

# Post-war Societies (East Central Europe)

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**Although in late 1918 countries of East Central Europe had different forms of government and military situations, they all faced similar social problems. First, the wartime ethnicization reached its peak during the phase of imperial collapse in Russia and Austria-Hungary. Second, social conflict intensified, taking increasingly violent forms. Consequently, the newly created states were confronted with a massive deficit of legitimacy. Instability lasted until the early 1920s.**

## Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Violence and Disorder](#)
- [3 Ethnic Conflicts](#)
  - [3.1 Fear as a Factor?](#)
- [4 Social Conflicts](#)
  - [4.1 Rural versus Urban](#)
  - [4.2 Workers versus State](#)
- [5 Tactics of the States](#)
  - [5.1 Decomposition](#)
  - [5.2 Legitimacy Deficit](#)
  - [5.3 Consolidation?](#)
- [6 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

## Introduction

In the last months of the war three major forms of government directly influenced public and private life in East Central Europe. Most of the Habsburg territories belonged to the category of the *hinterland* and never experienced direct fighting. In the eastern part of the [empire](#), the German and Austro-Hungarian military exploited [raw materials](#) and [food](#). The [Polish Kingdom](#) and the [Baltic provinces](#) represented an awkward mix of direct [occupation](#), participation of the local elites and political activism of the local German population aiming at incorporating new territories into the *Reich*. The defeat of the Central Powers created a power vacuum filled by a variety of political projects and [paramilitary](#) groups. In general, armed conflict between (predominantly) ethnically defined enemies marked the transition from wartime to the post-war years. However, in the former *hinterland* social upheaval, rather than ethnic strife, endangered states' survival. Although the region's territorial shape was to be decided in [Paris](#), with all major local actors officially (Czechoslovakia, Poland) or unofficially ([Ukraine](#), Hungary) accompanying the victorious powers' negotiations, local conflicts were decisive for the coherence of the new states.

## Violence and Disorder

Post-war East Central Europe was plagued by epidemic diseases, undernourishment, massive local unemployment as well as an acute housing and transportation crisis. Yet the common denominator of the region's political reconstruction was [violence](#).

Consequently, violence plays a crucial role in recent [historiography](#) on this topic.<sup>[1]</sup> The blurred border between regular and irregular fighting in the post-war conflicts facilitated repressions of the civilian population. For example, in the [Polish-Ukrainian war in Galicia](#) brutality towards peasants was the norm, while coercing conscripts was achieved mostly with the help of the whip. Locally, civilians accused of irregular fighting were executed. Ethnicity proved to be decisive in respect to the repressions that ranged from executions (i.e. in Ukraine, [Belarus](#) and Poland) to economic blackmail (as in the case of the Czech coalmine owners in Moravian Silesia forcing their Polish national employees to participate in pro-Czechoslovak manifestations).<sup>[2]</sup> In many cases, the [Jewish population](#) was accused of supporting one side of the conflict and "betraying" the other, giving an excuse for revenge - the most well-known being the pogrom in [Lemberg](#) (Lwów/L'viv) in November 1918.<sup>[3]</sup> East Ukraine became a field of multilateral fighting, generating a particularly destructive type of anarchic warlordism accompanied by large-scale [anti-Jewish violence](#).<sup>[4]</sup> Extensive and chaotic violence accompanied [independence wars in Estonia and Latvia](#) as much as it did the short [civil war in Finland](#) and the [Polish-Soviet conflict](#). These multilateral conflicts gave birth to combatants' "imagined communities" transmitting militant codes of conduct into the politics of East Central Europe in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>[5]</sup>

