States of War

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In a lecture delivered at the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882, the historian Ernest Renan formulated a provocative thesis:

> The act of forgetting, I would even say, historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings back to light the deeds of violence that took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been the most beneficial. Unity is always achieved brutally.[1]

Europeans have forgotten the aftermath of the First World War. New nations sprang up in central and eastern Europe, but their creation, if it marked the end of one conflict, also marked the initiation of many others.

The First World War ended with the armistice of November 11, 1918, but the heart of the continent did not rest easy until years later. In Russia, the October Revolution of 1917 brought a Bolshevik regime to power. The ensuing Russian Civil War between 1917 and 1921 claimed far more Russian lives than World War I. It soon became a crucial part of Soviet mythology. This story is widely known, but what is far less well-known is the fact that eastern and central Europe also sank into chaos and violence. In these regions, the First World War seamlessly turned into civil war. Unlike the Soviet experience, the conflicts in this region between 1918 and 1921 never became a part of any national mythology. Quite the contrary. The general view is that these states were created overnight at the end of 1918.[2] In accordance with Renan's prophecy, the east-central European civil war was deleted from official accounts as soon as it ended.

If eastern and central Europe was home to fully developed nation-states at the end of 1918, it follows that conflicts among them must have been state wars, and this is how they have been treated in the historiography.[3] This view must be called into question. At the end of 1918, the nation-states of eastern and central Europe were neither fully developed nor popularly supported. In disputed and multiethnic border regions, such as Upper Silesia or the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands, state allegiance, to the extent that it existed at all, was divided and often ambivalent. National identities needed time to develop. And not only in the border regions. In the centers of power, political factions fought bitterly against each other for dominance.

The Second Polish Republic was at the center of this upheaval: engaged in armed conflicts with every one of its neighbors except Romania, and, at the same time, racked by political divisions. Recent research has shown that, in 1918, the great mass of Polish speakers found the idea of a nation-state remote.[4] Indeed, the communities in disputed territories still thought of themselves as citizens of recently collapsed empires. Far from appreciating a national awakening, the greater part of the population understood these years as nothing more than a civil war.

The history of Europe is still written as national history,[5] a point evident in the cases of Poland and Hungary.[6] In Poland, ongoing educational reform under the Law and Justice Party mandates a return to the attitudes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: patriotism is stressed, national symbols are exalted.[7] In February 2020, Polish deputy prime minister Piotr Gliński announced the opening of an Institute for the Legacy of National Thought. The objective of the institute is to produce a biographical encyclopedia of outstanding representatives of Polish Catholicism and Polish national democracy.[8] The latter was a milieu in which anti-Semitic ideas were considered acceptable until the 1930s. In 2018, the centenary of Polish independence was celebrated in a spirit of national, patriotic, and religious self-approval. As part of a speech delivered in Warsaw on November 11, President Andrzej Duda appealed to a Christian state united by language and culture and, since 1918, led by great politicians. Duda's speech expressed the current government line.

It contradicted the historical facts.

A century ago, numerous Polish historians had a much more nuanced view. In 1916, Bolesław Limanowski saw the future of a Polish state *within* the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Ten years later, as a citizen of a Polish nation-state that had forcibly assimilated its ethnic minorities, he evoked the multiethnic past of the Polish–Lithuanian

Empire that had vanished in 1795 during the Partitions of Poland. In the early 1920s, Michał Bobrowski opposed Polish nationalism and supported the idea of an East-Central European federation of states. Marceli Handelsman had taken part in the post-Armistice fighting in the East and had witnessed the division of Poland's multiethnic borderlands. Other historians at the time, such as Oswald Balzer, Władysław Smoleński, and Wacław Sobieski, took a wholly nationalist approach.[9] These contrasting nationalist and multiethnic views are still reflected in the current Polish political and academic landscape. One could argue that the ruling Law and Justice Party with its national agenda represents the first view, and the opposing Civic Platform with its orientation towards the European Union represents the second.

