

Shifts and Tensions in Ethnic/National Groups

By [Borislav Chernev](#)

This article examines the changing dynamics of national tensions in the Habsburg, Romanov, and Ottoman empires during three distinct phases of the Great War. The outbreak and early months of the war witnessed a rise in imperial patriotism. Imperial competition coupled with a concerted effort to mobilise ethnicity for the war effort resulted in a marked increase in ethnic tensions between the spring of 1915 and the February Revolution in 1917. Finally, imperial collapse caused by political revolution and/or military defeat led to the emergence of independent nation-states and the ostensible triumph of the principle of national self-determination.

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1. Introduction

The unprecedented demands [total war](#) placed on entire societies exacerbated already existing ethnic

conflicts in all belligerent states. This pattern was most pronounced in the multi-national dynastic empires of the Habsburgs, Romanovs, and Ottomans, which had dominated Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East for centuries. The collapse of all three empires at the end of the Great War and the concomitant emergence of nation-states from their ruins radically transformed the political geography and the nature of ethnic relations in the vast area affected by this twin process. This, in turn, raises a series of important questions: what role did nationalism in general and national conflicts in particular play in the demise of the imperial-dynastic order? Was this demise caused by long-term socio-economic and cultural developments or by the short-term exigencies of total war? Was the collapse of the continental empires inevitable?

This article will seek to address these interrelated questions by tracing the comparative evolution of national tensions in the Habsburg, Romanov, and Ottoman empires chronologically over three stages: the beginning and early months of the war (1914 until early 1915), which saw a rise in imperial patriotism; the middle phase of the war (spring 1915 to February 1917), characterised by imperial mobilisation of ethnicity and a rise in ethnic tensions; and the conclusion of the war (February 1917 to November 1918), which witnessed the dual process of imperial collapse and emergence of nation states. It will focus on the nationality policies of the imperial establishments and imperial competition, as well as the actions of nationalist activists themselves, thereby reflecting the latest trends in the literature on the subject.

Early studies of imperial collapse in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East generally followed the "decline-and-fall scenario." In a historical era characterised by allegedly progressive nation-states, the old, multi-ethnic, dynastic empires appeared backward and increasingly anachronistic. The Ottoman Empire, for example, had long been referred to as "the sick man of Europe," with the question of what would replace it after it was gone (known as the Eastern Question) a prominent one in European diplomacy during most of the 19th century. After the impending collapse of the House of Osman (which nevertheless took a long time to materialize), the Habsburg Empire was seen as the next "sick man of Europe."

In this intellectual climate, the twin study of the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire and the rise of nationalism in East Central Europe developed along the lines of a teleological, national-history paradigm, which posited the opposition of impersonal, larger-than-life forces, for example absolutism versus democracy and dynasticism versus nationalism. This clash inevitably had to result in the destruction of the Austrian "prison of nations" and the triumphant emergence of the liberal nation-states of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia. This approach was formulated most influentially in the 1929 work of the Hungarian liberal émigré historian Oscar Jászi (1875-1957), entitled *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, a book which became paradigmatic in historians' thinking about the empire's collapse. In Jászi's own words:

The dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy and the establishment of new national states on its ruins was, in its essence, the same process which in many other states of Europe led to the state integration of those peoples having a common language and culture. The same fundamental causes working for unity in the nationally homogeneous states

worked toward dissolution in the ethnographical mosaic of the Habsburg Empire. Even the World War can only be fully understood from this historical perspective...., This vast historical drama was not the result of diplomatic quarrels, but grew out of the inevitable logic of a long series of social causes.^[1]

According to this interpretation, the dissolution of the monarchy was the function of the rise of the interrelated forces of nationalism and liberalism. The Great War acted as a catalyst to the intricate interplay between the centripetal (dynasty, army, aristocracy, Catholic Church, bureaucracy, capitalism, Jewry, and socialism) and centrifugal (nationalism and irredentism) forces, precipitating the inevitable collapse. Habsburg historians who adopted this approach tended to create a heroic narrative in which the struggling nations had all the agency while the empire, a colossus on clay feet, had none.^[2] Among the factors that caused the collapse of the empire during the war, Zbyněk Anthony Bohuslav Zeman argued, "radical nationalism proved the most disruptive."^[3] In contrast, issues of nationalism in studies of the collapse of the Romanov and Ottoman empires are often overshadowed by the primacy of political events, especially the [Russian Revolution](#) and the Turkish War of Independence.

