

Wielka Wojna poza linią frontu. Redakcja naukowa Daniel GRINBERG, Jan SNOPKO, Grzegorz ZACKIEWICZ. Białystok: Instytut Historii i Nauk Politycznych Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2013. – 396 s. ISBN 978-83-87881-16-0

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About a decade ago, researchers assessing the significance of the First World War to Polish society were writing, and possibly over-generalising, that the war had been 'forgotten'.¹ In 2014, two Polish historians, Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny, in a book devoted to the First World War and published in Warsaw, tried to go beyond this approach, by stating 'It was our war.'² This statement was not just a voice in the wilderness. In fact, it characteristically illustrated the trend in changing an approach to the meaning of the Great War as manifested in most East-Central European countries. The reconsideration of the role of that war, and especially its political, cultural and social impact, is greatly stimulated by the centenary of the events of 1914–1918. Reconsideration acquires different forms. Some countries in the region, such as Croatia, have gone so far as to make political decisions on the formation of special war memorial commissions. In other countries, the anniversary is an occasion for holding scientific conferences. Poland is undoubtedly a country where the trend has also been observed, reflected not merely by the publication of the above-mentioned book, but also by a significant increase in the number of books and scientific events devoted to the Great War. Whether the boost will turn into a qualitative turning point that will change the Poles' concept of the significance of the First World War to their nation and their culture is evidently a question that cannot yet be given an unambiguous answer. One thing is clear: an abundance of different research initiatives relating to the actualisation of the war certainly creates favourable conditions for it.

Initiatives of this kind included three conferences organised by the historians of Białystok University, in 2006, 2008 and 2012, devoted to a discussion of different aspects of the Great War. The first conference, dealing with Polish society's sentiment and views, and their change during the war, focused on 'the maturation of independence'. The second was devoted to the significance of the year 1918 to East-Central

¹ TRABA, Robert. Zapomniana wojna. Wydarzenia 1914–1918 w polskiej i niemieckiej pamięci zbiorowej. In TRABA, Robert. *Kraina tysiąca granic. Szkice o historii i pamięci*. Olsztyn, 2003, s. 155–162; MICK, Christoph. Der vergessene Krieg – Die schwierige Erinnerung an den Ersten Weltkrieg in Osteuropa. In *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918. Ereignis und Erinnerung*. Im Auftrag des Deutschen Historischen Museums hrsg. von Rainer ROTHER. Berlin, 2004, S. 74–81.

² BORODZIEJ, Włodzimierz; GÓRNY, Maciej. *Nasza wojna*. T. I: *Imperia 1912–1916*. Warszawa, 2014, s. 9.

Europe. The third, held in Tykocin in May 2012, was called 'The Great War behind the Front Line'. Three collections of articles were published based on the presentations given in the conferences.³ The present review is essentially devoted to the last one.

In all the above-mentioned conferences, including the second, devoted to the wider East-Central European region, most of the presentations were given by Polish historians, and the research object to a large extent covered different 'Polish' issues in the First World War. The book based on presentations in the third conference was not an exception. Out of 28 articles in the collection, almost all were written by Polish historians, and just a few of them focused on neighbouring regions: East Prussia, Romania, Courland and Lithuania. In this regard, the title of the publication 'The Great War behind the Front Line' was rather vague, and basically just the title in Polish, as well as the fact that all the articles in the collection except for one were in Polish, ought to have shown outsiders that the book dealt exclusively with Polish affairs.

One of the editors of the book, Jan Snopko, deputy director of the Institute of History and Political Sciences at the University of Białystok, writes in the preface that the book is intended to reveal military and political-diplomatic aspects of history in the broadly understood 'rear areas' (p. 9). This statement is too modest by far. Besides aspects of the history of the war, politics and diplomacy, the collection includes a number of articles discussing the situation of civilians, and therefore more attributable to social history. Moreover, some view the war through the prism of cultural history: they deal with images, reception or theatrical activities.

The articles in the collection are divided into seven chapters, which, in compliance with the format of a review, should be introduced. Chapter 1, 'At the Dawn of the Great War', deals with the issue of the general public response to the outbreak of the war, which became especially relevant after the appearance of Jeffrey Verhey's book⁴ in historiography. In this collection of articles, the issue is analysed according to three aspects. Piotr Szlanta presents the response of the active part of Polish society to the outbreak of the war in three different Empires (Habsburg, Hohenzollern and Romanov). Wiesław Bolesław Łach returns to the issue of relations between Russian troops and East Prussian civilians, which, incidentally, was well enough explored in the interwar years. Anna Gawryszczak analyses the outbreak of the war from the perspective of sentiment in the Łódź region. Chapter 2, 'Myths and Reality: The Lands of the Former Commonwealth in 1914–1918', deals mainly with issues relating to the impact of occupation, the situation of civilians, epidemics and charitable

³ Cf. the reviewed book and collections of articles: *Lata Wielkiej Wojny: dojrzwianie do niepodległości 1914–1918*. Red. Daniel GRINBERG, Jan SNOPKO, Grzegorz ZACKIEWICZ. Białystok, 2007; *Rok 1918 w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*. Red. Daniel GRINBERG, Jan SNOPKO, Grzegorz ZACKIEWICZ. Białystok, 2010.

⁴ VERHEY, Jeffrey. *The Spirit of 1914. Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare, 10). Cambridge, 2000.

activities. Five thematically rather different articles are united in the chapter 'Ideas, Politics, and Propaganda'. It is followed by Chapter 4, devoted mainly to the activities of Polish refugees and soldiers in the depths of Russia, and by Chapter 5, presenting the currently rather 'popular' topic of cities in the war. The topic is developed not just through the experience of major cities, such as Warsaw, Krakow or Vilnius, but also of some smaller ones, such as Tarnów and Gorlice, which entered the history of the war through the Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive in 1915. Chapter 6, 'Troops in the Rear Areas', includes articles on the issue of discipline in Polish legions stationed behind the front line, the structure of the German military administration formed in the Łomża military district, and the situation of the Central Powers' prisoners of war who found themselves in Russia after the Bolshevik coup. Finally, another two articles focus on what was called by the editors of the collection 'popular culture'.

In all this diversity, it is easy to notice that most focus not on movements at the front or military action, but rather on the experiences of most of the Polish population 'carried away' from the war. The experiences relate to life behind the front line under wartime conditions. Poland's road to independence, the significance of the year 1918, and the experiences of the rear seem to be three rather purposely selected aspects, which demonstrate the systemic scientific research approach of Białystok historians in seeking, by topics that are most relevant to Poles, to contribute to making the Great War in Poland 'their own'.