Historians and sociologists today mostly agree that there was no unified Polish nation at the end of 1918. Over a century earlier, Poland had ceased to exist as a state, as it had been divided into three areas by Austria, Germany, and Russia. These three areas were absorbed by different empires and developed in different political directions. At the same time, the populations of these areas remained ethnically mixed: Polish speakers lived together with German, Ukrainian, and Yiddish speakers. The nineteenth-century Polish-speaking political and cultural elites who propagated the vision of an ethnic Polish nation had no historical entity to which they could refer. By 1918, the nature and composition of the Polish nation were still under debate.[10]

It was a debate that did not reach the largely illiterate peasants. Even among those who could read, the idea of a Polish state was often suspect. The Polish-speaking population of East-Central Europe was four-fifths rural; these communities depended on permanence and were suspicious of sudden political upheavals. A Polish farmer in the 1930s recalled the moment of Polish independence at the end of 1918:

> Other times had come. The village woke up because everything was shaking all around. They tell us that there'll be a Poland and it's already taking shape, though it's still a bit weak, but slowly getting stronger. The peasants don't want to believe it, because we've always been told that this here's Russia and Russia it will be, and now, all of a sudden—hocus-pocus—it's Poland.[11]

The peasants of postwar East-Central Europe were far from being nationally mobilized.[12]

The preconditions for the emergence of nation-states in East-Central Europe were created after the First World War wiped off the map the empires that had long ruled there. The devastation and deprivation wrought by the war was immense. As the director of the American Relief Administration, Herbert Hoover was tasked with overseeing US efforts to help feed and rebuild Central and Eastern Europe. He later observed that some parts of Poland had endured no fewer than

> seven invasions and seven destructive retreats. Many hundreds of thousands had died of starvation. The homes of millions had been destroyed and the people in those areas were living in hovels. Their agricultural implements were depleted, their animals had been taken by armies, their crops had been only partly planted and even then only partly harvested. Industry in the cities was dead from lack of raw materials. The people were unemployed and millions were destitute.[13]

The aftermath of war created an urgent desire among the population for peace and a return to security, order, and prosperity. Most of the soldiers who had fought in the imperial armies had been sons of peasants. During the war years, their families were left to bring in the harvest without them. These shortages in manpower and expertise did not end with the armistice. Hundreds of thousands of peasant farmers never returned from the battlefields. It is easy to imagine how, at the end of 1918, rural communities received the news that the struggle was not over, but would now continue with national agendas between emerging states.

In August 1914, popular myth affirms, the people of Europe welcomed the outbreak of war. Such was the *Augusterlebnis*—the August experience. The photographs of people enthusiastically celebrating in the streets of capital cities are deceptive, because the great mass of those who looked to the war with concern cannot be found in them.[14] If the August experience is misleading, so, too, is the November experience of 1918, which has a similarly tenacious hold on the historical imagination, even though it is absurd to believe that imperial societies were suddenly transformed into national societies. In reality, the people of East-Central Europe had not yet decided how to parse themselves into nations—nor had they been asked about it. Only after the emerging power centers had come into conflict were they asked to make a decision, or forced to acquiesce in a decision made by others and implemented by force.

Populations found themselves split by an invisible frontline. As a young soldier in the Polish–Lithuanian border area, Handelsman found himself in conversation with a local farmer:

> He told me that he lived there in Ogrodniki, while his brother-in-law was down in Bereźniki. Now, he said, this is Lithuania, and that's Poland. It used to be one, but now there's a border between Bereźniki and Ogrodniki; there's a war on. Is that how things should be? Don't we all go to the same church? Isn't it a disaster that brothers are divided and fighting?[15]