The innovative theoretical works on nationalism which appeared in the mid-1980s helped alter historians' attitudes. Where earlier generations of scholars had seen the triumphant rise of an awesome force of nature, Benedict Anderson, Miroslav Hroch, and Ernest Gellner, among others, saw a cultural artefact. While they disagreed on what exactly created the nation – Anderson emphasized the role of print capitalism, Hroch articulated a three phase model of activist-driven nation formation, and Gellner highlighted the integrative effect of industrialization – all three concurred that the nation was a historical construct of fairly recent origin, thereby establishing the so-called constructivist paradigm of nationalism.^[4] The constructivist paradigm implicitly challenged the claim that the Great War merely expedited the inevitable collapse of the dynastic empires.^[5]

This article builds on recent literature to suggest that national tensions did not cause the collapse of the Habsburg, Romanov, and Ottoman empires at the end of the Great War. It does not dispute the fact that national tensions grew progressively worse as the war dragged on, becoming a major aspect of politics on the home front. However, as Mark von Hagen has argued persuasively, the imperial regimes themselves were actively involved in playing the nationalist card in order to "mobilise ethnicity" for the war effort.^[6] Consecutive occupation regimes in the Eastern European borderlands provided a further catalyst for ethnic competition and nationalist activity.^[7] Dominant nationalism, such as Russian nationalism in the Romanov Empire and Turkish nationalism in the Ottoman Empire, which sought to nationalize the respective empire by making it more Russian and more Turkish, played an important role in exacerbating national conflicts and inter-ethnic violence.^[8] In the final analysis, however, military defeat and bureaucratic collapse were the primary reasons for the dissolution of the dynastic empires, with nationalism acting as a subordinate factor. Contrary to the claims of the proponents of the national-history paradigm, the emergence of independent nation-states after the Great War was not the logical and inevitable outcome of a long-term process of

national revival and consolidation. Rather, as Aviel Roshwald reminds us, "the sudden onset of independence is often the result of short-term, exogenous factors."^[9]

2. First Phase: Rise in Imperial Patriotism, July 1914-early 1915

"The mood of 1914," a phrase popularised by historian James Joll that refers to a "complex of beliefs and attitudes and of the accumulated mentality of a nation," overwhelmingly favoured war as a test of virility and a welcome quest for national glory.^[10] Cheering crowds greeted the declarations of war in London, Paris, and Berlin, and the situation was not much different in Vienna, Budapest, Petrograd (St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd shortly after the outbreak of hostilities), and Constantinople. While competition and conflict between their myriad subject nationalities had dominated Habsburg and, to a lesser extent, Romanov and Ottoman domestic policy, the outbreak of war in August 1914 placed national tensions on the back burner in favour of an unprecedented rise in imperial patriotism.

The Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy was in many ways the most economically developed and liberal among the three dynastic empires under consideration, with a lively popular press in the languages of all subject nationalities. Various newspapers noted the emergence of new, supranational "Austrianness" and "Hungarianness," as a previously unknown sense of unity of purpose brought disparate national groups closer together in the defence of the realm against Serbian intransigence and Russian imperialist designs.^[11] The rise in imperial patriotism was not limited to the German and Hungarian-speaking parts of the Dual Monarchy; similar excitement prevailed in Bohemia, Galicia, Bosnia, and elsewhere. Popular demonstrations in favour of the war took place in Zagreb and Prague. Spontaneous anti-Serbian riots broke out in Sarajevo, the location of the assassination of [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#) by [Serbian terrorists](#).^[12] One Croatian daily, *Hrvatska*, noted that, "the Serbs are poisonous snakes from whom you are safe only after you have crushed their heads."^[13] Writing in January 1916, the US Consul at Prague described the absence of overt national tensions in the city during the first phase of the war in the following manner:

There have been absolutely no riots whatever in Prague since the war began and...,it is much more quiet here now than it was before the war when the Germans here actually considered it unsafe to speak their language in certain localities..., The Bohemian [i.e. Czech] national sentiment which was so rampant before the war has absolutely evaporated..., At every victory the Czech houses are beflagged and the Czech newspapers are more Germanophile than the Germans themselves..., It is safe to say that all political arrests made are upon information volunteered by Bohemians [i.e. Czechs].^[14]

A similar surge in support for the imperial cause was evident among most nationalities in the Romanov Empire. The popular press proclaimed an "internal peace" (*vnutrennij mir*), which set aside old tensions and brought together diverse classes and national groups. Amidst expressions of patriotism, *Novoe vremia* noted on 31 July 1914, "the non-Russian citizens of Russia felt themselves

to be Russians. The consciousness of approaching danger united them, firmly welded them to the greater fatherland."^[15] The leaders of even the most suspect ethnic groups, including German farmers, Jews, and Baltic German nobles, pledged allegiance to the empire in the [State Duma](#) (Parliament). "The period of public displays of loyalty, dedication to the common struggle against the external enemy, and disavowal of conflict with others in society and with the government created a deep impression," writes Eric Lohr.^[16] Imperial Russian society had been plagued by deep socio-economic and national divisions in the decades before 1914, which had manifested themselves violently during the [1905 Revolution](#). The first phase of the war seemed to promise the emergence of a modern citizenry, as people from all walks of life rallied behind the colours in active support of the Romanov war effort.

