

Version 1.0 | Last updated 16 June 2017

Post-war Military Action and Violence (East Central Europe)

By [Jochen Böhler](#)

The armistices of 1918 officially ended the First World War in Europe, but violence did not cease with the signing of the peace treaties. Fighting continued not only on the periphery, in Archangelsk or Siberia, but also at the very heart of the continent until the early 1920s. The frontiers of Central Europe were fiercely embattled in a civil war between the national armies of the evolving new states. The violence of soldiers and paramilitaries against civilians was omnipresent and often – especially when perpetrated against Jews – lethal.

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INTRODUCTION

From a Western perspective, the year 1918 might appear as a watershed between war and peace. In reality, it was not. The armistices and the ensuing [peace treaties signed in Paris](#) only nominally put an end to the preceding years of carnage. This illusion failed to deceive contemporaries living in parts of Europe who suffered severe consequences of the war – famine, epidemics, enormous human losses, and homelessness – and where the fighting still continued. “*Hoc modo post magnum bellum mundanum exorta nova bella nationum*” (“Thus after the Great War arises a new war of nations”), noted the anonymous author of a chronicle of the Jesuit monastery and seminary in Khyriv (Eastern Galicia) at the turn of 1918/19.^[1]

How is it possible that a prolonged war reaching far into peacetime has almost completely vanished from our memory? One answer is the cultural, political, and linguistic line that has divided eastern and western memoryscapes during the 20th century. For many years, the [Eastern Front](#) of the First World War was utterly neglected by Western [historiography](#). With the notable exceptions of Norman Stone's and Norman Davies' monographs published in the mid-1970s, there were literally no descriptions available to scholars not in command of Russian or other Eastern European languages, and very little even in those languages.^[2] Within the Warsaw Pact, the [Russian Revolutions](#) of 1917 and the Bolshevik seizure of power in the turmoil of the [Russian Civil War](#) dominated the picture.^[3] This trend was only reversed with Vejas Liulevičius' description of German rule from 1915-1918 in the Baltics.^[4] The centenary of the war's outbreak initiated many more excellent studies on the battlefields far east of [Verdun](#) and the [Somme](#) from the perspective of the major belligerents.^[5] But what we still lack today is a comprehensive description of the wars and armed conflicts waged by the states that evolved between [Russia](#) and [Germany](#) in the wake of the Great War.

Such a description will have to challenge already existing master narratives of established peace or ongoing [revolution](#). The West-centered view has marked 1918 as the end of the global conflict, although fighting in Central Europe did not cease completely until as late as 1923. Experts on Russia for their part have tended to interpret the period between 1917 and 1921 – or even before and after – as the era of the Russian civil wars.^[6] While they illuminate the making of the European postwar order on the one hand, and of the Soviet Union on the other, at the same time they tend to downplay or even ignore the actual fight of the people of Central Europe for [independence](#). The notion of a war after the war between 1918 and 1921, fought by the people living between Germany and Russia, reveals historical settings that were certainly influenced, but not dominated by the peace talks in Paris and the civil war in Russia.^[7] Since Lithuanians, Poles, Ukrainians and, to a certain degree, Belarusians fought sometimes side by side, sometimes on different sides of the front, it seems appropriate to see these wars and armed conflicts rather as part of one Central European Civil War with changing fronts and coalitions than a mere agglomeration of singled-out wars of independence.

Thus, a description of the Central European Civil War can build to a certain extent on national sagas of the scramble for independence in Central Europe after 1918, but it will need to integrate and rewrite

them. Although those narratives were never homogenous and changed with the varied governments of the 20th century in this most contested area of the continent, they usually describe the after-battles of the First World War through a national lens. In doing so, they almost entirely ignore the perspective from the other side of the trenches, let alone of third parties that – voluntarily or not – got caught up in the struggle, and of the civil population, which continued to suffer enormously in times that were officially called a period of peace.

