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Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen (East Central Europe)

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In the countries of East Central Europe, the commemoration of soldiers who fell during the First World War followed a complex trajectory. After 1918, governments invested in war cemeteries and war memorials primarily as a means of commemorating the struggle for political independence. The Second World War and the expansion of the Soviet Union and communism formed a first important turning point. The second was the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989. In the contemporary era, the commemoration of fallen soldiers plays an important role in the respective countries' national identities.

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Introduction

This article deals with the public memory of the Great War and the forms that the cult of the fallen took in East Central Europe. Paradoxically, despite the significance of this conflict for the entire region's history, [historiography](#) has not paid much attention to the commemoration of the war until recent years. The three national cases – [Poland](#), the [Baltic states](#), and [Finland](#) – are discussed separately. The following aspects of the commemoration and cult of the fallen will be taken into consideration: cemeteries, national holidays, monuments, military decorations, [veterans' associations](#), and political functions of the commemoration of the war and the fallen soldiers. Three periods are distinguished as relevant for the commemoration of the First World War: the interwar period, the Cold War period, and the period following the fall of communism.

Poland

Despite the extensive material losses and the enormous human sacrifices – 400,000 Polish soldiers in the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German armies were killed and 800,000 wounded, excluding Polish voluntary units such as the [Polish Legions](#) or the [Polish army in France](#),^[1] the war turned out to be a resounding success for those political movements that had struggled for decades to regain Polish statehood. There was a broad consensus across Polish society that this was a “sacred war”, which resulted in the almost miraculous re-establishment of an independent Poland.

The cult of the fallen during the First World War was seen as one of many elements in a long chain of fights for national independence and sovereignty, started during the Kościuszko Uprising in 1794; it did not possess a special feature or liturgy. Already during the war, Polish society paid tribute to the fallen and their families. The [Polish press](#) regularly published lists of fallen legionnaires and places of burial. On the field cemeteries, religious and national-patriotic celebrations took place with the participation of civil society. Public collections of money for [widows](#), orphans and the caretaking of graves were organized.^[2] In August 1916, the Legion Column was erected in Cracow's market square. People could buy special nails which they hammered into the column. Income from the sale of these nails went to the legionnaires' families. The same happened in other towns.^[3]

Interwar Period

The central memorial place, erected in Warsaw in 1925, was the [Tomb of the Unknown Soldier](#) (as seen all over Europe).^[4] However, from the beginning, this monument was designed to commemorate all fighters for the independent Polish state, not only those who had fallen during the

Great War. Even the unknown soldier buried here had lost his life not in the First World War, but during the [battles with the Ukrainians for control of East Galicia](#). A number of plaques with the names of the battlefields on which Polish soldiers died between the years 1914-21 were added to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. They reflect the fact that from the Polish perspective, the Great War ended three years later than in the West.

War cemeteries also played a role as special places of commemoration, especially cemeteries where fallen legionnaires were buried. For obvious political reasons, special attention was paid to the legionnaires' graves. About 3,000 legionnaires fell on the battlefields, among them 170 officers. A 1929 government decision divided the legionnaires' graves in the cemeteries into special sections. According to international obligations and domestic law, Polish local administrations were required to maintain all war cemeteries. A large number of social organisations, such as the Polish Mourning Cross (*Polski Krzyż Żałobny*), established in 1921 and re-named the Society for Care about the Heroes' Graves (*Towarzystwo Opieki nad Grobami Bohaterów*) in 1925, the Polish Red Cross, and veterans' associations were engaged in this process.

The legions' battlegrounds were additionally commemorated by special memory boards, crosses, chapels, monuments and schools. In Volhynia, the site of battles involving all three brigades in 1915-16, twenty legionnaires' cemeteries were established, a special tourist trail was set up and the terrain declared an historic park.^[5] These memorials, which were located in the eastern provinces of the country with the *Cmentarz Orląt Lwowskich* in [Lwów \(Lviv\)](#)^[6] and the military section at the Rossa (Rasos) Cemetery in Wilno (Vilnius) additionally played an important political function of serving as "evidence" for the allegedly Polish character of these nationally-mixed and disputed terrains. In 1923, the exhumed bodies of fifteen Polish cavalymen, fallen in a charge of Rokitno in Bukovina in an attack on Russian trenches in June 1915, were solemnly buried in the Rakowicki Cemetery in Cracow. The battle emerged as one of the symbols of self-sacrifice of Poles struggling for independence and became a part of Polish national mythology in the post-war period. According to official propaganda, even those Poles who had fallen in the ranks of imperial armies died for the sake of the re-establishing Polish statehood and sovereignty.^[7]

The memory of the fight for independence over the course of the 19th century, with its successful and dramatic climax in the Great War, was – according to the Warsaw government – crucial to a new national identity, and would unite the multi-national Polish post-war society, which consisted of about 35 percent non-ethnic Poles.