The situation in the Ottoman Empire was complicated by the long string of defeats and humiliations the Ottomans had suffered at the hands of the European Great Powers. Between 1878 and 1913, the empire had lost all of its African possessions and nearly all of its European territories. By 1914, a deep sense of victimhood engulfed the intellectual and emotional climate of the empire. The imperial project to promote a multi-confessional, eclectic notion of Ottomanism had failed to inspire the Christian populations of the Balkans, which had welcomed the [arrival of the armies of the Balkan League in 1912-1913](#) with open arms. Many Ottoman intellectuals believed that the very existence of the empire was at stake and that salvation could only be attained through war. Consequently, Ottoman elites worked tirelessly to boost Muslim imperial patriotism between the end of the Balkan Wars and the formal entry of the empire in the war at the end of October 1914. According to [Mustafa Aksakal](#):

By August 1914, the political public was thoroughly familiar with the values and changes its leaders regarded as essential for the empire's recovery: if Ottomans were to survive..., they had to embrace an unfaltering patriotism of toil and self-sacrifice in the empire's service.^[17]

Although studies of popular attitudes among the empire's Arabic and Kurdish populations are virtually non-existent, there is little reason to doubt their commitment to the Ottoman cause early on.

How long did the rise in imperial patriotism continue? Events at the front generally determined the duration of the period of ethnic cooperation and reconciliation. The heavy defeats the Habsburg armies suffered in [Galicia](#) in September 1914, the failure to subdue [Serbia](#) between November and December 1914, and the suicidal Carpathian Offensives between January and April 1915 meant that popular enthusiasm for the war quickly subsided and was already a thing of the past by early 1915. These military disasters brought about the end of the cosmopolitan, polyglot, *Habsburg-treu* officer corps, which had been the glue of the multi-ethnic Habsburg army. Newly-trained cadres were less sensitive to national issues, and their misguided actions inadvertently contributed to a rise in ethnic tensions within the army at the front.^[18] In contrast, [Russia](#) did not suffer obvious defeats in the early months of the war; hence, imperial patriotism continued to be on the rise until the Great Retreat of May-October 1915 dealt it a devastating blow. Defeats in Eastern Anatolia in early 1915 and the

landing of Allied forces at Gallipoli in the spring, precipitated a similar crisis in the Ottoman Empire which quickly escalated out of all proportion. In all three cases, military defeats and fears of utter collapse and disintegration resulted in the intensification of inter-ethnic conflict that occasionally took on violent forms.

3. Second Phase: Mobilisation of Ethnicity and Rise in Ethnic Tensions, early 1915-February 1917

Much of the initial enthusiasm for the war in the dynastic empires as well as elsewhere was due to the widespread - although mistaken - belief that the fighting would be "over by Christmas", following which the boys would come home and normal life would resume quickly. By early 1915, however, it was abundantly clear to everyone involved that this was not the case and that an unprecedented effort of societal mobilisation for total war was required to break the deadlock. In countries where a modern notion of citizenship complete with an understanding of citizens' rights and obligations existed, such as Britain, France, and Germany, the transformation of society and the economy on a total war footing was easier to implement. In contrast, in countries where common citizenship was less well developed, such as the dynastic empires, the authorities faced a number of daunting challenges.

One strategy imperial elites employed towards this goal was what Mark von Hagen has dubbed "the mobilisation of ethnicity." He has argued that a focus on state and elite policies is indispensable for a full understanding of the emergence of national conflicts in the dynastic empires during the Great War. According to von Hagen, "[a]mong the war's consequences was a speeding up of the reconfiguration of identities – itself part of the longer-term shift in the way imperial society was structured – from traditional dynastic, confessional, and estate categories to ones of class and ethnicity."^[19]

The case of Poland is the most instructive example of this imperial policy and its unintended consequences for several reasons. First, Poland had a well-developed national movement going back to the second half of the 19th century. Second, following the late-18th century Partitions of Poland (1772-1795), the territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were shared among Romanov Russia, Habsburg Austria, and Hohenzollern Prussia-Germany. Over the course of the 19th century, the three empires had cooperated closely on the Polish Question, which had contributed to the stability of the system of imperial-dynasticism in the east of Europe. Third, much of the fighting on the Eastern Front took place on territories inhabited by Poles.

In light of these considerations and the looming importance of the Polish Question in the expected post-war redrawing of political borders, the Habsburg and Romanov empires began vying for Polish support after the outbreak of hostilities. Russian Commander-in-Chief Nikolai Nikolaevich, Grand Duke of Russia (1856-1929) made the first move in August 1914, when he publicly promised the restoration of a fully-autonomous Polish Kingdom within the empire at the end of the war, which

would include Austrian Galicia and Prussian Poznan. Vienna responded almost immediately by sponsoring the creation of autonomous [Polish Legions](#) within the Habsburg army. Under these circumstances, Polish nationalist leaders were divided on the best course of action. [Joseph Piłsudski \(1867-1935\)](#), who considered Russia to be Poland's chief enemy, threw his lot with the Habsburgs, as they had previously allowed Polish cultural autonomy in Galicia. In contrast, [Roman Dmowski \(1864-1939\)](#) sided with the Russians for fear of persecution in the case of a Russian victory.