Changing Coalitions and War Aims

The Great War

The major undercurrent of postwar turmoil was the change from imperial to postwar order, not initiated, but propelled by the Great War.^[8] The outgoing 19th century marked the strengthening of national movements all over Central Europe, with Galicia as a hotspot, where the Polish speaking part of the population enjoyed extensive autonomy within the Habsburg monarchy. Nevertheless, armed struggle as the means to achieve independence was widely accepted amongst Polish nationalists and led to the formation of paramilitary organizations which after the outbreak of the war formed the nucleus of Polish military formations within the Habsburg army, the so called “Polish Legions”. Since the downfall of all three land empires during the war seemed highly improbable in 1914, Polish war aims initially were limited to independence within the monarchy following the Hungarian example. The German and Austrian occupation of former “Congress Poland” – the Russian partition zone of the Polish Commonwealth that had been dissolved at the end of the 18th century – and the [Baltics](#) was characterized by a process of constant negotiation with rather than oppression of and resistance on the part of the local population.

The Race for National Independence

In 1917/18 the Russian Revolutions and the [Central Powers’ defeat](#) ended [imperial](#) reign in the East and West and started the race for national independence between the heirs of the empires. However, there was still room for alternatives. [Józef Piłsudski \(1867-1935\)](#) for example, the Polish commander-in-chief and head of state, for some time pursued the goal of building a federation under Polish rule with the participation of Lithuanians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians.^[9] The period of 1918-1921 witnessed the birth of the Central European postwar order, with ever changing coalitions: Poles and Ukrainians fought against each other in the [Polish-Ukrainian Conflict](#) in 1918/19 and side by side against the Red Army in 1920/21. Analogously, Lithuanians fought with and against the Poles on the one hand and the Red Army on the other during their struggle for independence. As was the case in Southeastern Europe, the Central European postwar state system was not a given at the outset, but arose as the result of a civil war of the evolving nations.

A War of Decolonization

The First World War had overseen the emancipation of the people of Eastern and Central Europe from imperial rule. [Historians](#) have divided this process into four phases of decolonization: 1. “Imperial challenge”: when socio-political movements, such as the Bolsheviks or [nationalists](#), emerge and question the legitimacy of the empire; 2. “State failure”: when, in times of crisis, the old order crumbles and cannot guarantee the functioning of the state; 3. “Social disaster” as an immediate result of phase 3; and 4. “State building”: when new elites engage in establishing their own polity.^[10] Phase 4, the struggle with or against competing nations, was one major factor during the Central European Civil War, which, as we have seen, often blurred the frontlines and led to quite unlikely coalitions. The other major factor, which in a way united all warring parties east of Russia, was their struggle against the establishment of Bolshevik regimes in their future state territory. The revolutionary virus did not spread among the Central European nations. After the Battle of the Vistula in summer 1920, the Red Army had to retreat far behind its westernmost front line and would not return for twenty years. Simultaneously, the Slavic and Baltic people of Central Europe fought any persistence of German rule in their region. In this regard, although the governments in St. Petersburg/Moscow and Berlin had changed in the meantime, the Central European Civil War of 1918-1921 was also a war of decolonization against Russian and German imperial rule. It was distinct from but also mirrored features of the Russian Civil War that raged further to the East and other violent European settings of the time, for example the Irish War of Independence. It can be argued that another fifth phase can be added to the model where the de-colonized heirs of the vanished empires used practices of colonial rule themselves to control and subdue their ethno-national rivals, a kind of “recolonization”. The most distinctive feature of this phase was the application of arbitrary [paramilitary violence](#).

Violence against Civilians beyond the Battlefields

Whereas the Great War by and large was fought conventionally and did not feature large-scale [atrocities](#) against civilians, the period between 1917 and 1921 in contrast witnessed a wave of paramilitary violence all over the European continent.^[11] The First World War had begun as a classic diplomatic crisis leading to armed conflict, waged according to the conventions of [modern warfare](#) which limited violence to the clearly defined groups of combatants. But in its wake, as the old European land empires were busy fighting each other, modern ideas of social equality and national independence entered the scene from backstage, and would take over the script when the imperial actors were exiting the stage. Both ideologies were not mutually exclusive: many Polish socialists embraced the idea of national independence. But, they introduced criteria of inclusion and exclusion which gave their struggle for dominance a dangerous totalitarian turn: the ethnic definition of the nation rendered all ethnic aliens on future state territory potential enemies; the social definition of the working class as the state’s sovereign declared wealthy citizens and members of the former imperial elites as “bourgeois” or “counterrevolutionary”. The various national and the Bolshevik – as well as the anti-Bolshevik – definitions of the ideological enemy did not limit potential violence to the specific military targets or servicemen: now women, children, and the elderly were directly endangered.

