

The First World War

The First World War:

Analysis and Interpretation, Volume 1

Edited by

Antonello Biagini and Giovanna Motta

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INTRODUCTION

ANTONELLO BIAGINI AND GIOVANNA MOTTA

The volumes *The First World War: Analysis and Interpretation* are the result of an international conference held at Sapienza University in Rome, on June 19 and 20, 2014, and organized within the PhD program “History of Europe,” which was dedicated to the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War. The two-day meeting, full of ardent discussions and debates, which gathered a significant number of scholars from all parts of the world, was a continuation of the conference “Empires and Nations from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century,” held in June 2013, during which the main objectives were to analyze the interrelations between multinational *empires* and the affirmation of the idea of the *nation*. In 1914, in fact, one hundred years after the Congress of Vienna, which was based on the concept of restoration that had to avoid the “dangerous” ideological, political, and social mechanisms placed by the French Revolution and spread by Napoleon’s expansionism, the Great War—initially on a European and then on a world scale—demonstrated the fragility of the international system of the European balance of powers. Preceded by regional and smaller, but not secondary, conflicts, such as the Balkan Wars (1912–13), the First World War determined the dissolution of the great multinational empires, the end of Prussian militarism and expansionism, and the need to redraw the map of Europe according to the principles of national sovereignty and the right of nations to self-determination, ideally formulated by the US President, Woodrow Wilson. Formally, a new era of international “democracy,” characterized by the affirmation of nation-states with their own sovereignty, liberty, and independence, had to be opened, but ideological tensions and social contrasts widely spread all over Europe produced contradictory effects and brought a twenty-year period of crisis and instability.

In this perspective, international and national scholars, researchers, and PhD students in history, political science, economy, sociology, geopolitics, geography, literature, and other scientific fields related to the topic, one hundred years after a young Bosnian Serb student from the Mlada Bosna, Gavrilo Princip, “lit the fuse” and ignited the First World War, re-analyzed

and re-interpreted the conflict of 1914–18, which was to have far-reaching consequences for the whole twentieth century. Participants from various different countries and continents focused their attention on: ideological and historiographical debates; the use of propaganda for the mobilization of public opinion; military history; social, political, economic, and psychological aspects of the war; the role of intellectuals and artists; the issue of minorities and nationalities; economy, international relations, and politics; and on war memories and the most important contemporary historiographical and popular narratives about the war. The two volumes provide new insights into the theories of the Great War, reconsidering traditional academic clichés, with less studied topics of the conflict that started the Short Twentieth Century, which was, in the apt words of Eric Hobsbawm, “marked by war even when the guns were silent and the bombs were not exploding.” They are characterized by internationality, interdisciplinarity, and a combination of different disciplines and efficient research methods used by the contributors to reconstruct various aspects and facts of the history of the Great War. The contributions are based on archival documents from different countries, such as Georgia, Italy, and Poland, on international and local historiography, as well as on the analysis of newspaper articles, postcards, propaganda material, memorials, theatre plays, school books, etc. The two volumes are divided into ten chapters, with each chapter containing five to ten articles that make compact units. They are intended for historians, political scientists, scholars of economy, economic history, sociology, geopolitics, and literature, but also for anyone interested in the conflict, which in recent years has become increasingly “popular” due to its hundredth anniversary.

The first chapter *Theory, Historiography, Memory* looks at the First World War from the postwar and present perspective. It explores different war memories, outlining the “memory map” of Europe and the most important contemporary European narratives about the war, considering whether, among different and sometimes even conflicting perceptions, it is possible to show a common—both for the whole of Europe as well as for particular countries and regions—memory of World War I. Within this chapter, conflicting narratives and different historiographical and political perceptions of Gavrilo Princip, “an assassin in the West and a hero in the East,” are analyzed, with a particular focus on recent commemorations in the city where the Short Twentieth Century started—Sarajevo. Other contributions are dedicated to war memories in specific countries and regions and within specific time frames, particularly to the current national historical discourses of post-Communist states, including Romanian historiography and the revival of the memory of the Great War in the

official narrative of Russia. Two contributions analyze post-Second World War perceptions of its historical precedent in the autobiographies of German Jews after the Holocaust and in the official narrative of the city of Padua, at the borders of which, at the Villa Giusti, the armistice between Austria-Hungary and Italy was signed. The last contribution of this chapter gives an overview of the causes and characteristics of “the first act of the destruction of Europe,” focusing especially on modern historiographical debates and the Eastern roots of the conflict.