In addition to war-related violence, East Central Europe experienced mass movements of former [Russian](#), [Austro-Hungarian](#) and [German](#) prisoners of war (POWs). Some suffered abuse at the hands of locals, others joined the so-called "green cadres" formed by deserters, draft evaders and – mostly in Ukraine and Belarus – local peasants opposing food requisitioning. Parallel to these treks, an evacuation of the German armed forces generated tension with local authorities that culminated in armed clashes in Grodno and other places. Some of the German soldiers chose to stay in the region, taking part in anti-Bolshevik wars in the Baltic states but ultimately fighting against independent Latvia and Estonia – and temporarily succeeding in installing a pro-Baltic German Latvian government of [Andrievs Niedra \(1871-1942\)](#) in spring 1919.<sup>[6]</sup> Particular formations and units – the *Freikorps* White Russians, or [Stanisław Bułak-Bałachowicz's \(1883-1940\)](#) army in Belarus – were widely known for their brutality.

Many other aspects of public and private life were also prone to brutalisation. [Maureen Healy](#) discovered that increased violence against women was connected to Austrian veterans' frustrations.<sup>[7]</sup> The experience of [refugees](#) from Galicia and [Russia's western provinces](#) included both physical and symbolic violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors.<sup>[8]</sup> Even seemingly non-political matters turned into areas of potential conflict. Travelling by train in Poland and [Romania](#) proved to be temporarily impossible due to frequent striking. Also, railway transport was locally dangerous, notably to Jewish travellers. Beatings and cutting beards – perpetrated mostly by conscripts – happened on a daily basis.

## Ethnic Conflicts

The war, and particularly occupation (experienced in East Central Europe much longer and on larger territories than in western Europe), deepened rifts between [ethnic groups](#). Although they faced the same misery, the diverse nationalities in East Central Europe did not develop a shared feeling of solidarity. After 1915 it was no longer possible to lead a common charity work for all ethnic and cultural groups in [Russia](#). In face of the imperial administration's impotence almost all such activities were taken over by ethnically defined political groupings which concerned mostly their compatriots.<sup>[9]</sup> Notably, Jewish charities tended to separate from the Christian organizations to secure fair distribution of goods to the Jews. The situation in other parts of the region differed in details, but the general pattern was the same. In 1917 and 1918, Prague and Vienna saw growing discontent with the prolonged presence of so-called Galician refugees, who were mostly Jewish. Expelling them back to their home countries (in summer 1915 Eastern Galicia returned to Habsburg control) was a popular postulate and they were locally harassed or discriminated against. In some cases, as in Prague, they were temporarily forbidden to use public transport.<sup>[10]</sup> Reluctance of [East Central European governments](#) to accept refugees coming back from Russia (and not belonging to the nation-state) illustrates the lasting impact of ethnicization deep into the 1920s. Simultaneously it demonstrates the emptiness of the anti-Bolshevik slogans used in the 1920s in order to deliberately select between welcome and unwelcome migrants.

### Fear as a Factor?

The insecurity of the post-war period is sometimes linked to the general feeling of fear. According to Marcin Zaremba, between 1918 and the early 1920s the Polish population in particular was driven into anti-Jewish violence because of fear of the Bolsheviks. The state, the Catholic Church and political parties instrumentalized this anxiety.<sup>[11]</sup> But while fear surely was a factor, it does not sufficiently explain why violence tended to be so unevenly distributed, aimed primarily at Jews. Neither does it help to understand the surprisingly broad range of opportunistic collaboration between representatives of enemy camps. This was the case with the Bolsheviks during their short-lived occupations of Eastern Poland in 1919 and 1920. Interestingly, right-wing local politicians strived for participation in the Sovietized administration, successfully competing with Polish and Jewish socialists in places such as Wilna. In any case, political calculations seem to have played a more decisive role than emotions.

