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Historiography 1918-Today (East Central Europe)

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East Central European historians of the First World War have focused and continue to focus on the regaining independence and state-building processes that took place in East Central Europe in the first half of the 20th century. During communist rule, the freedom to conduct independent research in the region was severely restricted and subordinated to a Marxist ideological framework.

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Introduction

The article is devoted to the historiography dealing with the First World War in East Central Europe. It is structured according to national historiographies as they developed in the interwar, Cold War and post-1989 periods. From the very beginning, that is, during the last stage of the First World War, historians examined this conflict as one that ultimately led to the creation of independent nation-states. Apart from their scientific value, these studies were important in reshaping national identity in the post-war period and influencing political arguments.

Poland

In the interwar period, many studies on the First World War battles, written by former officers, were used as manuals for students at military academies; numerous books by foreign military men and politicians were translated and published in Poland at that time.^[1] The Polish book market was flooded with the memoirs of Polish participants in the Great War.

From the very moment of independence, Polish historians started to research the war. Of prime interest, of course, was the process of reestablishing Polish statehood^[2] and Polish national units' military activity during the war.^[3] During the war, many of these historians, including Oscar Halecki (1891-1973) and Wacław Sobieski (1872-1935), participated in political discussions, in [peace negotiations in Paris](#), or joined the Polish national military units.^[4]

The most heated issue regarding the First World War was not, as in Western [historiography](#), the question of “war guilt” (*Kriegsschuldfrage*).^[5] Without going into details, Polish historiography accepted the allegedly German and Austro-Hungarian responsibility for the outbreak of the Great War, which formed the basis of the Versailles Peace Treaty.^[6] Interwar Poland did not have an interest in revising this treaty (which was beneficial for Poland), as such a revision would have threatened the very existence of the current international order. As Stefan Rowecki (1895-1944) wrote in 1922:

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 hegemony in the world. These invasive plans, based on power, violence, and the rule “strength before law” caused the world war.^[7]

However, there was by no means a lack of controversy over the interpretation of WWI. This strongly politicized issue was widely discussed, in particular the aspect of who could claim most credit for the reestablishment of Poland. Politicians and their parties quarreled over their relative historical importance and boasted about their historical achievements. The largest political parties, the National Democrats and [Józef Piłsudski's \(1867-1935\)](#) followers, both claimed credit for regaining independence. In Poland, as in many countries in eastern and southern Europe, the First World War delivered legitimacy for those who wanted to seize or keep political power and influence. This political dispute was reflected in the historiography. The authoritarian regime – Piłsudski's followers after 1926 – tried to convince the Polish public opinion that it was only thanks to them that Poland existed.

One of the most respected historians of the governing elite, Wacław Lipiński, stated that after the crushing of the [1905 Revolution](#), “the independence movement had only one path to go – the construction of a force, a brutal physical force, which could break the power of the [Russian] government.”^[8] According to this interpretation, Piłsudski and his legions claimed the most credit for Polish independence.

When a historian from Jagiellonian University, Waclaw Sobieski, challenged Pilsudski's role in planning and carrying out the successful [summer 1920 campaign](#) against the [Red Army](#) in a Polish history textbook in 1935, the ministry of education fired him.^[9] The other powerful political camp, the National Democrats, regarded their main ideologist, Roman Dmowski (1864-1939), as the person who resuscitated Poland. In the first phase of the conflict, he strove to unite all Polish territories under the Russian regime, and in the second convinced Russia's allies that an independent, republican Poland was in their interest.

The Second World War dramatically changed this perspective. The 1914-21 events were rapidly overshadowed by the next world war. World War Two, with its tremendous human and material losses, occupation terror, Holocaust and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, aroused huge interest among historians and the Polish public.

Nevertheless, the history of the last few decades, including World War I, did remain a politically fragile issue. As a result of the establishment of a communist regime in Poland and, consequently, its subjection to the Soviet Union, freedom of research was strongly limited and strictly subordinated to the official party line.^[10] From the Marxist perspective, Poland regained independence as a result of the [Great October Revolution](#), not of the Polish nation's efforts.^[11] Marxist hardliner 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 realistic conditions allowing for the reestablishment of the Polish independence, because only as a result of the revolution did the following come to pass: 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.^[12]

Pilsudski was labeled a dictator and [fascist](#). According to the official communist interpretation, his legions had served the imperial interest of the Central Powers, as the National Democrats allegedly had served the imperial aims of Entente. Dmowski and his National Democrats were criticized for their [nationalism](#) and anti-Semitism and their activity was denied any consideration of patriotic inspiration.^[13]