From November 1918 onward, belligerent emerging nation-states sparked conflicts across East-Central Europe. Although it is customary to regard these as state wars, closer inspection prompts doubts. The conflicts took forms typical of civil wars, whether in the Ukrainian–Polish conflict over Lviv and Eastern Galicia (1918–19), the German–Polish conflict over Poznan and Upper Silesia (1918–20), the Polish–Lithuanian conflict over the Vilnius region (1919–20), or the Czech–Polish conflict over Cieszyn Silesia (1918–20). In none of the disputed regions was violence exercised exclusively by regular troops; paramilitary units and terrorist organizations were also engaged. The lines between these units and loosely organized groups of bandits were often blurred.[16] Violence against ethnic minorities, women, children, and old people was common. The Jewish population suffered especially.[17] These indiscriminate forms of violence are typical of civil war according to the Greek political scientist Stathis Kalyvas.[18]

From a political perspective, a civil war is a "war between the citizens or inhabitants of a single country, state, or community."[19] Is that definition applicable in this case? In 1918, it would not have been possible to speak of national communities, since their formation was the *outcome* of succeeding conflicts. The belligerent parties were far from having a unified state leadership. The Weimar government, for example, sent the infamous Freikorps to fight Polish insurgents. The very same right-wing paramilitary groups were at the center of efforts to overthrow Weimar democracy in the years that followed.[20] In the regions between Lviv and Kharkiv, there existed simultaneously a Western Ukrainian People's Republic, a Ukrainian People's Republic, and a Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.[21] In the Baltic states, the national governments were in conflict not only with the German Freikorps and the Red Army, but also with the troops of Baltic Soviet republics, short-lived countergovernments created and supported by Moscow.[22]

The internal division is particularly striking in the Polish case. At the end of 1918, there were more than half a dozen different centers of power. These included a Regency Council, which had been convened in September 1917 during the German occupation; a short-lived Provisional People's Government in Lublin led by Ignacy Daszyński; a Polish Liquidation Committee founded in Krakow in October 1918, which was to reintegrate the former Austro-Hungarian crown land of Galicia into Poland; a hastily assembled government in Warsaw inaugurated on November 11, 1918, under the former socialist paramilitary leader and wartime military commander Józef Piłsudski; and a Polish National Committee formed in Paris during August 1917 by Piłsudski's archrival, the National Democrat, Roman Dmowski, which represented Polish interests to the Entente. There were also various National Councils formed in the contested border regions, which represented viewpoints ranging from integration into a Polish nation-state to local autonomy.[23] These power centers were often in conflict. In December 1918, a protocol articulated by the Polish National Committee in Paris gave serious consideration to the possibility of shipping large contingents of Polish soldiers from French prisoner-of-war camps to Poland in order to overthrow the Warsaw government.[24] Although this plan was never put into practice, there were numerous skirmishes between Polish units loyal to different commands throughout the country during 1919.

In the face of such a confusing variety of power centers, which partly cooperated, partly competed, and partly fought against each other between 1918 and 1921, categorizing conflicts as state wars is a vain attempt to order political chaos. This simplification also neglects large swathes of the population of East-Central Europe, who experienced this period as a civil war. In a poem composed during May 1919, a Polish platoon leader implored Czechs, Poles, and Ukrainians: "Slavs, do not place obstacles in each other's way, in the end we're not stupid peasants, we're members of one family." Writing around the same time, Michał Römer, a Polish-Lithuanian political activist, noted in his diary that the war had "reached into human societies and transformed itself into a state of permanent chaos, a *bellum omnium contra omnes*." During the conflict over Eastern Galicia that took place between 1918 and 1919, the Polish and Ukrainian press frequently referred to the fighting as fratricidal.[25]

The British historian David Armitage has written extensively about civil wars. "How do we tell civil wars apart from other kinds of wars," he asks, "when so many internal conflicts spill over their countries' borders or draw in combatants from outside…?" His answer: "Civil war is, first and foremost, a category of experience; the participants usually know they are in the midst of civil war long before international organizations declare it to be so."[26] One would like to add: "and long before a nationalizing historiography takes it over."