At first, it seemed that Dmowski might be correct, as Russian armies soundly defeated the beleaguered Austro-Hungarian forces and occupied almost all of Austrian Galicia in the autumn of 1914. The retreating Habsburg troops perpetrated atrocities against local Poles, and Ukrainians, who were deemed unreliable, anticipating the general descent into violence in the province.^[20] The subsequent Russian occupation of Galicia subjected the large Jewish population to expropriations, deportations, pogroms, and other gratuitous forms of violence, and the Ukrainians to cultural Russification, while the Poles were treated with ambivalence. These measures, which were intended to prepare the province for eventual incorporation into the Russian Empire, had the exact opposite effect of strengthening the national identities of the affected groups and increasing inter-ethnic violence and competition for increasingly scarce economic resources.^[21] The Austro-German invasion and occupation of parts of Italy following the [Battle of Caporetto](#) in the autumn of 1917 bore striking similarities to Russian occupation policy in Galicia, as imperial German and Habsburg troops engaged in deliberate destruction and ruthless exploitation of the resources of the occupied territories. In addition, Habsburg troops transported over 16,000 Italians to camps in Austria, at least 3,000 of whom died. These cases were part of what [Alan Kramer](#) has recently described as a "dynamic of destruction which produced the most extensive cultural devastation and mass killing in Europe since the Thirty Years War."^[22]

The Central Powers soon regained the upper hand after they broke through the enemy lines at Górlice-Tarnów, liberated Galicia, and conquered all of Russian Poland between May and October 1915. They proceeded to establish an Austro-German condominium in Russia's former Polish territories, which included the German [Government-General Warsaw](#) in the north and the Austrian Military-Government Lublin in the south. [Both occupation authorities](#) promoted Polish culture in an attempt to secure Polish support.^[23] In November 1916, Germany and Austria-Hungary upped the ante by proclaiming an independent Kingdom of Poland under their protection. The Habsburgs in particular believed that a successful mobilisation of Polish nationalism would enable them to strengthen the empire by implementing the so-called Austro-Polish Solution of the Polish Question. This project entailed transforming the Habsburg Empire from a Dual Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to a Tripartite Austro-Hungarian-Polish Monarchy by uniting Galicia with Russian Poland.^[24] If successful, this would have resulted in a further rise in imperial patriotism among large sectors of the Polish national movement, accompanied by a concomitant decrease in national tensions. In this way, the imperial competition for Polish support resulted in considerable concessions towards the

Polish nationalist movement, which enabled Polish nationalist activists to manoeuvre skilfully, playing one side against the other.

The imperial policy to mobilize ethnicity was not limited to the Poles. The Ukrainians were another important, large ethnic group that straddled the old Habsburg-Romanov frontier. Most of the 4 million Ukrainians (usually called Ruthenians) in the Habsburg Empire, who lived in Eastern Galicia, Northern Bukovina, and North-eastern Hungary, enjoyed substantial cultural autonomy. In contrast, the Romanovs denied the existence of a separate [Ukrainian nation](#), arguing that the Little Russians (*malorossy*) were a branch of an All-Russian nation, which included Great Russians, Little Russians, and White Russians (Belarusians).^[25] In September 1914, Habsburg authorities created the first Ukrainian military detachment, known as Ukrainian [Sič Riflemen](#) (*Ukrainski Sichovi Striltsi*), which fought the advancing Russian troops in Galicia. Beginning in January 1915, it came under the command of [Wilhelm von Habsburg, Archduke of Austria \(1895-1948\)](#), a self-fashioned Ukrainian national leader whose penchant for wearing a blue-yellow embroidered shirt won him the alias Vasyl Vyshyvanyi and the heartfelt affection of his Ukrainian troops. With German and Austrian financial backing, Galician Ukrainians also set up a Union for the Liberation of Ukraine (*Soiuz vizvolennia Ukraini*) in [Lemberg](#), the capital of Galicia, which later relocated to Vienna and, eventually, to Berlin.

Faced with such concerted pro-Ukrainian actions on the part of their Habsburg and German adversaries, the Romanovs had no alternative but to offer concessions of their own. In August 1915, a telegram from [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868-1918\)](#) to a Ukrainian émigré group in [Switzerland](#) used the term "Ukrainians" rather than the previously obligatory "Little Russians" for the first time.^[26] Albeit primarily a symbolic concession, it had important consequences for the legitimisation of the Ukrainian national movement in the Russian Empire. The new spirit of reconciliation, which would have been unthinkable a mere twelve months earlier, continued to inform the attitude of the imperial Russian establishment towards Ukrainian nationalism. For a time, the authorities even considered opening a Ukrainian university.^[27] In this way, Ukrainian national activists were able to benefit from the competition between the dynastic empires, much like their Polish counterparts.