There was no room for alternative interpretations. During the Eighth Convention of Polish Historians, held in September 1958, a high-level communist activist and historian, Henryk Jablowski, read 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 was the Russian Revolution.^[14] This illustrates one important factor, namely that the communist regime, which was conscious of its deep unpopularity amongst a significant part of Polish society, tried to use national rhetoric to improve its legitimacy. From this ideological position, especially after the end of the Stalinist period in the mid-1950s, the ruling party tried to appeal to the tradition of fighting for independence and often strained facts and arguments by overstating the achievements of left-wing and communist politicians

regarding the reestablishment of Polish statehood after 1918.^[15]

The improving atmosphere for research after 1956 allowed Polish historians to study the First World War beyond the constraints imposed by a purely Marxist framework. The most important studies on the war stem from this period, even though they are now rather outdated.^[16] These studies concentrated on political and military aspects of the process of regaining statehood during the period between 1914 and 1918. The Great War, in and of itself, is presented in these studies as the background for heated disputes between the pro-Austrian grouping around the Piłsudski-led legionnaires and the pro-Entente faction led by Dmowski and the National Democrats. The authors did not avail themselves of the many sources from Russian and Austrian archives and hardly paid attention to economic or social issues connected to the war. Pajewski applied the same military and political perspective in his monograph on the First World War, written at the beginning of the 1990s and still widely used in Poland today.^[17]

After the fall of communism, interest in the history of the First World War reemerged in Poland. First, historians started to remind the public of the war's military aspects and of Polish national units, especially Piłsudski's [Polish Legions](#).^[18] Polish historians are still researching the internationalization of the Polish cause during the Great War and the policy of belligerents towards Poles.^[19] In the years approaching the centenary of the war's outbreak, Polish as well as non-Polish scholars tried to research many historical gaps. For example, there is a rising interest in Jewish history and in the history of Polish-Jewish relations. This trend also includes studies on the First World War.^[20] Traditional political history nevertheless retains its central importance. In recent years, studies by Damian Szymczak on the rivalry between [Germany](#) and [Austro-Hungary](#) and the process of emerging Poland were published,^[21] Piotr Mikietyński wrote about on German policy toward Russian Poland, 1914-1916^[22] and Katarzyna Grysińska-Jarmuła published the political biography of [Bogdan Hutten-Czapski \(1851-1937\)](#), one of the closest co-workers of the German governor of Warsaw from 1915 to 1918, [Hans von Beseler \(1850-1921\)](#).^[23]

A few studies on social and economic issues were recently published as a sign of the shift in interest among historians conducting research on Polish history between 1914 and 1918.^[24] The same can be said regarding the [occupation policy and experience](#).^[25]

Nevertheless, battlefield history continues to be popular among Polish historians and readers.^[26] One of the best surveys on the topics touched upon by Polish historians is a compilation of articles stemming from conferences organized by the University in Białystok.^[27] However, in spite of the research mentioned above, there is still much work to be done. Compared with West European historiographies, interest in the First World War among Polish scholars remains still quite small.

The Baltics

The First World War has consistently played a marginal role in the national historiographies of [the Baltics](#). It is treated mainly as a “transitional phase” between two core epochs: the “national awakening” of the 19th and early 20th centuries and the “[wars of independence](#)” in 1918-21, followed by the interwar period, which is regarded as the first high point in the histories of modern Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This is partially a result of the interpretation of the First World War as a “foreign war”, forced upon the periphery of the [Russian Empire](#) by the great European imperial powers. Moreover, ethnic Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians only sporadically fought as soldiers close to their home, as opposed to the wars of 1918-21.

Immediately after the war, [Ludwik Abramowicz \(1879-1939\)](#), a representative of the *Krajowcy* (a group of advocates of a multi-ethnic Lithuanian state) and active supporter of Lithuanian independence published a collection of documents on the history of Lithuania during World War I.^[28] In the early interwar period, several Latvian and Lithuanian eyewitnesses wrote biographical accounts of life under German occupation^[29] and on experiences in the military. Among them were priests,^[30] journalists,^[31] and former soldiers, some of whom had fought in the ranks of the Imperial Army,^[32] the [Latvian Riflemen](#),^[33] and in the national armies during the independence wars of 1918-21.^[34] The majority of these authors presented their actions and experiences during World War I as patriotic activities opposed to the German occupants and geared towards the goal of establishing independent national states.