Ethnic nationalism emerged in East-Central Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century; and after the First World War, it led to the formation of an assortment of nation-states who almost at once imposed some form of national identity on their border minorities.[27] This is the standard view and well-known. It is not false. Research has long recognized the destructive potential of ethnic nationalism.[28] If this account is not false, it is nevertheless incomplete simply because historians have not properly taken into account the transitional character of the years between 1918 to 1921. It is during these three years that theory was put into practice. Whatever the politicians said or thought, local populations in disputed territories perceived the conflict as civil war, and *not* as a national awakening. The assumption that, by 1918, some sense of national affiliation had *already* been estab-

lished is erroneous. Recent research speaks against it. As Tara Zahra has observed,

> the dissolution of the Austrian empire marked the demise of the nationally indifferent or neutral state in east central Europe. The Czechoslovak, Polish, and Yugoslav governments all forcibly classified citizens, hoping to boost the legitimacy of their states domestically and internationally by reducing the number of people counted as members of minority groups.[29]

Indeed, the new nations were *formed* as part of the conflicts that broke out between 1918 and 1921. It was only during these hostilities that individuals and populations across many different regions were suddenly forced to decide which side they were on.

An understanding of this period is more necessary today than ever. In the face of a resurgent national populism, historians must make their findings accessible to a broader public. Similar events are occurring in Britain, France, Germany, Hungary, and Poland, as parties with national agendas are gaining ground in multicultural societies. The fact that these agendas plunged Eastern and Central Europe into a civil war between 1918 and 1921 has been largely forgotten.

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1. Ernest Renan, *What is a Nation? and Other Political Writings*, ed. M. F. N. Giglioli (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 251.
2. To this day, the civil war–like turmoil of 1918–21 is not part of the curriculum in East-Central European schools.
3. The literature on this subject is vast. See, for example, Mieczysław Wrzosek, *Wojny o granice Polski Odrodzonej, 1918–1921* (Wars for the Borders of Restored Poland, 1918–1921) (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1992).
4. Kai Struve, "Polish Peasants in Eastern Galicia: Indifferent to the Nation or Pillars of Polishness? National Attitudes in the Light of Józef Chałasiński's Collection of Peasant Youth Memoirs," *Acta Poloniae Historica*, no. 109 (2014): 37–59, doi:10.12775/APH.2014.109.03.
5. Recent debates on the establishment of a House of European History in Brussels demonstrate the nationalization of European history. An overview of this ambitious project is provided by Andrea Mork and Perikles Christodoulou, eds., *Creating the House of European History* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).
6. Tomáš Janík and Štefan Porubský, "Introduction," in *Curriculum Changes in the Visegrad Four: Three Decades after the Fall of Communism, Studies from Hungary, Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics*, ed. Tomáš Janík et al. (Münster: Waxmann, 2020), 15–30.
7. Andrzej Kaluza, "*Analyse: Die Reform des Schulsystems in Polen* (Analysis: The Reform of the School System in Poland)," *Polen-Analysen*, no. 224 (2018): 2–7, doi:10.31205/PA.224.01. See also Daria Hejwosz-Gromkowska, "Reforming the History Curriculum in Poland: The Good Change Strikes Back," *4liberty*, no. 6 (April 22, 2017): 70–85.
8. "*Prof. Jan Żaryn: Chcemy przywrócić wielki dorobek przeszłych pokoleń, by wzbogacał dzisiejszą młodzież* (Prof. Jan Żaryn: We Want to Restore the Great Achievements of Past Generations so That They Enrich Today's Youth)," *wpolityce.pl*, February 3, 2020.
9. See the corresponding contributions in Peter Brock, John Stanley, and Piotr Wróbel, eds., *Nation and History: Polish Historians from the Enlightenment to the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 109, 160, 176, 253–54, 365–66.
10. Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
11. Memories of a peasant from the Łask district, 1933, published as memoir no. 7 in Ludwik Krzywicki, ed., *Pamiętniki chłopów* (Peasants' Diaries) (Warsaw: Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego, 1935), 72.
12. Jan Kieniewicz, *Historyk a świadomość narodowa* (The Historian and National Consciousness) (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1982); Jan Molenda, "The Formation of National Consciousness of the Polish Peasants and the Part They Played in the Regaining of Independence by Poland," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 63–64 (1991): 121–48; Jan Molenda, *Chłopi, naród, niepodległość: Kształtowanie się postaw narodowych i obywatelskich chłopów w Galicji i Królestwie Polskim w przededniu odrodzenia Polski* (Peasants, Nation, Independence: Shaping National and Civic Attitudes of Peasants in Galicia and the Kingdom of Poland on the Eve of Poland's Rebirth) (Warsaw: Neriton, 1999).
13. Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure 1874–1920* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 356.
14. Maximilian Konrad, "The European War Enthusiasm of 1914," in *Bellicose Entanglements 1914: The Great War as a Global War*, ed. Maximilian Lakitsch, Susanne Reitmair-Juárez, and Katja Seidel (Vienna: Lit, 2015).
15. Marceli Handelsman, *W piątym pułku Legjonów: Dwa miesiące ofensywy litewsko-białoruskiej* (In the Fifth Regiment of the Legions: Two Months of the Lithuanian-Belarusian Offensive) (Zamosc: Zygmunt Pomarański i Spółka, 1921), 25–26.
16. Jochen Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 70–121, 146–86.