Subsequently, they often also fell victim to the wave of paramilitary violence after the Great War.

Given the prevalence of ideological frontlines in postwar Europe, this phenomenon was far from limited to our geographical area of interest. The impact of modernity, on the other hand, with its technical innovations facilitating the deportation of large groups of people were felt not so much in Central Europe, but rather to the Southeast in the course and aftermath of the Greco-Turkish War (1920-1922).

Anti-Jewish Pogroms

The group that suffered the biggest losses of life through physical violence and was persecuted by literally all participants of the Central European and the Russian Civil War: Eastern European Jews. Already in early 1915, the Russian Army had introduced large-scale [anti-Semitic](#) violence to the region. The years of 1918 and 1919 then marked the high point of pogroms especially in Ukraine, where over 100,000 Jews were killed by members of the White or Red or Peasant Armies, which roamed the country, oblivious to the western world, although at least the Red Army officially condemned anti-Jewish violence. In contrast, some Polish pogroms which resulted in the death of several hundreds of Jews in Eastern [Poland](#) in the wake of the [Polish-Soviet War](#) in 1919 were reported by Western correspondents and led to heated debates in the United States and Paris about the “maturity” of the nascent Polish nation and to the establishment of foreign investigative commissions such as the most famous one headed by Henry Morgenthau (1891-1967).^[12] Apart from the lethal violence that Jews were exposed to in the eastern borderlands of the young Polish Second Republic, the harassment and abuse of orthodox Jews in trains and public places by Polish soldiers, often assisted by Polish civilians, was a common sight and a cause of constant annoyance, occupying the Polish parliament for years.

Three main motives for the anti-Jewish violence peaking in [Ukraine](#) and eastern Poland can be discerned: first, Jews were regarded as accomplices of the Bolshevik revolution. The overwhelming masses of Eastern European Jews – who traditionally were either small traders or licensed innkeepers rather than peasants in the countryside and advocates or doctors instead of workers in the cities – themselves became victims by the upheavals of communism. But a few leading figures in prominent positions of the Bolshevik party and security apparatus – such as Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) – were regarded as Jews, although they themselves would have either vehemently rejected or ignored this notion. This made Jews in general a welcome scapegoat for the populations who had endured devastations and deprivations for years. Furthermore, strong Jewish organizations, such as the influential socialist workers’ organization (the “Bund”) or the smaller Zionist groups, propagated internationalism or a Jewish homestead in Palestine rather than participation in a Polish nation state, thus involuntarily marking Polish Jews in general as enemies of the national project in their Christian neighbors’ eyes. Last but not least, pogroms, once initiated, often provided a welcome opportunity for ill-equipped soldiers and impoverished townspeople to enrich themselves and at the same time to indulge their lowest instincts. Pogroms were often accompanied by primitive acts of desecration and

sexual violence. Obviously, the years of war and civil war had brutalized not only many soldiers, but also parts of the civilian population.^[13]

Everyday Atrocities in Eastern Poland

Not only Jews fell victim to marauding Polish soldiers at the sidelines of the Central European Civil War. The contact zone between Russia and Poland, whose southern part was affected by the Polish-Ukrainian conflict, was an overall ethnic and culturally-mixed space. In the northeast Lithuanians and Belarusians prevailed, in the south Ukrainians; Poles and Jews lived everywhere. Christianity – Orthodox or Roman Catholic – and Judaism were the three predominant traditional religious orientations. After the withdrawal of the troops of the German *Oberost* in 1918/19, the new Polish government installed a civilian administration in order not to upset the non-Polish ethnic groups from the very start. However, when the Polish-Soviet conflict 1919 mutated into an undeclared war, the increasing presence of Polish armed forces started to weigh heavily on the local population. Non-Polish schools were closed, unpaid labor services demanded, the infrastructure was dismantled. Cases of looting and other abuses made the Polish administration and armed forces more anathema than the previous regimes of Germans and Bolsheviks. The security situation in the area was so tense that at times martial law was imposed by the military authorities.^[14] Although members of other ethnic groups sometimes complained about the alleged preferential treatment of Jews in trade, pogrom-like attacks against local Jews were reported repeatedly.^[15]