The second chapter *Communication, Propaganda, Perception* examines the power of propaganda and its use by the governments involved in the conflict in order to support war efforts and encourage men to join the armies. It analyzes different propaganda instruments—pamphlets, handbills, books, postcards, newspapers, magazines, and books and toys for children—which were aimed not only to recruit men but also to promote an active role of women as “agents of moral suasion.” Related to the last aspect, an overview of the most iconographic posters calling on women to take up male jobs is presented for women were needed as nurses, in defense industries and military support jobs. The contributions further explore: technological innovations and the birth of mass consumerism and mass media; war journalism and Italian war journalists; the specific aviation press in Italy, which developed with the first successful airplane flights; debates in different cultural magazines during the weeks between the death of Franz Ferdinand and the first week of August 1914; and the perception of the Holy See’s official voice *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which portrayed the beginning of the Great War as “the most tremendous disaster” that Europe had ever faced. Another propaganda tool, used during the war and at peace conferences was the ethnographical map, which became a weapon of political communication and an instrument for classifying identities and solving ethnic disputes.

The third chapter *Armies at War: Structures, Operations, Innovations* is dedicated to military history, war fronts, technical and organizational aspects of the war, and to specific military services and units. The contributions, based on military documents, follow the destiny of some specific Italian sections and services, including: the Carabinieri Section of the 45th Infantry Division on the Isonzo Front, the protagonists of the conquest of Sabotino Mountain, which opened the way for the conquest of Gorizia; the Sezione R of the Italian High Command Information Service, which dealt with intelligence information of an economic nature concerning censorship, military police activities, and counter-espionage; the health service in the support of the Italian army; and the Italian Military Mission to Poland and Italian military representatives in Inter-

Allied Commissions. Air power is also another important and interesting subject, and the Great War marked an unprecedented utilization of air capabilities, in both quantity and quality, as well as the work of the Italian political criminal justice during the Great War, with a specific focus on the Italian magistracy and the role it performed in regard to the most significant political crimes and trials of the period.

The fourth chapter *Soldiers, Prisoners, Volunteers* draws readers' attention to cities, homes, prisons, and hospitals analyzing the social and psychological aspects of the war and different roles and duties that soldiers, prisoners, priests, citizens, and immigrants had to assume. It examines the role of clergy in prisoner-of-war camps—in 1914, indeed, most of the states that joined the conflict had a religious army service—as well as military health services, which were responsible for the care of wounded and ill soldiers and for the provision of medical and other supplies. Health issues concern not only soldiers who were physically injured but also those who experienced mental changes, which provoked new discussions about the existence of possible war syndromes. Volunteers, citizens, and immigrants contributed to war efforts and organized humanitarian activities. San Marino's volunteers supported the Italian army, Karlovac citizens organized cultural events to help soldiers and their families, while for the Italian community in Latin America the war was an opportunity to redefine their relationship with their mother country. The chapter ends with a story about the odd situation of the Russian ex-prisoners interned on the Italian island of Asinara, which is a significant example of the role that prisoner-of-war camps had in the postwar context.

The fifth chapter *Nationalities and Minorities* examines the position and role of different minorities and nationalities in the First World War, as well as the relations between them, focusing, on the one hand, on the harsh reality and the exclusion of minorities through policies of cultural homogenization, and, on the other hand, on the opportunity provided by the conflict to struggle for a "better place under the sun." The contributions analyze the reality in which many Jewish communities were living in Eastern Europe during the conflict based on the documentation of the Joint Distribution Committee, created for the relief of the Jews in Palestine, which enlarged its action and included also the aid and relief of Eastern Jewish groups, as well as ideological debates on the aspects of Jewish identity during the war, the Jewish Question, and the role of Socialist Zionism. Other contributions explore the involvement of Russian Muslims and other minorities in the First World War, religious identity challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina prior to the Great War, an aspect

which played out in a larger arena of intricate international relations, as well as language issues and national ideas, more specifically the role of Serbo-Croatian and the Cyrillic script. A large-scale migration wave was one of the consequences of the conflict, which, in turn, fostered the birth of the international system for the protection of refugees, when the number of refugees within European and non-European countries became millions, bringing the international community to search for lasting and universal solutions.