In the 1930s, more scholarly works were published, mostly collecting eyewitness accounts and putting them in a broader perspective. Most historians distinguished between the period of 1914-18^[35] and the phase of the independence wars,^[36] with only a few, such as Vladas Skurupskis, drawing a continuous line into the interwar period and thus evaluating the outbreak of the war as the beginning of a process of achieving and consolidating independence, which still had not finished.^[37]

The history of the [Freikorps](#) in the Baltics became a popular subject among extreme right-wing authors in Weimar Germany, maintaining a revisionist attitude towards the new Baltic republics. Many of these authors were Baltic Germans themselves, who had actively participated in the *Freikorps*^[38] and some of whom later supported the National Socialist movement.^[39] The Berlin-based *Mittler Verlag* was the primary publishing house to publish a number of revisionist accounts on the retreat of the German army and the engagement of the [Baltische Landeswehr](#) in Latvia.^[40] The topic was also taken up by right-wing novelists with great success.^[41] The history of the Baltic German war effort remained popular after World War II, with Baltic German historians revising works published already in the interwar period^[42] or publishing new research into the 1980s.^[43]

During the Cold War, historiography in the Baltic Soviet republics functioned along the lines of Marxist-Leninist historiography. As early as 1939,^[44] World War I was depicted as a war between capitalist powers,^[45] and its aftermath in the Baltics as a strategy of the imperialist western Entente

to establish bourgeois, anti-Bolshevist regimes. The independent interwar republics were considered mere British and American puppet regimes.^[46] Like their interwar-counterparts, Soviet Baltic historians focused on the period from 1917 to 1921 – however, this was due to its characteristics as a “revolutionary period” rather than as a period of independence wars. International currents and the role of the “small nations” in the Bolshevik movement were emphasized. The decades leading up to World War I were mainly interpreted as a period of strengthening the workers’ movement in the Baltics versus the tsarist regime.^[47]

During the later years of perestroika and eventually after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Marxist-Leninist historiography was replaced with a post-communist historiography, which on many levels picked up approaches of the nationalistic interwar historians, particularly regarding the periodization of the pre-war period as a phase of “national awakening”, 1914 to 1917-18 as a “foreign war” and 1917-18 to 1921 as the period of the wars of independence and onset of the interwar period. Again, particularly the last period remains a frequently researched period both on a scholarly and a popular-science level.^[48] The years 1914 to 1917-18 still have received very little scholarly attention. However, particularly historians of Latvia and Estonia, both of which were occupied rather late during the war, began to transcend this periodization as early as the late 1990s, emphasizing the whole period of 1914-21 as a period of a “battle for independence” or of a “coming into being of national states”.^[49]

Little is known about the dynamics of the relationship between German occupants and local elites and the role of the occupation in the development of national and territorial concepts.^[50] Only in the second half of the 2000s and the early 2010s did a small number of historians undertake research on the war’s effect on the local population.^[51] Also in the early 2010s, Baltic historians published studies scrutinizing the dichotomy of terror-wreaking Bolsheviks and arbitrarily violent *Freikorps* on the one hand, and noble independence fighters on the other by emphasizing the paramilitary structure of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian armies in 1919-20,^[52] the terror and requisitions exerted by these armies against the population and against each other, and the problematic role of this dichotomy for collective memory and historiography.^[53]

As a result of the complex linguistic situation in the region, studies from historians outside the region seldom integrate Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian language sources, while on the other hand historians from inside the region often overlook research trends followed in other parts of Europe and the USA. Some of the most innovative work has thus been done by historians of the diaspora, who have managed to integrate the perspectives of occupants and locals^[54] and who have worked within larger research contexts to transcend the historiographical fragmentation of the region, emphasizing shared experiences such as evacuations and the subjection to (para-)military violence.^[55]

Conclusion

In comparison to Western historiography, historians from the states under consideration have been relatively less interested in the history of the First World War. Their research has focused primarily on the military and political aspects of the war and the post-1918 state-building processes. When, after 1945, communist ideology restricted research freedom and tried to impose its own interpretation of historical events, traditional historiography played an important role in maintaining a national identity. With few exceptions (for example, studies on occupation policy in Poland or paramilitary violence in the Baltic states), regional historiography remains only minimally integrated into the general WWI historiography. This is a result of many factors – not least the complex linguistic situation.