Independence Day (11 November) did not become an official holiday until 1937. It commemorates not the armistice on the [Western Front](#), but rather [Józef Piłsudski's \(1867-1935\)](#) seizing executive power from the Regency Council and the disarmament of the German garrison in Warsaw, which took place on 11 November 1918. Moreover, there was no political consensus on the holiday. For example, the socialists preferred to celebrate the anniversary of [Ignacy Daszyński's \(1866-1936\)](#) leftist government, established in Lublin on 7 November 1918.^[8]

Veterans' associations played an important part in commemorating war victims, with the most influential being the [Union of Polish Legionnaires](#) (*Związek Legionistów Polskich*), established already in May 1918. On the one hand, this was a way of coping with traumatic "front experience"; on the other, it was a way to commemorate fallen brothers in arms. Apart from the memoirs, the veterans endeavoured to influence wide public opinion through memoirs, the press, and each year's convention, and by taking part in official celebrations of WWI anniversaries.

In 1922, veterans set up the Museum of the Struggle for Independence (*Muzeum Czynu Niepodległościowego*) in Piłsudski's home in Cracow.^[9] The Museum of the Polish Army (*Muzeum Wojska Polskiego*) in Warsaw, opened in 1920, played a similar function. Polish authorities restored the two highest medals from the pre-partition period, namely the Order Virtuti Military (1918) and the White Eagle Order (1921). New medals, such as the Cross of Independence, the Medal of Independence and the Cross of Bravery were established to honor those who had distinguished themselves in fights for Polish independence and the Polish border.^[10] Many were posthumously awarded these decorations.

The Cold War Period

The unprecedented scale of the tragedies of World War II (6 million killed, among them "only" 160,000 soldiers) eclipsed the commemoration of the First World War. Moreover, the new communist rulers tried to impose their own vision of history on society and establish new traditions to celebrate and new heroes to emulate.^[11] After 1945, many of the First World War cemeteries fell into ruin and oblivion. The new authorities decided not to rebuild some of the monuments destroyed during the Second World War, such as the Monument of the Achievements of the Legions (*Pomnik Czynu Legionowego*) in Kielce (it was rebuilt in 1991). New plaques commemorating battlefields from the Second World War were added to the reconstructed Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Warsaw, while the old ones, commemorating the battles of 1918-21, which were also fought against Soviet Russia, were relocated to the Museum of the Polish Military. The commemoration of the First World War was shifted mostly to [churches](#) and the private sector and was cultivated by opposition circles and emigrants.

Changes occurred to a certain extent with the establishment of the trade union *Solidarność* in 1980, which referred to the independence tradition. People tried to publicly celebrate Independence Day, but unofficially, by attending special masses or by putting flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Observing this holiday was seen as a demonstration of anti-government attitude. After 1981, every year a few dozen opposition members tried to march alongside the route Piłsudski's legionnaires took between Cracow and Kielce in August 1914.

The Post-Communist Period

After 1989, additional changes in the commemoration of the First World War in Poland were

noticeable. First, 11 November was re-established as a state holiday with the changing of the honour guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Warsaw and a military parade as the central celebrations. Interest in World War I rose. Local communities re-discovered local war cemeteries, and local schools took care of their maintenance. After years of exclusion from public life, many Poles again embraced these sites as an important part of local heritage and a significant element of the cultural landscape. The First World War's cemeteries even became an important element of a regional tourism policy. Many of the First World War cemeteries throughout Poland have been the subject of detailed monographs in recent years.^[12]

The Baltic States

In the Baltics, the history of World War I is similarly overshadowed by the history of the “[Wars of Independence](#)”, during which Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania gained their independence from Bolshevik troops and German *Freikorps*. This fact resonates in commemorative policies, a pronounced symmetry of national holidays and a common emphasis on the events of 1918-20 in museum landscapes. At the same time, the historical symmetry between all three states is reflected in shared commemorative rituals, for instance the hoisting of all three flags – Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian – on national holidays associated with the wars of independence. Moreover, as all three states were incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940, commemorative policies were discontinued for around fifty years, and its symbols became tools of resistance and subsequently of regained independence.

Interwar Period

The governments of the emerging states in the Baltics began commemorating the wars of independence while they were still raging.^[13] Already in 1919, the Estonian government started handing out a Cross of Liberty to veterans of the new national army (a process discontinued in 1925), and the Latvian government established the Order of Lāčplēsis (“Bearslayer”, a figure from a Latvian epic poem) to reward soldiers of the Latvian army on 11 November 1919.