Such phenomena suggest that the prevailing post-war attitudes in the region should not be explained in terms of the extraordinary or abnormal. Contrary to the old imperial structures, which had been interested in the stability of their realm, the new ones occasionally fueled interethnic conflicts to gain popular support or, as in the case of Polish-Ukrainian conflicts, to consolidate their ethnic basis. This was the case even in relatively peaceful Czechoslovakia, where Hungarian and German workers' protests in February and March 1919 met with a brutal reaction of the Czechoslovak army, creating the first martyrs in the case of Germans from the Sudetenland.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Social Conflicts

Parallel to deepening ethnic divisions, class conflicts intensified. Slogans in the name of the working class enjoyed wider response than before the war whilst conflicts between employees and employers intensified and radicalized. In East Central Europe this phenomenon acquired an impressive scale, particularly so when it interfered with ethnic conflicts.

### Rural versus Urban

The early form of this conflict already manifested itself under the Russian occupation of Habsburg Galicia in 1914 and 1915. Mid-size cities experienced a rapid advance of the lower strata while peasantry profited from the Russian policy of redistributing goods and prestige.<sup>[13]</sup> The economic conditions of medium-sized landowners (mostly wealthy peasants) improved in an unprecedented fashion. The first Czechoslovak finance minister interpreted this as an illustration of the deepness of the country's crisis: "The peasant women bought or bartered trousseaux for their daughters during the war; in many peasant cottages not only one but two pianos were to be found."<sup>[14]</sup>

In the Habsburg Empire and its successor states food distribution in the cities steadily worsened. The rise in prices seemed to automatically push wealthy peasants up in the social hierarchy. Gyula Illyés (1902-1983), who moved to Budapest in late 1916, recalled:

...the townspeople were standing outside the rural garden gates like dogs waiting for a piece of lard. They were begging for bacon, eggs or a pocketful of flour carrying the tailcoat of the father of the family, a Persian rug, a kitchen-stool under their arms. They offered everything they could bring from their homes in exchange.<sup>[15]</sup>

On the other side, peasants fell victim to requisitioning by various state and militant organizations and forced conscription.<sup>[16]</sup> From 1918 onwards, massive campaigning throughout the region aimed at bridging the gap between urban and rural dwellers by appealing to moral and national values.<sup>[17]</sup>

The conflict between the rural and urban populations took the most drastic form in Ukraine, with peasant-formed partisan units regularly looting cities. As shown by Felix Schnell, even partisan units that opposed the Bolsheviks appropriated revolutionary slogans promoting anti-bourgeois violence. In Ukraine, Belarus, eastern Poland and Hungary this conflict coincided with militant anti-Semitism. Typically, the marketplace was the birthplace of a pogrom in 1919 or 1920, but there are also some reports of local towns being surrounded for days by armed peasants ready to attack and loot.<sup>[18]</sup> Hence, at least in some cases a sort of rules of conduct and a particular strategy in the war between the village and town seem to have developed during the war.

### Workers versus State

In addition to the complicated relations between townspeople and the rural population, the period after 1917 was characterized

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by the growing wave of [strikes](#) and hunger riots in the cities. The heavily industrialized Czech lands saw the largest workers' protest in the military Škoda plant in Pilsen in summer 1917. A characteristic trait of the strike at Škoda seems to have been its largely interethnic character. A multiethnic mass of workers, many of them women, succeeded in pushing through their decisively non-[nationalist](#) slogans.<sup>[19]</sup>

Throughout East Central European industrial hubs, in 1918-1919 a period of internationalism within the workers' movements represented a strong countertrend to the overwhelming ethnicization. In addition to economic shortages, news of the [Russian revolutions](#) as well as some returnees from Russia stimulated popular radicalism. Such popular sentiments were echoed by the public statements of left-wing politicians. On 13 November 1918 [Ignacy Daszyński \(1866-1936\)](#), prime minister of the Polish Republic, spoke to the inhabitants of Warsaw: "They want to push us into the war with Bolsheviks, but we won't let them do this. The Bolsheviks did the right thing in Russian and we will do the right thing in Poland."<sup>[20]</sup>

In Poland, the 1920 Bolshevik invasion was instrumental in undermining this strand of politics, whereas in Hungary it was marginalized by the "white terror" that accompanied the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. In Hungary and Latvia the appeal to revolution lost legitimacy due to the "red terror."<sup>[21]</sup> Needless to add, all industrial hubs in the region were plagued by waves of strikes both before and after 1918. The reaction of the state and that of industrialists was, typically, to agree on economic postulates of the strike. Wage rises contributed greatly to fueling hyperinflation. This led to a sharp increase of salaries and prices, which in turn reduced the value of the currencies and led to further strikes.