Elsewhere, the German military occupation in the Baltic ([Ober Ost](#)) actively promoted the development of national identities in order to intensify national conflicts; a classic case of divide-and-rule. Surprised to "discover" the existence of Belarusians, for instance, the *Ober Ost* administration quickly realized that the strengthening of Belarusian national identity via cultural policies would weaken the hold of Polish nationalist activists in the area.^[28] The attempt to mobilize the local populations for compulsory labour in order to contribute to the German war effort also caused frictions and grievances against privileged ethnic groups, such as Baltic Germans. "Great, overreaching ambitions in *Ober Ost's* utopian vision sanctioned a brutal, arbitrary, and violent rule which undercut its own goals," concludes Vejas Liulevicius.^[29]

Even as they engaged in positive mobilization of ethnicity for the war effort, imperial regimes

proceeded to clamp down on certain "undesirable" ethnic groups and nationalisms. Typically influenced by military defeats, this policy tended to single out nationalities perceived as internal enemies, such as Jews and ethnic Germans in the Romanov Empire and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. In both cases, dominant nationalism (Russian and Turkish respectively) played an active part in the radicalization of the regime's repressive policies, thereby contributing to the exponential escalation of violence and inadvertently destabilizing the imperial establishment in the process. The Austro-Hungarian army engaged in a similar suppression of Serbian nationalism in occupied Serbia, in preparation for the country's incorporation into the empire at the end of the war.

The ill-prepared Ottoman army suffered a humiliating defeat in its offensive against the Russians at the Battle of Sarikamish (December 1914-January 1915), with the freezing winter weather in the Caucasus swelling the already substantial Ottoman casualties. In the spring of 1915, the Russians counterattacked in full force and overran most of Eastern Anatolia, as rumours of Armenian collaboration with the invading Russian armies abounded. Simultaneously, British, the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps ([ANZAC](#)), and French troops landed at Gallipoli in April with the intention of forcing the Black Sea straits and knocking the Ottoman Empire out of the war. The early defeats stirred the latent apprehension of the Ottoman establishment and Turkish nationalist activists and galvanized them into desperate action. As Taner Akçam has argued, the pervasive fear of dissolution of the Ottoman Empire greatly influenced the development of the Turkish national movement during the Great War, whose proponents perceived the [Armenians \(and other Christian minorities, such as the Assyrians\)](#) as allies of the Russian imperialists and hence enemies within.^[30] The relatively better economic position of most Ottoman Armenians compared to that of ethnic Turks (Armenians and Greeks controlled a large percentage of domestic commerce, including in the imperial capital of Constantinople) provided an additional incentive for action.

The precedent of Armenian massacres had already been established in the 1890s. In the spring of 1915, with defeat and imperial collapse seemingly imminent and Constantinople engulfed by panic, the Ottoman establishment endeavoured to carry out a policy of systematic removal and extermination of the Armenian population in the empire, which ultimately resulted in the first modern [genocide](#). On 24 April 1915, 235 Armenian national leaders in the Imperial capital were arrested, ostensibly in retaliation for an Armenian revolt in the area of Lake Van in Eastern Anatolia. By late-May, the number of arrests had risen to 2,300, with several public executions also taking place.^[31]

According to Taner Akçam, the governing Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) party had already taken the decision to massacre the empire's Armenians in mid-March.^[32] In May, the Ottoman army began rounding-up the entire Armenian population of Anatolia under the pretext of relocating it to the arid deserts of Syria and Mesopotamia on military necessity. In some places, Kurdish tribesmen attacked and pillaged Armenian settlements and massacred their inhabitants without waiting for the arrival of regular troops. The deportees were cramped in temporary concentration camps in Aleppo, where many died from starvation and lack of sanitation. The survivors were humiliated, beaten, and marched to certain death further south. Irregular Kurdish

militias continued to carry out spontaneous massacres, although there were also examples of individual Kurds hiding and protecting their Armenian neighbours. The deportations continued until late 1916, long after the end of the [Gallipoli Campaign](#). Estimates of total Armenian deaths range from 800,000 to over 1.5 million. The Ottoman authorities used the confiscated Armenian economic assets to extend the Muslim bourgeoisie and provide for the needs of Muslim immigrants from the Balkans. Thus, they employed the Armenian genocide to strengthen the Turkish national movement in Anatolia demographically and economically, thereby transforming Anatolia from a heterogeneous collection of imperial provinces to the heartland of a future Turkish nation-state.^[33]

Even though no genocide took place in the Russian Empire in 1915, the sequence of events closely resembled that in the neighbouring Ottoman Empire. Following a series of defeats against the combined Austro-German forces on the [Eastern Front](#), the Russian army was forced to relinquish Courland, Poland, and Lithuania over the course of the Great Retreat between May and October 1915. With troop morale and discipline extremely low, the High Command began looking for a scapegoat for the military debacle and quickly found one in the Jews. Popular [anti-Semitism](#) in the Russian Empire had been quite strong in the decades before 1914, with anti-Jewish pogroms breaking out in 1881 and 1905. The vast majority of the empire's Jewish population lived in the so-called Pale of Settlement (roughly coinciding with the borders of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth prior to the First Partition in 1772), situated close to the front in 1915. This sparked accusations of sabotage, as many Russian officers believed that Jews were more attracted to Central European rather than Russian culture. To make matters worse, Yiddish, the language of Eastern European Jewry, sounded remarkably similar to German to the uneducated ear.