In all three states, the commemoration of the wars of independence was institutionalized in the form of museums, which were established and financed by the respective ministries of defence. In Latvia, a museum established in Riga in 1916 and dedicated to the [Latvian Riflemen](#) Regiment, which fought against the German army at the Dvina front, was turned into the Latvian War Museum and substantially expanded in 1937. Already on 19 January 1919, shortly after the onset of the Estonian War of Independence, Estonian General Johan Laidoner (1884-1953) ordered that a museum for the commemoration of the war be established.

In Lithuania, the decision to build a war museum was also made in 1919. The square in front of it became the main venue for war commemorative events. A monument for Lithuanian freedom fighters was erected on 16 October 1921, to which a tomb for an unknown soldier, who had fought

against the Bolsheviks, was added on 23 November 1934. The memorial ensemble was framed by a sculpture pantheon of Lithuanian national activists. Lithuanian General Silvestras Žukauskas (1860-1937) and the first Lithuanian soldier to fall in enemy fire, Antanas Juozapavičius (1894-1919), were later added to the pantheon.^[14] The Latvian government unveiled a massive 42-metre high “Freedom Monument” (*Brīvības piemineklis*) in Riga in 1935 to commemorate the war. In Estonia, a memorial to commemorate the war was erected in every county.^[15] Many of these memorials were erected in squares that had been left vacant as the Russian troops “evacuated” monuments on their retreat from the Baltics, as for instance in the case of the Catherine II monument in Vilnius in 1915.^[16]

Cemeteries became virtually the only spots commemorating both soldiers that died during the wars of independence and at the German-Russian front before the November 1918 Armistice. For instance, the Cemetery of the Defence Forces in Tallinn (*Tallinna Kaitseväe kalmistu*), established in 1916 as a cemetery for the city garrison, hosted graves of Russian, Estonian and German soldiers killed during World War I, and later graves of Estonian soldiers who died while fighting the Bolsheviks (Soviet authorities later destroyed these graves). The Cemetery of the Brethren (*Brāļu Kapī*) in Riga, established in 1924, encompassed graves of and a memorial dedicated to Latvian soldiers killed between 1915 and 1920.

The Cold War Period

The incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union led to the destruction of the memorial landscape. The Estonian War Museum was dissolved in 1940 and most of its exhibits destroyed. The sculpture ensemble in front of the Lithuanian War Museum was removed in 1941 and after the war replaced with busts of Feliks Dzierżyński (1877-1926) and Vincas Mickevičius-Kapsukas (1880-1935), a Lithuanian communist leader. The Latvian War Museum was turned into the Museum of the Revolution. Any kind of commemoration of the struggle for independence of the “bourgeois” Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian states was suppressed. In Estonia alone, 250 plaques, monuments and crosses were torn down. Most memorials were destroyed at the turn of the 1950s, but in Lithuania, the process continued well into the early 1970s.^[17]

In the late 1980s, in the course of Glasnost and growing opposition to Soviet rule in the Baltics, paying tribute to or re-erecting destroyed monuments dedicated to the wars of independence became part of the Baltic independence movements. In 1987, Estonians brought flowers to sites of scattered parts of destroyed memorials. In 1988-89, affiliates of the Lithuanian independence movement *Sąjūdis* systematically dug up and restored monuments, even repeatedly when the Soviet authorities attempted to demolish them anew as quickly as possible. Moreover, in 1990, there was a significant number of attacks on Soviet monuments. While in all three Soviet republics, commemoration of and protest against the Hitler-Stalin Pact served as the most important realm of memory for the independence movements, commemorations of the wars of independence became its positive counterpart.^[18]

The Post-Communist Period

Even before regaining independence, the local Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian governments began to rebuild memorials commemorating the struggle for independence.^[19] The sculpture ensemble at the Lithuanian War Museum was restored in 1990. After the new declarations of independence, holidays commemorating the events of 1918-20 were restored and new ones added. For instance, in Estonia “Victory Day” (*Võidupüha*), which had been celebrated between 1934 and 1939, was re-introduced, commemorating the victory of Estonian forces over the [Baltic German *Landeswehr*](#) at Cēsis on 23 June 1919 with large-scale official ceremonies, including the flying of the national flag for two days and the carrying of the “Victory flame” to every Estonian county. It thus represents the most significant summer holiday in Estonia. Moreover, the anniversary of the Tartu Peace Treaty, which effectively ended the war with Bolshevik Russia on 2 February 1920, is celebrated, as are the Day of the Declaration of Independence on 24 February 1918 and the Day of the Commemoration of the War of Independence Fighters (the latter is not a holiday but rather a flag day).