## Tactics of the States

Even though they were pushing in opposite directions, both right and left radicalization (or ethnicization and class conflict) led to a similar end. The war and post-war period increased the fragmentation of societies. Peasants, workers and townspeople were as divided in their attitudes and interests as were various ethnic groups. Cohesion had been sustained as long as it was secured by the organized power and prestige of a supranational empire. Yet, as early as 1917, this element started to lose its influence on East Central Europe. Massive Polish protests against the [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#) in February 1918 represent one of the early examples of cutting ties between the empire and one of the ethnic groups. The navy riot in Boka Kotorska and the Bulgarian soldiers' refusal to fight in September 1918 are further examples of a soldiers' strike, akin to the dissolution of the Russian front in summer 1917. [Germany](#) seemed to be the only former power capable of maintaining control over its territory up to the end of the war.

## Decomposition

Empires were gradually (as in Russia) or rapidly (as in Austria-Hungary) replaced by [national movements](#). They formed the basis on which new state structures emerged. For many political actors this was the fulfilment of a long-dreamed utopia and an immediate effect of their wartime diplomatic and propagandistic efforts. Consequently high were their expectations towards the new statehood. Yet in many places the resistance to the new state was powerful, if not coordinated. Reports on local developments (1918 to 1920) show that many parts of East Central Europe were reluctant to accept any real existing state power. Local power centers challenged existing borders, reclaiming them for a different national state, as in the case of the short-lived "Hutsul Republic" in what was then the northeast corner of Hungary.<sup>[22]</sup> Also, there were many examples of "demoralized districts" in the ethnic "interior" typically controlled by armed locals. In the most drastic form, armed peasants simply fought back attempts to introduce police controls. Much more common was a refusal to pay taxes and organized looting of state goods. Some elements of the conflict between urban and rural populations can also be interpreted as anti-state resistance by the peasantry. Privatization of violence, especially in Ukraine, greatly contributed to the escalation of these conflicts. On a large scale such an insubordination could spread to the whole province, as in the case of Romanian-occupied Bessarabia.<sup>[23]</sup>

When looking at this process from the perspective of the war-weary population, some reasons for resistance towards the new state become apparent. Everyday experience of the war forced peasants to organize in self-defense. Fighting by organized peasants in villages was common, especially after 1918, when masses of former POWs marched home. The new states were not always able to protect larger territories from various kinds of organized violence. At least some of the militant groups categorized as anti-state organizations were in fact – at least in their beginnings – fulfilling the state's duty of defense and order.

## Legitimacy Deficit

The weakest spot of the new governments was their legitimacy deficit. Winning the support of the rural population proved to be particularly difficult. The lack thereof manifested itself in the disappointing numbers of peasant volunteers to the national armies. Moreover, whenever an ethnically mixed territory came under new control, state structures were no longer perceived in pre-war categories. Instead, they were now re-defined along ethnic or class-related lines, i.e. as representing only one of the local ethnic or social groups. In many cases this was not an unjustified observation. Firstly, switching from one form of government to another was typically accompanied by the looting of at least some segments of the local population. Secondly, even beneficiaries of the new regime recognized its ethnic bias as an evident fact. Locally armed groups became semi-official representatives of the state power. In 1919, the Romanian government authorized loosely formed armed groups intervening in their interest in Dobruja. Similar actions were taken by Serbs in Banat, Bulgarians in Macedonia, and Poles and Germans in Silesia. Neither the ethnic minority nor the majority could thus perceive the new state as a guarantee of political stability.

