Piotr Mikietyński shares this view. The Germans did not acknowledge their allies' claims to incorporate Polish territories into the Habsburg Monarchy, aimed at gaining dominant influence over the whole of Eastern Central Europe after victory in the war. It was only the strategic situation that induced them to take a more concrete decision in the Polish question, such as on 5 November 1916 with the creation of the Regency Kingdom of Poland.⁷⁴

Generally speaking, neither of the war participants possessed any far-ranging, coherent plans concerning Poland at the outbreak of hostilities. Through the entire war, they could not agree on the future of the Polish terrains. The 5 November Act of 1916 is unanimously seen as an element in the changing strategy toward Russia and an insincere tactical maneuver by the Central Powers, who wanted the material resources in the Polish areas to be used in their war efforts.

Parallel to this, the Russian authorities, since the very beginning of the war, were also trying to win Polish hearts and minds. Because they turned out to be unwilling even to restore autonomy in Russian Poland, the effects of their attempts remained fairly insignificant.⁷⁵

Among new trends in research on World War I, studies on the attitudes of Poles toward the states that partitioned Poland in eighteenth century should be mentioned. Whereas the deep-rooted myth that with the beginning of the war all nationally conscious Poles started to work for national independence had for long pervaded traditional historiography, nowadays scholars have come to question this consensus, offering new insights into the identity of the Polish population and patterns of behavior.

They show that at the beginning of the war, contrary to long-upheld beliefs, many Poles identified themselves with their states and generally accepted the existing territorial and political order, striving for unification of Polish territory under one ruler. However, it was only during the course of the war that their political attitudes gradually radicalized and Poles isolated themselves from Russia and Austria-Hungary as well as Germany, seeking to build an independent Polish state. Nevertheless, this turned out to be a complicated process, depending on many factors. During the war years, Polish society underwent a thorough transformation, including radicalization and democratization. Different conservative milieus had lost their position and influence to the advantage of the

mass parties, which enjoyed growing support among the lower and middle social strata.⁷⁶

Polish historians' interest still focuses on the activities of Polish emigrants in the Western countries and the attitude of the Western powers and public opinion toward the Polish cause. Traditionally, the Polish milieu abroad actively participated in a political life and endeavored to exert influence on the situation in the Polish areas.⁷⁷ During the war, their efforts, besides political activities, concentrated on relief action and collections of money for Polish war victims. These initiatives were promoted and supported by the Catholic Church.⁷⁸

Social, Cultural, and Economic History since 1990

In the last few years, with the imminent centenary of the outbreak of the war, Polish as well as non-Polish scholars have become more interested in researching this conflict, filling in many historiographical gaps. Beyond recent publications already cited above, one can observe an increased interest in Jewish history and the history of the Polish-Jewish relations, particularly during World War I.⁷⁹ The authors of these studies show how the economic crisis, pauperization, and changing occupation regimes led to laicization and the political emancipation of Jews in Russian Poland. The growing political aspiration of Jews resulted in tensions with the Polish majority and the rise of anti-Semitism. In these new, dynamic circumstances, many Jews had to find a newly defined national identity. On the other hand, many assimilated Jews demonstrated their Polish patriotism by actively supporting Polish national aspirations. According to Marek Gałęzowski's recent research, for complex reasons a surprisingly large number of Jews joined Polish legions.⁸⁰

The fate of the Polish prisoners of war also became a topic of studies. Contrary to the myth that the former legionaries were badly treated in the camps for internees after 1917, Jan Snopko shows that their plight was not as dramatic as suggested in their interwar collective memory. They had relatively good living conditions, as they were able to receive food supplies provided by the Polish society.⁸¹ We also know a good deal more about the fate of the Polish refugees who in 1915 were evacuated to the internal provinces of the Russian empire.⁸²

In research on the Polish peasantry, historians focus mainly on the evolution of their identity and emergence as a conscious and active constituent of the Polish nation. Apart from negative repercussions (devastation, military service, requisition), the prolonged war contributed to the acceleration of the modernization process in the countryside of central Poland. Changes occurred in family life (the strengthening of the posi-

tion of women), in the management of farms, and in attitudes toward other social groups (gentry, Jews). Finally, the education of children became widely regarded as something of value, which resulted in the fast development of the education system after 1915.⁸³ Concerning another social group, Maciej Górny has published extensively on the role of East European intellectuals during the war and during the Paris Peace Conference.⁸⁴ And in his monography on the Greek Catholic Church diocese of Przemyśl, Andrzej Szczupak investigates the complicated and dynamic relations between clergymen, church communities, and Austrian and Russian state authorities.⁸⁵

On the other hand, we also know quite a good deal about the urban history of the war, with a number of studies on bigger cities having been published, focusing mainly on everyday life.⁸⁶ On a different register, with a study by Katarzyna Sierakowska, there is now a book featuring a history of emotions approach.⁸⁷ This is illustrative of the way young Polish historians who are engaging with World War I are now more and more embracing cultural history methodologies that have emerged in Western historiography in the last decades. Still, quite a few blind spots remain. Take, for instance, gender studies, which—with regard to World War I—still tend to concentrate on political aspects of the women’s movement.⁸⁸ However, on balance, one cannot fail to notice that quite a few interesting studies on social issues have been published in the last few years.⁸⁹