The entanglement of the wars of independence is reflected in the fact that one day before Estonian Victory Day, on 22 June, Latvians celebrate the Day of the Commemoration of the Heroes to celebrate the same [battle at Cēsis](#). Moreover, the Commemoration Day of the Latvian Freedom Fighters, associated with the Soviet-Latvian Peace Treaty on 11 August 1920, and Lāčplēsis Day, commemorating the Latvian army’s victory over Russian and German forces under the command of General [Pavel Bermond-Avalov \(1877-1974\)](#) on 11 November 1919, are national holidays, as well as the day of the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia (18 November 1918) and the day Western powers *de jure* recognized Latvia on 26 January 1921. In Lithuania, 16 February marks the commemoration of the declaration of independence in 1918. The holiday, already celebrated in interwar Lithuania, draws a historical line and emphasizes a continuity of statehood from the Lithuanian Grand Duchy to the emergence of an independent state as the Day of Restoration of the State of Lithuania.

After 1991, Soviet monuments in all three Baltic states were systematically removed and replaced mostly with memorials commemorating the events of 1918-20.^[20] In some cases, Soviet monuments were rededicated. This is most pronounced in Latvia, where the Riflemen sculpture in Riga, designed to commemorate the decisive contribution of the Latvian Riflemen to the success of the [Bolshevik Revolution](#), is, after years of debate on whether it should be demolished, increasingly seen as a memorial for the Riflemen’s defence of Riga in 1916 – a development mirroring the increasing tendency towards interpreting the events of 1918-20 in Latvia as a civil war rather than as a war of independence. In Estonia, according to plans already made in the interwar period, the parliament decided in 2005 to erect a Victory Column commemorating the War of Independence.^[21] A memorial to the 440 Estonian soldiers fallen during the war, built in 1928 and demolished in 1950, was rebuilt in 2012.^[22] In 2001, the Estonian War Museum was re-opened in General Laidoner’s house in the outskirts of Tallinn.

Finland

At the time an autonomous part of the [Russian Empire](#), the territory of Finland was not a direct battleground between the Central Powers and the Entente during the First World War. The European political events were overshadowed by the outbreak of the [Finnish Civil War](#) in 1918. The domestic conflict and political terror between the Whites and the Reds had a direct and lasting impact on the culture of death in Finland.

As a precursor to the Civil War, a number of Finns had fought on the battlegrounds of WWI. The legendary *27. Königlich-Preußisches Jäger-Bataillon*, a Finnish volunteer military unit in the Imperial German army, was incorporated into the national mythology as an embodiment of the Finnish independence struggle. A cult of the fallen was constructed around the [Jägers](#), with Battalion veterans taking the lead in these activities. Jäger monuments were set up both in Finland and in Latvia, where the Battalion had served on the Riga front.

Interwar Period

The monuments in Finland commemorated the underground recruitment of the Jägers and their return to Finland in 1918. In 1927, a monument was erected in Simo in northern Finland, where Jäger activists had clashed with Finnish policemen and Russian soldiers in 1916. The Hamnskär monument in Loviisa, commemorating the return of the first Jägers to Finland on the German [submarine UC-57](#), was unveiled in 1934, and representatives of the German *Wehrmacht* attended the ceremony.^[23] New monuments were erected in Finland in the 1960s, celebrating the fifty-year anniversary of the Jäger movement.

Memorial stones in Latvia commemorated those Jägers who had fallen in action in Kurland and were buried in local military graveyards. A Jäger monument was unveiled at Klapkalnciems in 1929; the monument was subsequently demolished by the Soviets, but erected once again at Finnish initiative in the newly-independent Latvia in 2004. Already in 1977, a small marble plaque had been unveiled at the St. Trinitatis Church in Liepāja. This commemorated the Finnish Jägers who had sworn their oath in the chapel before leaving for Finland, where they fought in the Civil War on the White side.^[24]

During the Finnish Civil War, the Reds and the Whites adopted broadly similar practices in the commemoration of fallen soldiers. On the White side, approximately 3,400 soldiers, voluntary civil guardsmen and conscripts were killed in action. The White Army fully exploited the ceremonial value of military funerals. Whenever possible, the burials were turned into solemn, festive occasions, where the nature of the war and the significance of the soldier's sacrifice were explained to the congregation.^[25] This was important during an internecine conflict, during which the indoctrination of popular sentiment was of paramount importance. From the White perspective, the war was a "war of liberation" against the Red rebels, who were regarded as traitors associated with the Russian Bolsheviks.