Correspondingly, the lines between the new state order and disorder were often blurred. Another variety of this phenomenon on a lower level was the privatization of state apparatus, typically turning gendarmes or policemen into partially authorized bandits. Moreover, even within the same ethnic group various elements of the administrative apparatus might turn into representatives of specific local or class-related interests. This was the case in the Polish lands where many policy units refused to intervene against representatives of their social group or local community.

Logically, fond memories of the old regime were widespread, notably among the non-dominant ethnic groups. Some Austrian or Russian officials kept their posts or returned to them after a short break. Sometimes, as in the Baltic provinces, there were no other options than to integrate the former ethnically German state officials into the service of the new state. In some cases even such non-ethnic local powers as the Bolsheviks or the withdrawing German units could symbolize impartial rule of justice to the rural population in ethnic borderlands (of which Belarus seems to be the foremost example).

## Consolidation?

Despite initial nationalist fervor the old administrative elites were integrated into the new structures, at least temporarily. The early attempts to replace them with new, nationally credible cadres often failed due to insufficient expertise.<sup>[24]</sup> This even applied to the communist regime. The Bolsheviks in Russia and Hungary were forced to recruit former officers and common soldiers from the imperial armies. In their case, even the collectivization of agriculture was based on big and medium-sized landowners losing their property to the state but remaining in place as state-approved managers.<sup>[25]</sup>

The other strategy was to ride the wave of popular discontent or, to put it differently, to side with the stronger. In East Central Europe this strategy manifested itself in the harsh treatment of ethnic minorities. The Czechoslovak army and police intervened more brutally against German workers in March 1919 than they had against a predominantly Czech mob looting Jewish and German shops in Prague and Brno a few weeks earlier, or in Budějovice and many other places a few months thereafter.<sup>[26]</sup>

Particularly important long-term manifestations of this strategy were the region's agrarian reforms. It is telling that these reforms took the most radical turn precisely in countries like Estonia or the short-lived Ukrainian Republic where the landowner class was composed primarily of a different ethnicity than the majority of the rural population. In such cases agrarian reform seems to have aimed not only at a change in property structure (or as in Estonia, at a long-term plan to create a state-supporting middle rural class of Estonian nationality) but also at reducing the economic power of the minority and winning support of the rural population who benefited from the land redistribution.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Conclusion

Whatever strategy was chosen, the new states remained on the verge of losing popular support. In fact, there were many state projects in East Central Europe that never really materialized or that remained ephemeral. Naturally, international recognition was crucial to their stability, but so was the broad support of the population. Typically, in the post-war period chaos states and would-be states at least temporarily identified themselves with a particular social or ethnic group, showing a rather hostile face to all other ones. The Hungarian Soviet Republic represents one extreme option based on the unstable support of the industrial proletariat; the Ukrainian Hetmanate could be seen as the other extreme of the regime, representing mostly great landowners.

The narrowness of their respective social basis was one of the reasons for their collapse. But none of the new states of East Central Europe were able to avoid alienating particular social or ethnic groups; simultaneously, they failed to monopolize violence in their territories.

Given the ethnic structure of East Central Europe, with rump Hungary probably the closest to ethnic homogeneity, yet divided by the memory of the red and white terror, the indispensable condition of a halfway successful government was to get as close as possible to impartiality and stability. This was only partially achieved, leaving an immense potential for discontent. Thus, the consolidation of power in East Central Europe should not be primarily seen as an accomplishment of previously designed and consequently carried out state-building projects. Neither did this process constitute a climax of the struggle for fatherland, as has been asserted by the nationalist historiographies all over East Central Europe. Rather, the new states benefited from the local populations' weariness with the political chaos.<sup>[28]</sup> A universal longing for a functioning state, for law and order, seems to have been an offer for anybody capable of pacifying the region, irrespective of the regime's ethnic or political character. Seen from below rather than from the centre, the establishment of post-war East Central Europe thus resembles a ceasefire in the war of all against all, not a final victory.

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