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Notes

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3. ↑ Bagiński, Henryk: Wojsko Polskie na wschodzie 1914-1920 [The Polish Army in the East 1914-1920], Warsaw 1921; Gąsiorowski, Waclaw: Historia Armii Polskiej we Francji [The History of the Polish Army in France], Bydgoszcz 1939; Lipiński, Waclaw: Walka zbrojna o niepodległość Polski w latach 1905-1918 [The armed struggle for Polish independence in the years 1905-1918], Warsaw 1931.
4. ↑ Maternicki, Jerzy: Idee i podstawy. Historia i historycy polscy 1914-1918. Studium historiograficzne [Ideas and positions. History and Polish historians from 1914 to 1918. Historiographical study], Warsaw 1975; Bobrzyński, Michał: Nasi historycy wobec wojny światowej [Our historians on the World War], Cracow 1920.
5. ↑ Mombauer, Annika: The Origins of the First World War. Controversies and Consensus, London 2002.

6. † Dąbrowski, Jan: *Wielka Wojna 1914-1918 [The Great War 1914-1918]*, Warsaw 1937, pp.52f and 76f.
7. † “Przedwojenne Niemcy, dążące całym rozpędem do opanowania życia gospodarczego we wszystkich częściach świata, a wewnątrz u siebie do utworzenia z własnego kraju jednej wielkiej fortecy, najeżonej bagnietami, działami i pancernikami, miały daleko idące plany zgniecenia wszystkich sąsiadów i zdobycia hegemonji w świecie. Zaborcze plany niemieckie oparte na sile, przemocy i zasadzie ‘siła przed prawem’ wywołały wojnę światową”. Rowecki, Stefan: *Odwet Niemiec [Germany’s retaliation]*, in: *Kurier Warszawski*, 24.11.1922.
8. † “Ruchowi niepodległościowemu pozostawała tylko jedna droga – stworzenia siły, brutalnej siły fizycznej, która potrafiłaby złamać potęgę rządu”. Lipiński, *Walka zbrojna 1935*, p. 14.
9. † Pirożyński, Jan: *Wacław Sobieski (1872-1935) [Wacław Sobieski (1872-1935)]*, in: Dybiec, Julian (ed.): *Złota księga Wydziału Historycznego [The roll of honor of the History Department]*, Cracow 2000, pp.181-90; Barycz, Henryk: *Historyk gniewny i niepokorny. Rzecz o Wacławie Sobieskim [An angry and defiant historian. The issue of Wacław Sobieski]*, Cracow 1978.
10. † Rutkowski, Tadeusz P.: *Nauki historyczne w Polsce 1944-1970. Zagadnienia polityczne i organizacyjne [Historical Sciences in Poland, 1944-1970. Political and Organizational Issues]*, Warsaw 2007, pp. 94ff; Manteuffel, Tadeusz: *Warunki rozwoju nauki historycznej w dziesięcioleciu 1948-1958 [The conditions for the development of the historical sciences in the decade 1948-1958]*, in: Łukasiewicz, Juliusz (ed.): *Tradycje i współczesność. Księga pamiątkowa Instytutu Historycznego Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego 1930-2005 [Traditions and modernity. Commemorative book of the Historical Institute of Warsaw University 1930-2005]*, Warsaw 2005, pp. 360-72.
11. † Zatorski, Aleksander: *Polska lewica wojskowa w Rosji w okresie rewolucji 1917-1918 [The Polish military left in Russia during the revolution of 1917-1918]*, Warsaw 1971; Butkiewicz, Tadeusz / Ślisz, Andrzej: *Polscy żołnierze Wielkiego Października [Polish soldiers of the Great October]*, Warsaw 1987.
12. † “Zasadniczym przełomem w rozwoju sprawy polskiej w okresie pierwszej wojny światowej dokonała Wielka Październikowa Rewolucja Socjalistyczna. Dopiero ona stworzyła realne warunki umożliwiające odzyskanie przez Polskę niepodległości, bo tylko dzięki niej: 1. Rosja przestała być państwem imperialistycznym, 2. w ścisłym związku z wybuchem rewolucji niemieckiej i austriackiej upadły monarchie w państwach centralnych”. Grosfeld, Leon: *Sprawa polska w okresie pierwszej wojny światowej [The case of Poland during the First World War]*, Warsaw 1955, p. 22.
13. † Kormanowa, Żanna: *Historia Polski 1864-1945. Materiały do nauczania w klasie XI [Polish history from 1864 to 1945. Materials for teaching in class XI]*, Warsaw 1952, pp. 270-88.
14. † Rutkowski, *Nauki historyczne [Historical Sciences] 2007*, p. 363; Jabłoński, Henryk: *Rewolucja październikowa a sprawa niepodległości Polski [The October Revolution and the case of Polish independence]*, Warsaw 1967.
15. † Zaremba, Marcin: *Im nationalen Gewande. Strategien kommunistischer Herrschaftslegitimation in Polen 1944-1980*, Warsaw 2011.
16. † Holzer, Jerzy / Molenda, Jan: *Polska w pierwszej wojnie światowej [Poland in World War I]*, Warsaw 1973; Pajewski, Janusz: *Odbudowa państwa polskiego 1914-1918 [The reconstruction of the Polish State 1914-1918]*, Warsaw 1978; Garlicki, Andrzej: *U źródeł obozu belwederskiego [The genesis of the Belvedere party]*, Warsaw 1978.
17. † Pajewski, Janusz: *Pierwsza wojna światowa 1914-1918 [The First World War 1914-1918]*, Warsaw 1991.