In an atmosphere of pervasive anti-Jewish prejudice, Russian military commanders began in March and April of 1915 to deport or simply [expel Jews](#) from districts close to the front to the interior of the empire. The deportations were accompanied by escalating levels of violence and pogroms on the part of demoralised Russian and [Cossack](#) troops. Local Lithuanians, Poles, and Ukrainians also looted Jewish property, considerably exacerbating Christian-Jewish tensions in the western borderlands of the empire. In time, the deportations expanded in scope to include German farming colonists in the western provinces and Muslims in the Caucasus, as well as other nationally-suspect groups.^[34]

As thousands of Jewish, Baltic, and other [refugees](#) streamed into central Russia, they encountered large numbers of ethnic Russians for the first time. As [Peter Gatrell](#) explains, "in view of the notorious suspicion in official quarters of non-Russian cultural and political organizations, population displacement created a new framework for political activities."^[35] Refugees set-up self-help organisations along national lines, which provided a platform for voicing political demands and strengthened their sense of national belonging but also contributed to an antagonistic view of other cultures and ethnic groups. In effect, this constituted a negative mobilization of ethnicity, as discriminatory imperial policies forced previously underdeveloped national movements to cohere in order to ensure their survival. The same was true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the Russian population in the

areas affected by the influx of refugees, which often felt overrun by foreigners. "We may look to refugeedom for the crystallization of Russianness," Gatrell concludes. "Refugeedom reinforced the sense of otherness, reminding Russians..., what they were not, as well as what they were."^[36]

The Romanov establishment carried out deportations of unwanted nationalities in the pursuit of a policy of "nationalising the empire" – making it demographically and economically more Russian.^[37]

Like the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, Germans and Jews were prominent actors in the imperial Russian economy who controlled substantial economic assets. However, they were minorities in the parts of the empire where most of them resided (primarily the western borderlands), as were Russians. Consequently, the removal of Germans and Jews did not strengthen a Russian national movement which had a negligible presence in the area; rather, it had the unintended consequence of aiding the aspirations of territorial nationalities (Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, etc.) instead. "The regime and the army found themselves literally clearing the way for the national assertion of territorially concentrated national groups," writes Eric Lohr.^[38]

Habsburg policy towards Serbs bears both similarities to and differences from the Romanov and Ottoman cases. Serbs (in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Southern Hungary, and elsewhere) were definitely perceived as the main enemy within and targeted by the military and civilian authorities, not unlike Jews in Russia and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. In a conversation with Austrian politician [Josef Redlich \(1869-1936\)](#) that took place on 8 October 1914, Hungarian journalist [Josef Diner-Denes](#) talked at length about a "race war" carried out by the Habsburg authorities against the Serbs in Southern Hungary. Redlich noted in his diary that this was a "systematic policy of extermination."^[39]

On the other hand, Serbs from the Kingdom of Serbia constituted one of the main external threats to the integrity of the empire. This helps explain the extremely high levels of violence that characterised the initial Austro-Hungarian invasion of Serbia in the autumn of 1914. A British professor of criminology, who published a report on the subject in 1916, elaborated: "The Austro-Hungarian soldiers, finding themselves on Serbian territory and face to face with people who had always been represented to them as barbarians, were frightened. It is from fear..., that they probably perpetrated their first cruelties."^[40] Unlike in the Romanov and Ottoman cases, however, dominant (German and Magyar) nationalism was of little importance, either during the initial invasion or during the course of the Austro-Hungarian [occupation of Serbia](#) (November 1915-October 1918). The Habsburg army, which ran the occupation, sought to de-nationalize Serbia by deporting the local nationalist intelligentsia to the Habsburg hinterland and establishing a military-bureaucratic regime that relegated politics (national and otherwise) to the background. While generally within the bounds of [international law](#), this regime – which reflected the Habsburg military's utopian vision of a non-national future for the empire as a whole – engaged in violent retaliations against civilians and *komitadsjis* (Serbian guerrillas).^[41] Since many Austro-Hungarian troops were of South Slavic (Croatian, Slovene, Bosnian) origin, the memory of these violent reprisals would play an important role in the rise of ethnic tensions that plagued inter-war Yugoslavia.

