
The well-known Polish historians W. Borodziej and M. Górny recently published an astounding history of the Great War in English. The original book came out in Polish as *Nasza wojna. Tom 1. Imperia 1912–1916* in 2014. This is a rare case of a study on the Great War by East European historians being translated for a larger international audience. Yet it fully deserves translation, for a simple reason: the volume is a massive transnational history of the war that covers the vast East and Central European region (including the Balkans and the Baltics). It obviously fills a still-existing lacuna in studies on the war in the east. However, its main strength is its transnational and often comparative approach to the conflict that crossed all imperial and national borders.

As the authors note, it is not a traditional military history, although the first part of the volume follows chronologically the story of major war campaigns, battles and sieges. The book is more a socio-cultural study of the impact of the war on societies. The focus is on ‘processes and peoples’ attitudes’ (7). The most original and valuable is the second part, devoted to the war experiences of soldiers, and especially civilians (both in hinterlands and in occupied lands). This part covers the impact of military regimes on everyday life: from regulations on political, economic and social activities, war propaganda, shifts in loyalties, plans for colonisation or integration into imperial realms, to food supplies, hunger, epidemics, hygiene and prostitution.

The authors state plainly their lack of interest in the history of international relations with regard to the Great War (8). Instead, they are interested in saving the ‘wartime memory’ from the falsifications of self-oriented, nationalist and patriotic accounts of the war, and traditional theories of the causes of the war. In their view, ‘none of these theories has stood the test of criticism. None has even attempted to explain the relationship between the origins of the war and its course, because no such relationship exists’ (8). By preference, they focus on how civilians and soldiers survived the war, and how their survival efforts changed
the course of the war. In a certain sense, this is their attempt to recover the Great War for ordinary people, not only specialists and politicians. As they say, ‘it was our war,’ referring to the societies of contemporary Eastern and Central Europe (5).

This focus determined the choice of sources: they dip deeply into diaries, memoirs and witness accounts of participants in the war, from high-ranking officers to merchants and peasants. It makes their narrative vivid, emotional, full of witness quotes and personal stories. The style is highly readable and engaging. Only occasionally is one struck by the shortage of references to official sources and works by other authors that covered similar topics.

This is a multi-layered study that offers many original insights into the behaviour of the occupiers and the occupied. However, the main purpose of the book is ‘to remind the reader, whether in Cracow, Riga, Sofia, or Zagreb, of the common traumatic experience that established a region stretching between the Baltic, the Adriatic, and the Black Sea’ (8). This kind of argument surely resonates with the long historiographic tradition that sees the period of the Great War as the prelude or the background to the even more traumatic epoch of the Second World War.

Yet the authors engage in the debate with this interpretation by claiming that ‘the German and Austro-Hungarian presence in the East, aside from its nationalist, imperialist, and racist elements, also had a liberal component’ (348). This consisted of the revival of cultural and political life among the non-Russian nations of the Romanov empire, the scientific investigation of conquered territories, and the promotion of education and hygiene among the occupied populations. Thus, they show that at least some of the German policies in East Central Europe during the First World War were of quite a different nature than during the Second World War.

The authors admit that they are primarily interested in the Habsburg monarchy (9). Interestingly, they start the volume with coverage of the Balkan wars (1912–1913). They suggest that the traumatic experience of the Balkan populations preceded the First World War, and ‘the Balkan wars were indeed conflicts of the same type as the Great War’ (56). Violence, deprivation and social disorder had a cumulative effect in the region that was carried into the period 1914 to 1916. Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania are covered in greater detail, alongside Poland (especially Galicia), than the rest of Eastern Europe. This approach to the origins of the Great War strongly resonates with the recent works by historians such as Rober Gerwarth, John Horne, Jochen Bohler, Ugor Ungor, and others who treated the Balkan wars as a prelude to the Great War.
For those interested in Lithuanian studies, one could mention that the volume has a number of references to the German policies in the Ober Ost, and the war experiences of the population in Lithuania. It shows, for example, that in Lithuania and East Prussia, pogroms and other forms of violence against civilians were as inseparable an element of the war as in the rest of the East. Robberies, requisitions, banditry, rape, spy mania, displacement, hostage-taking and theft were common practices carried out not only by Russian and German troops but also by civilians against their neighbours. Anti-Jewish violence was almost a universal feature in the Ober Ost, and all over the East. Ethnicisation was a recurring process that took place both in hinterlands and in occupation zones.

Balancing the large-scale picture of military policies in a vast region stretching from the Baltic to the Balkans was indeed a monumental challenge to the authors, with which they have coped quite impressively. Among the less successful examples is their claim that in the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, the Germans solicited the cooperation of local elites (302). This was indeed the case in the former, but only partly in the latter. In the Ober Ost, which was run by the German army, the local elites were pushed out of municipal governments as soon as early 1916. For example, in February 1916, the Vilnius magistrate, which initially included local representatives, was made only an advisory institution to the German city governor (Stadthauptmann). The local elites in Lithuania had less opportunities for passive resistance than their Polish counterparts. Only in September 1917 were the Lithuanian elites allowed to organise themselves into the Lithuanian Council (Taryba).

The authors explain clearly the causes of the food shortages in the hinterlands of the Central Powers in 1916. They suggest that in the occupation zones (for example in Serbia) the populations were better off than in the hinterlands (300-301). Local peasants were the beneficiaries of the food crisis, while the urban populations suffered deprivation. Yet the authors do not sufficiently recognise that, starting from 1916, the Central Powers systematically drained food stocks from zones of occupation such as the Ober Ost, causing starvation in the local cities. In other words, there was a close connection between the food shortages in the hinterlands and the subsequent hunger in the occupied lands; and large sections of occupied populations became victims of this exploitative policy.

These rare imbalances do not diminish the overall quality of the volume. The authors sketch impressively an all-encompassing, comparative,
vivid and colourful panorama of the life of East Central European societies during the Great War. Hopefully, many of the themes that they have covered will open up new research vistas for specialists working on the socio-cultural impact of war. There is no doubt that the volume should belong to the canon of major historical studies of war in the East.

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