18. † Zgórnjak, Marian: 1914-1918. Studia i szkice z dziejów I wojny światowej [From 1914 to 1918. Studies and sketches from the history of World War I], Cracow 1987; Pajewski, Pierwsza wojna [The first war] 1991; Milewska, Waclawa / Nowak, Janusz Tadeusz / Zientara, Maria: Legiony Polskie 1914-1918. Zarys historii militarnej i politycznej [Polish Legions 1914-1918. An outline of the military and political history], Cracow 1998; Wrzosek, Mieczysław: Polski czyn zbrojny podczas pierwszej wojny światowej 1914-1918 [Polish military activity during the First World War 1914-1918], Warsaw 1990; Snopko, Jan: Finał epopei Legionów Polskich [Final of Polish legions epos], Białystok 2008; Czerep, Stanisław: II Brygada Legionów [The Second Brigade of the Legions], Warsaw 1991; Radziwiłowicz, Dariusz: Polskie formacje zbrojne we wschodniej Rosji oraz na Syberii i Dalekim Wschodzie w latach 1918-1920 [Polish armed forces in eastern Russia, Siberia and the Far East in 1918-1920], Olsztyn 2009.
19. † Grosfeld, Leon: Polityka państw centralnych wobec sprawy polskiej w latach pierwszej wojny światowej [The policy of the central states with regards to the Polish case in the First World War], Warsaw 1962; Toporowicz, Wiesława: Sprawa polska w polityce rosyjskiej 1914-1917 [Poland's case in Russian policy 1914-1917], Warsaw 1973; Achmatowicz, Aleksander: Polityka Rosji w kwestii polskiej w pierwszym roku Wielkiej Wojny 1914-1915 [Russia's Policy regarding the Polish question in the first year of the Great War 1914-1915], Warsaw 2003.
20. † Zieliński, Konrad: Stosunki polsko-żydowskie na ziemiach Królestwa Polskiego w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej [Polish-Jewish relations in the lands of the Polish Kingdom during the First World War], Lublin 2005; Zieliński, Konrad: Żydzi Lubelszczyzny 1914-1918 [The Jews of Lublin 1914-1918], Lublin 1999; Sobczak, Mieczysław: Stosunek Narodowej Demokracji do kwestii żydowskiej w latach 1914-1919 [The position of the National Democratic Party with regards to the Jewish question in the years 1914-1919], Wrocław 2008; Gałęzowski, Marek: Na wzór Berka Joselewicza. Żołnierze i oficerowie pochodzenia żydowskiego w Legionach Polskich [For example Joselewicz. Soldiers and officers of Jewish origin in the Polish Legions], Warsaw 2010; Kaufman, Jesse: Schools, state-building and national conflict in German-occupied Poland 1915-1918, in: Keene, Jennifer D. / Neiberg, Michael S. (eds.): Finding Common Ground. New Directions in First World War Studies, Leiden et al. 2011, pp.113-37.
21. † Szymczak, Damian: Między Habsburgami a Hohenzollernami. Rywalizacja niemiecko-austro-węgierska w okresie I wojny światowej a odbudowa państwa polskiego [Between the Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns. German-Austro-Hungarian rivalry during World War I and the restoration of the Polish state], Cracow 2009.
22. † Mikietyński, Piotr: Niemiecka droga ku Mitteleuropie. Polityka II Rzeszy wobec Królestwa Polskiego (1914-1916) [The German path to Mitteleuropa. The Second Reich's policy towards the Polish Kingdom (1914-1916)], Cracow 2009.
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