17. William Hagen, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1914–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
18. Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
19. "Civil War," in *Oxford English Dictionary: Online*, ed. Michael Proffitt, Philip Durkin, and Edmund Weiner.
20. Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration: Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914–1933* (Stab-in-the-Back Legends and Political Disintegration: The Trauma of German Defeat in the First World War 1914–1933) (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2003).
21. Serhy Yekelchyk, *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 67–84.
22. Tomas Balkelis, *War, Revolution, and Nation-Making in Lithuania, 1914–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 57–135.
23. Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe*, 138–45.
24. Minutes of the meeting of the Polish National Committee in Paris on December 11, 1918, published in Marek Jabłonowski, ed., *Komitet Narodowy Polski: Protokoły posiedzeń 1917–1919* (Polish National Committee: Minutes of its Meetings 1917–1919) (Warsaw: Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczna Pułtusk, 2007), S. 623.
25. Ludwik Bałos, *W poszukiwaniu prawdy (Pamiętnik) z lat 1901–1951* (In Pursuit of the Truth [A Memoir] from 1901–1951) (Wrocław: National Ossoliński Institute/Manuscript Deptartment, 15421/II, 1922), no pagination; Michał Römer, *Dzienniki, 1916–1919* (Diaries, 1916–1919), vol. 3, ed. Agnieszka Knyt (Warszawa: Ośrodek Karta, 2018), 689; Christoph Mick, *Lemberg, Lwów, L'viv, 1914–1947: Violence and Ethnicity in a Contested City* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2016), 147.
26. David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 15, 238–39.
27. In relation to Poland, see Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate*; Rogers Brubaker, "Nationalizing States in the Old 'New Europe' – and the New," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19, no. 2 (1996): 411–37, doi:10.1080/01419870.1996.9993918. Kathryn Ciancia, *On Civilization's Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
28. The most prominent example is Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951).
29. Tara Zahra, "Imagined Non-Communities: National Indifference as a Category of Historical Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2010): 101, doi:10.1017/S0037677900016715. See also Brendan Jeffrey Karch, *Nation and Loyalty in a German-Polish Borderland: Upper Silesia, 1848–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Maarten van Ginderachter and Jon Fox, "National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe: Introduction," in *Ignoring the Nation's Call: National Indifference and the History of Nationalism in Modern Europe*, ed. Maarten van Ginderachter and Jon Fox (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1–14; Matthias Middell and Lluís Roura i Aulinas, "The Various Forms of Transcending the Horizon of National History Writing," in *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing*, ed. Matthias Middell and Lluís Roura i Aulinas (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1–35. See also the discussion and references in David Berlinski, "A Passage to India," *Inference: International Review of Science* 6, no. 1 (2021), doi:10.37282/991819.21.2.

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