The strains total war put on the dynastic empires meant that ethnic groups previously exempt from military service were now subject to recruitment. The issue was a particularly sensitive one in the Romanov Empire. Approximately half of the 13.7 million people exempted from conscription according to the 1897 census lived in Central Asia. As the army began to suffer from a shortage of manpower due to the enormous casualties, the authorities introduced the draft in July 1916. This caused a large-scale rebellion in Central Asia, which eventually required the deployment of regular troops and Cossacks regiments. The rebellion was essentially an ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz nomads and Slavic (Russian and Ukrainian) farmers, whose large influx in the decades leading up to 1914 had threatened the locals' traditional way of life. The rebellion resulted in the destruction of 9,000 Slavic homesteads and the death of approximately 3,600 Slavic settlers. Casualties among the local tribesmen were far higher.^[42]

Prisoner of war (POW) recruitment was another policy the empires used to address the manpower shortage. By offering preferential treatment to POWs of a particular ethnic background, the imperial establishments hoped to convert them to their cause. The Germans and Austrians set up special camps for Ukrainian POWs, which contained 400,000 people by late 1916. Galician Ukrainians were brought in to teach Ukrainian history and culture. The 40,000 POWs who proved particularly receptive to nationalist propaganda formed a special Ukrainian auxiliary corps.^[43] The Russians created similar camps for Habsburg POWs of Slavic nationality, especially Czechs and Serbs, and organised the so-called **Czechoslovak Legion**. In contrast, German Austrian and Hungarian POWs received far harsher treatment. As Peter Pastor has argued, this policy "made nationalism the primary ideology of the camps."^[44] By mid-1918, a full scale civil war between Habsburg POWs was taking place in Siberia, as German Austrians and Hungarians fought the Czechoslovak Legion.^[45] POW policy was similar to refugee policy in that it strengthened national unity but also exacerbated ethnic tensions considerably. Returning POWs brought these ethnic tensions to the home front.

The activities of émigré nationalists also fostered ethnic tensions. Czech and Yugoslav nationalist activists in particular were at the forefront of the quest for independence from the Habsburg Monarchy. **Thomas Masaryk (1850-1937)** and **Edvard Beneš (1884-1948)** mobilized Czechoslovak expatriate communities in Western Europe and North America and secured political support from Britain, France, and the United States. According to Masaryk:

[S]ince we could not withstand Austria at home, we must withstand her abroad. There our main task would be to win the goodwill for ourselves and our national cause, to establish relations with the politicians, statesmen and Governments of the Allies, to organize united actions among our people in Allied countries and, above all, to create an army from among Czech prisoners of war.^[46]

However, the activities of émigré nationalist activists had limited effect on national groups at the home front until 1918. As **Jaroslav Hašek's (1883-1923)** novel **The Good Soldier Svejk** reflects, most Czechs supported the Habsburg war effort or offered passive resistance at best.^[47]

4. Third Phase: Imperial Collapse and the Emergence of Independent Nation-States, February 1917-November 1918

The February Revolution in Russia marked the beginning of an extended period of imperial collapse in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Although the primary cause of the revolution was political – it reflected the inability of the imperial Russian establishment to inspire the confidence of the educated elites and the military – it had important repercussions on inter-ethnic relations. With the imperial centre gone irretrievably, national groups began to assert themselves and make bids for independence, as the weak [Provisional Government](#) in Petrograd looked on helplessly. On 5 March 1917, the Russian language daily *Kievskaja mys* reported a large gathering of various Ukrainian national associations in Kiev, which created a Central Rada (council) aimed to serve as a local governing body.^[48] The Rada grew increasingly independent from central authority in the following months, proclaiming the autonomy of the Ukrainian Republic within a Russian federation in November, soon after the Bolsheviks toppled the Provisional Government in Petrograd. Finland – previously an autonomous Grand Duchy within the empire – quickly followed suit, while other nationalities, including the Georgians and the Armenians, also inched towards independent national-statehood.

One of the Bolsheviks' main goals was to take Russia out of the war. To this end, they initiated peace talks with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk at the beginning of December. The Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference (December 1917-March 1918) provided a forum for national self-determination discourse, as the two sides debated the application of this novel concept in international relations. The increasing appeal of self-determination first manifested itself in the entangled spaces of Eastern Europe, where the national aspirations of Poles and Ukrainians, bolstered by the new discourse, converged with the rhetoric emanating from Brest-Litovsk to contribute to the twin process of imperial collapse and the emergence of nation-states. The [First Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#), signed between the Central Powers and the Ukrainian People's Republic on 9 February 1918, is a good illustration of this pattern.^[49] With Austro-German military support, the fledgling Ukrainian republic embarked on a policy of nation-building and state consolidation in the following months.