The cult of the fallen was also a cult of martyrdom. The funeral coffins of the deceased White soldiers were regularly painted white, which has since become the norm in Finland, but was exceptional in the early 20th century. The traditional color of coffins was previously black, with white reserved only for children and young people. The fallen soldier, however, was regarded as someone who had been purified from his sins by his ultimate sacrifice on behalf of a just cause – the freedom of the nation. The dead soldiers were brought back to their home parishes and buried in specific “Heroes’ Cemeteries” on the best spots of the churchyards. During the interwar era, these cemeteries assumed importance as cult places. The local Civil Guards laid wreaths on the graves on each Independence Day, and new conscripts gave their oaths of allegiance beside the graves of fallen White soldiers. The cult of fallen White heroes was also commemorated in art and literature, for example in the post-war poetry of Artturi Leinonen (1888-1963).^[26]

On the Red side, the combat losses amounted to slightly over 5,000 men and women killed in action. The burial ceremonies were usually styled in a military fashion, with music, wreaths and a formal cortège. The color of the casket was often red, signifying the political devotion of the revolutionary soldier, and formal death notices were published in labor movement newspapers.^[27] The revolutionary authorities also used the funerals as a means of uplifting morale among the working class. Even during the decisive [battle of Tampere](#) in March 1918, a “heroic burial” of fallen guardsmen was organized by the local labor organizations and trade unions. Following socialist principles, the ceremony was completely secular.^[28]

With the eventual Red defeat at the hands of the White forces, their combat deaths were surpassed by over 7,000 execution victims and 11,000 fatalities in prison camps. The executed Reds were often excluded from public cemeteries. Viewed as rebels who had risen against the rightful government, their burial in the sacred ground of churchyards was not considered proper. Graves near the places of execution remained nameless and were not allowed to be marked. Public attempts to commemorate Red victims could be met with police action.^[29]

On the eve of the Second World War, a national reconciliation allowed the commemoration of Red casualties. Already during the spring of 1939, the Social Democrats organized reburial ceremonies of executed Reds in a few churchyards. The victims of White terror were now integrated into public memory as victims of the violent birth of the nation.^[30] The reconciliation was given official sanction in the aftermath of the Winter War against the Soviet Union. The Order of Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim (1867-1951) established a new memorial day of the fallen, intended as a commemoration of those soldiers who had died in the recent war, as well as of all those who had “sacrificed their life for their conviction” during the “turmoil” of 1918.

Post-World War II and Contemporary Period

Monuments for the Red soldiers who had “fallen for their convictions” were set up at churchyards both during and after the Second World War. Occasionally they were inaugurated together with

monuments dedicated to the soldiers who had died in the Finnish Wars of 1939-1945.^[31]

Commemoration of the Civil War has continued, and in 2008, on the ninetieth anniversary of the war, a special exhibition on the Battle of Tampere was opened at the local Museum Centre Vapriikki. Some political divisions have remained; the memorial foundations and associations dedicated to the War of Liberation tend to commemorate the White side, whereas laying wreaths on the Red graves is part of the May Day traditions of the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance. There is, however, an official consensus of reconciliation, as testified by the government-organized ninetieth anniversary seminary titled *On behalf of Reconciliation and the Republic (Sovinnon ja Tasavallan puolesta)*.^[32]

Conclusion

Commemoration of the First World War in East Central Europe was strongly politicised and connected to the fact that states (re-)gained independence after 1918. Dragging on for more than four years, the war exhausted the human, material, and fiscal resources of belligerents, eroded existing social and political systems, and led to the fall of multi-ethnic empires in East Central Europe. The resulting political vacuum was filled by national states. Despite the fact that the greatest number of fallen soldiers from East Central Europe died in the ranks of the imperial armies, the official commemoration policy in the interwar period mainly emphasized those who died in the ranks of national units within imperial armies, those who died fighting the Bolsheviks, and those who died in border conflicts with neighbouring states. During communist rule and domination, the commemoration of the First World War was intentionally marginalised or blurred in public consciousness in favour of the commemoration of workers' movements and social revolutions. After the fall of the communist bloc and Soviet Union, the commemoration of the First War regained its place in the public memory and the state's historic policy, becoming an important part of the national identity of the states discussed above.

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Notes

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7. † This could be seen on the new table on the monument in the Gorlice military cemetery, which replaced the original, an Austro-Hungarian one, in 1928. The new one 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 1914-1915". See: Duda, Oktawian: Cmentarze I wojny światowej w Galicji Zachodniej 1914-1918 [World War I Cemeteries in Western Galicia 1914-1918], Warsaw 1995, p. 166.
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