Almost *terra incognita* is the economic history of the Polish terrains, 1914–18, not counting chapters in general monographs on the economic history of Poland. In recent years, Tomasz Kargol has tried to fill this gap, concentrating on Galicia’s economic recovery after the liberation from Russian occupation in 1915.⁹⁰ The central authorities in Vienna, interested in the fast increase in agricultural production in this province, stimulated this process by preferential credits, subsidies, and material support (machinery, fertilizers, labor force of POWs).⁹¹

Occupation Policy Studies

One of the most vibrant areas of recent studies explores the different dimensions of the occupation experience and policy. In that field, Polish historiography has the strongest relation to international historiography, especially the German one. It is in this field of research where the process of internationalization of studies on Poland during World War I is probably the most developed.

The two occupiers faced contradictory challenges in administrative practice in their spheres of Russian Poland, having to win the support of the Polish population while at the same time exploiting the economic

resources of the occupied territories. Even by giving more cultural freedom, judicial powers, an education system, and self-government at a local level, Poles could not be satisfied in the long run. Austro-Hungarians and Germans disagreed on the future of the Polish territories. If the authorities in Vienna were willing to at least discuss the idea of integrating the Russian-Polish territories into Austro-Hungary-Poland, the Germans were not prepared to give up their influence over the conquered territories. The Central Powers were unable to come to an agreement on that issue until the end of the war.

Studies on the policy conducted by the Habsburg Monarchy in occupied Russian Poland were started in Poland by Jan Lewandowski, who analyzed the occupation policy of the Danube Monarchy in Russian Poland after 1915.⁹² Recently, economic aspects of occupation policy have been studied by Stephan Lehnstaedt. None of the Central Powers after seizing Russian Poland had a far-reaching plan for economic exploitation. On the one hand, they tried to exploit Polish economic resources (mainly agricultural products) for the support of their war effort, while on the other hand, due to complicated political calculations, they wanted to avoid estranging the Polish population and sought their support.⁹³ These activities, however, did not alleviate the economic consequences of the war, and the profitability of large landed estates declined. In his latest monography, Lehnstaedt also compares occupation regimes and aims of the Central Powers during World War I with those of the Nazis conducted a generation later, highlighting similarities and dissimilarities of those imperial policies. He heavily insists on the deep discrepancy between short- and long-distance aims of the occupants.⁹⁴

Christian Westerhoff analyzed the workforce policy of the German occupying authorities on the Polish and Lithuanian terrains. In the first phase of the occupation, recruitment of the local labor force was conducted by the German authorities on the basis of free choice, according to the free-market tradition. Later on, they used more compulsory methods to reach their goals.⁹⁵

Everyday life experience in the General Government of Warsaw is presented in the book by Jacek Szczepański. He portrays the interaction between occupied and occupiers, especially beyond the large towns, and presents the detailed process of the collapse of the occupation structure in German-occupied Poland, which disproved the well-rooted myth of a successful, spontaneous disarming of German troops by the Polish populace.⁹⁶

Different aspects of occupation policy of the Russian part of Poland by the Central Powers are analyzed recently by Arkadiusz Stempin,⁹⁷ Jesse Kauffman,⁹⁸ and Grzegorz Kucharczyk (and his coworkers).⁹⁹ Włodzimierz

Mędrzecki's work is also part of this field of research in Polish historiography. The decision by the German authorities for military intervention in the Ukraine in 1918 was made for complex reasons, such as the wish to control the vast, fertile land that could be used to feed the German population at home. In the short term, this intervention turned out to be unfavorable from the point of view of building a really independent Ukrainian state, but in the long term it contributed to the internationalization of the Ukrainian cause.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

Regarding its commemoration of World War I, Poland focused and still focuses mainly on the regaining of independence, which happened as a result of national determination and the favorable international circumstances. The commemorative discourse and actors obviously changed over the decades. The first turning point was World War II, which overshadowed public memory of the former global conflict and resulted in Poland's subjugation to the Soviet Union. During the Communist domination, commemoration of the war was intentionally marginalized and blurred in favor of the commemoration of the workers' movement. After the fall of Communism and the start of the democratization process in 1989, World War I and more precisely its aftermath regained its place in public memory and official historical policy. It still plays an important part in the Polish national identity.

Until recent years, Polish historiography in the field of World War I studies has concentrated on the war's political and military aspects, delineating the "road map" that led to the reestablishment of Poland, or to put it another way, the state-building process. In the last two or three decades, there has been a rise in interest in World War I studies among Polish historians as well as foreign historians. Parallel to this, a process of departure from the traditional research perspective can be observed, with Polish historians attempting to describe so-far-neglected fields such as the social, cultural, economic, and gender-related aspects of events between 1914 and 1918. However, we still know relatively little about these issues, and much work still needs to be done.

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