The abuse of non-Jewish residents of eastern Poland apparently was differently motivated than the pogroms. In the dawn of independence, Polish soldiers were struggling with issues that directly influenced their behavior beyond the battlefields: they usually were not only ill-equipped, but also untrained, and often waited in vain for their pay or support for their families. The wave of violence that spilled over the region ranged from unauthorized requisitions to armed robbery and *rape*, but unlike the pogroms, it rarely resulted in the immediate death of the victims. The dichotomy of violence in this case apparently consisted merely in the antagonism of armed soldiers and unarmed civilians, regardless of their religion. Violence was equally targeted against the Orthodox, Catholics, and Jews. To themselves the perpetrators might have justified their actions by stating that they simply “took from the land” what the state they were fighting for owed them. But the state itself fought back: the attacks were taken as very serious breaches of discipline within the Polish army, and the wave of violence subsequently produced a wave of court-martial proceedings.^[16]

The White Militias in Hungary

Contrary to the large majority of rather apolitical war veterans, highly politicized entities like the counterrevolutionary militias, especially of Germany, Austria, and Hungary, tended to create transnational milieus of violence. Having fought together in the First World War, they saw the struggle against Bolshevism as a mere continuation of this coalition. Experiencing the trauma of revolution after a lost war in which many of them had actively taken part, they built up ultra-violent

environments that served two purposes: to prove themselves in battle and to revenge and eventually overcome the despised “Red Terror”.

In Hungary, after the defeat of the Bolsheviks under Béla Kun (1886-1938), the paramilitary White militias perpetrated acts of atrocities against civilians, with Hungarian Jews as the main, but not the only victims: working class activists and radical peasants were on their persecution lists as well. But whereas non-Jewish victims usually would be robbed and maltreated, but not murdered, the number of casualties amongst the Hungarian Jewish community in Transdanubia alone amounted to 3,000 in 1922.^[17]

Although the militia’s target groups were summarily taken for Bolsheviks or at least their sympathizers, violence was not motivated exclusively by anti-Semitism or ideology. Much more, in times of chaos and shortage, acts of arbitrary violence would establish authority and power, and provide for a welcome source of income. Furthermore, for the Hungarian paramilitaries, violence had not only a destructive, but also a constructive side: building up a brutalized form of group identity, and demonstratively separating the perpetrators from the “civilized” part of society. In the end, it was rather their anarchic attitude than the heinous character of their crimes which in the early 1920s triggered a resolute reaction of the new authoritarian state’s forces under Miklós Horthy (1868-1957), which finally led to the defeat of the militia movement in the Kingdom of Hungary.^[18]

Conclusion

For a long time neglected by historiography, a Central European Civil War raged from 1918 to 1921 between a Germany defeated by war and a Russia defeated by revolution. This conflict shaped the frontiers and later foreign policies of the East-Central European states which in the interwar period functioned as ‘buffer states’ between the Soviet Union and the West. The geographical shape and ethnic composition of those nation states was not predetermined from the start, but fought out in the course of this civil war. Far from being a case apart, the Central European theatre of civil war bore striking similarities to other embattled regions of postwar Europe, like Ireland, Italy, or Yugoslavia, the main common feature being forms of paramilitary violence and banditry which had been almost absent on and beyond the battlefields of the Great War. The anti-Jewish pogroms in Ukraine and Poland were a shared feature of the Central European and the Russian Civil War, specific to the whole region with its high percentage of Jewish population on the one hand and its highly ideologized struggle between the Whites and Reds on the other, with revolutionary Hungary being the extreme case.

Instead of strengthening solidarity between the newcomer states, the fierce after-battles of 1918-1921 poisoned their relations for the next two decades and thus significantly contributed to their isolation and radicalization in the 1930s and dismantling by or submission to Nazi or Soviet rule in the course of the Second World War.^[19] This is not the least reason why we are well advised to see the armed struggles in Central Europe between 1918 and 1921 as a distinct phenomenon instead of

taking it for an odd annex to the Russian Civil War, or simply ignoring it.

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Notes

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Citation

Böhler, Jochen: Post-war Military Action and Violence (East Central Europe) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2017-06-16. **DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11111**.

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