Over the course of the spring and summer of 1918, the Allied and Associated Powers also granted official recognition to the various émigré-run national councils, most importantly those of the Czechs and the Yugoslavs, which now called for outright independence from the Habsburgs. At the time, most western statesmen gave little thought to the implications this would have for the Habsburg Empire; as they were coming under severe pressure from the [German spring offensive](#), Allied diplomats hoped support for the émigrés would destabilize Austria-Hungary by revolutionizing its home front. Building on the strains of four years of total war, which had exacerbated already existing socio-economic and national divisions, many of which tended to coincide throughout Central Europe (Magyar landlords and Slovak peasants, for example), anti-Habsburg propaganda was an extremely successful strategy during the last months of the war.^[50]

By autumn 1918, it was abundantly clear the Central Powers were losing the war. The Allies had beaten back the German offensive in the west and the Habsburg offensive in Italy and were counterattacking in full force. Hundreds of thousands of army deserters and POWs the Russians had released after Brest-Litovsk, many of whom were radicalized by Bolshevism, roamed the countryside in search of loot. Starvation was widespread, especially in most Austrian urban centres. Railway transportation had broken down almost completely.^[51] In the circumstances, on 16 October, [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#) issued a manifesto reorganizing the Austrian half of the empire into a federation of nationalities. This desperate act, which sought to preserve the integrity of the Habsburg Empire in the face of looming defeat, had the exact opposite effect of empowering nationalist activists, who duly proceeded to declare independence and take over the local bureaucracy and administration in Prague, Zagreb, Ljubljana, and elsewhere in the last days of October. The emperor renounced his role in the affairs of Austria and Hungary on 11 and 13 November, respectively, and went into exile. By then, the Habsburg Empire had all but ceased to exist. Ironically, the Ottoman Empire, the erstwhile "sick man of Europe," outlived its Romanov and Habsburg counterparts – it was officially dissolved only in November 1922.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, national [revolutions](#) did not bring about the dissolution of the dynastic empires in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Rather, military defeat and bureaucratic collapse paved the way for independence-minded nationalist activists to have the last word. Ethnic groups in the Russian Empire began to assert their right to national self-determination only after the February Revolution had delegitimized the imperial centre. Even then, they were initially cautious, seeking autonomy within a reorganized, federative Russia. Only after such prospects seemed unlikely did nations like Ukraine hesitantly move towards full independence. A similar scenario unfolded in the Habsburg Empire, where most subject nationalities decisively turned against the imperial establishment only once defeat loomed large in the autumn of 1918 and the army and bureaucracy had practically disintegrated. "Generally speaking," admitted Masaryk, "our independence is a fruit of the fall of Austria-Hungary and of the world conflagration. In vanquishing Germany and Austria, the Allies won our freedom and made it possible."^[52] The Ottoman case was slightly different, as by the time the empire dropped out of the war on 30 October, it had already lost almost all of its Arab territories to advancing British, Indian, and ANZAC troops and their Arab clients. Overall, imperial collapse preceded and was largely responsible for the emergence of independent nation-states at the end of the Great War.

The Great War marked the end of the system of imperial-dynasticism in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East and paved the way for the triumph of the political concept of national self-determination. Total war required total mobilisation, which ultimately proved beyond the capabilities of the complex imperial societies presided over by Habsburgs, Romanovs, and Ottomans. Military defeat and political revolution brought down the empires, which created an opportunity for nationalist activists to set up independent nation-states at the end of the war. However, the formal conclusion of

hostilities in November 1918 did not bring an end to ethnic tensions. If anything, it intensified them, as a plethora of actual and would-be nation states fought over disputed areas with ethnically-mixed populations. In 1919, Poles clashed with Ukrainians over the formerly Habsburg town of Lemberg (Ukrainian: Lviv, Polish: Lwów). The Romanian army invaded Hungary and briefly occupied Budapest in the summer. A series of anti-Jewish pogroms swept through Ukraine and Southern Russia, resulting in the deaths of over 100,000 Jews. The dust did not settle until 1923.

During the inter-war period, it became abundantly clear that the idea of national self-determination did not correspond to the reality on the ground, as ethnic tensions continued to simmer under the surface. Millions of Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Jews found themselves second-class citizens in the Second Polish Republic. Czechoslovakia had incorporated 3 million reluctant Germans, as well as substantial Hungarian and Ruthenian (Ukrainian) minorities, which never quite reconciled themselves to the new state. Even Slovaks, theoretically part of the dominant Czechoslovak nation, often felt aggrieved. Far from an embodiment of South Slav unity, Yugoslavia became a thinly disguised Greater Serbia, to the great chagrin of most Croats and Slovenes, who had sought to create an ethnic confederation. Last but certainly not least, the arbitrary boundaries the British and the French established in the Middle East laid the groundwork for conflicts which persist to this day. In the final analysis, the Great War raised more questions about the nature and application of national self-determination than it was able to resolve.

Borislav Chernev, American University

Section Editors: [Michael Neiberg](#); [Sophie De Schaepdrijver](#)

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