The sixth chapter *Intellectuals and Historiographical Debate* is dedicated to the world of writers, poets, painters, photographers, actors and actresses, playwrights, and journalists during the Great War in Germany, Spain, Turkey, Italy, France, England, and Serbia. The contributions examine: the positions of German writers and their *Manifesto of the Ninety-Three*; the collaboration of French and Serbian intellectuals; the intellectual war waged in neutral Spain, including the works of Jose Ortega y Gasset and the intellectual movements Regeneracionismo and Generación del 98; the works of three European authors, the English poet and writer Siegfried Sassoon, the Italian writer and politician Emilio Lussu, and the French writer Maurice Genevoix; and the interpretations of the role played by the Ottoman Empire in the war made by three prominent Turkish intellectuals, the probably partly Kurdish Ziya Gökalp, the Tatar Yusuf Akçura, and the Jewish Munis Tekinalp. The war became a reality that would change a generation of writers, intellectuals, artists, and poets; many of them actively participated as simple soldiers or officers, while others, such as the Romanian writer Panait Istrati, chose to remain faithful to their pacifist principles. Another interesting cultural experience of the war was provided by the so-called soldiers' theaters staged near the front lines with the goal to raise the spirit and morale of the combatants.

The conflict, in fact, represented a turning point in international politics, involving all the great powers and altering the international political order, an aspect which is examined in the seventh chapter, *Politics and International Relations*, which focuses on the foreign policies of certain states involved in the conflict and on the relations between them. It analyzes the conflict from the perspective of the neoralist theory of international relations, the geopolitical changes that took place during and after the war, and the development of the idea to help fragile states set up institutions and security forces. The contributions analyze the Italian irredentist movement, the relations between Italy and France during the crisis of July 1914, the background of Greece's participation in the war, the positions of Portuguese Africa and Latin America, and the attempt of a

separate peace between the Emperor of Austria-Hungary, Charles I of Austria and the Allies, the so-called Sixtus Affair. The importance of the last topic rests on the fact that if the attempt had been successful, it could have facilitated the survival of the Austro-Hungarian Empire with very significant effects on the future development of the European system.

In the balance necessary for the stability of a political system, it is inevitable that the economy plays an important role and that this role becomes a triggering cause, when, due to a conflict, complex political, social, and financial situations arise. The eighth chapter, *Economy and War*, analyzes the economic causes and consequences of the conflict. The contributions are dedicated to Rosa Luxemburg and her position on war and economy, to the industrial mobilization and economic governance of Italy during the war, and to the role of women in state economies. In fact, during the First World War, the social role of women in the European countries involved in the conflict changed rapidly and radically since women had to take the leading roles in family households and various positions that previously had been considered exclusively male. The last two chapters are case studies; the first is devoted to Russia and the Ottoman Empire, including issues such as oil and international finance, and the second to the Caucasus and the Middle East, taking into account the Caucasus Front, Azerbaijan, central Asia, and the rise of Arab nationalism.

Finally, we would like to thank all the contributors for their in-depth analyses, the editorial staff of Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their help and support, as well as all those who had participated in the conference and contributed to its realization. We hope that the volumes will add to the studies of the Great War and encourage other interpretations and analyses.

CHAPTER ONE:
THEORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, MEMORY

THE MEMORY OF WORLD WAR I: DIVERSE EUROPEAN NARRATIVES¹

MARTA TURKOT

The First World War, the Great War, the War of National and Ethnic Independence, the Victorious War, and finally the Suicide of Europe—all of these terms connote different interpretations, receptions, and memories of the war of 1914–18. These are not at all neutral concepts, but they express very different assessments of the war, its effects and significance. These narratives, belonging to particular countries and regions, show the perceptions of the political project that Europe was and is today. In the paper, it will be considered whether, among these different and sometimes even conflicting perceptions, it is possible to show a common—both for the whole of Europe as well as for particular countries and regions—memory of World War I. A hundred years after the outbreak of the war, an attempt to analyze and answer the question is already possible and even necessary. The second question that must be asked is why the memory of the war in some parts of Europe is still alive, while in other parts it is almost completely forgotten. This memory is shaped not only in terms of content but also in terms of intensity.

Diverse narratives

Communities building their collective memories choose certain narratives about historical events. Below is an overview of the most

¹ Objections:

- a) Speaking of memory in relation to World War I, I outline the functioning narratives about the war. I do not focus on the material constructions of memory such as artifacts, monuments, memorials, or museums. Primarily, I examine the mental content of the European versions of war memory.
- b) I am aware that the European narratives differ from the narratives of the former colonies and countries that had been subordinated to the former European empires.
- c) The presented narratives are drafts, used to discuss memory issues—all detailed aspects of war memory for different countries and regions were presented at the conference.

important European narratives of World War I, which existed in the past and are functioning today among societies and nations.

a) The Great War/The Victorious War

The term “the Great War” comes from the Allies, particularly the British, and is mainly used in countries such as France, Great Britain, and Italy. The term “great” is used not only in relation to the fact that the conflict was fought on an unprecedented scale but also because it ended victoriously for the Allies. Therefore, this term also means “the Victorious War.” Moreover, in the opinion of the majority of countries and not just European ones, such as Canada, the USA, France, and Great Britain, the war had decent objectives: the promotion of democracy and independence of nations. The term “great” means a heroic act of soldiers and also refers to the conviction of their guiltlessness and laying the blame on the losers. The question of blame and innocence, as well as the changing image of guilty and innocent people, is another great topic of historical discussions.²

b) The War of 1914

Primarily the French like to talk about “the War of 1914” since they look at the war from the perspective of three wars: 1870, 1914, and 1940. The first and the last were lost, while the victorious one was the Great War. This perspective is present in a number of studies and works published on the subject—in just the last twenty years more than 1,500 new books have been written and published in France on this issue (a similar figure has been recorded in the United Kingdom)³ (Chwalba 2014). Despite the popularity of the World War II theme not only among German but also among Allied researchers, the interest in “the War of 1914” has never weakened and even increased in the late 1980s, as by then many veterans had already died. When in 2008 the last of them, Lazare Ponticelli, passed away, he was remembered with honor (Beaupré 2014).

² Concerning the question as to whether the issue of guilt can be resolved and whether it should be attributed only to the Central powers, as had been adjudicated at Versailles, researchers today agree that we cannot identify only one country that is responsible for the war. We can talk about mutual fault, but it is difficult to identify one main culprit. However, searching for who or what is responsible for the causes of the war, historians indicate the responsibility of nationalism, which underwent a phase of chauvinism (Histmag 2014).

³ That is truly a large number, however, around the world there are more than 60 thousand items on the topic of the First World War published in more than 150 languages (See: Chwalba 2014).

The war of 1914, as the victorious war, was initially combined with positive and sentimental meanings. However, criticized by a number of French historians, this image lost its unequivocality. The dispute between the two approaches has gained a broader context, which is described below in the subsections “sentimental approach” and “anti-war pacifist rhetoric.”

c) Sentimental approach

In Western Europe, from the beginning of the war, there existed a kind of romantic or sentimental approach to the war and its memory. In this sense, the war appeared as a momentous and heroic conflict. Individual soldiers played their part in the common event, mostly perceived as a national act. This act was determined by a dictionary of virtues, such as courage, heroism, glory, and sacrifice. A historian of this period stated that: “Tears and pathetic songs flooded Europe not because of fear, but because of the patriotic exaltation and emotion. In Germany in August 1914, ‘on the occasion of the war’ there were one and a half million occasional poems. In Poland the longing for a war that would ‘liberate the nation from slavery’ was revived; people prayed for ‘a universal war for the freedom of peoples’” (Traba 2009, transl. M.T).

A study of the phenomena of the heroic approach to the war was conducted in the Museum of the Great War (Historial de la Grande Guerre),⁴ the first museum devoted entirely to World War I, opened in 1992 in Peronne, near the battlefields of the Somme in 1916. Its scientific council, which subsequently evolved into an independent research center, consisting of eminent scholars (Jean-Jacques Becker, Annette Becker, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Jay Winter, and Gerd Krumeich), views the war from an international and comparative perspective.

Researchers tried to explain how it was possible to feel so much enthusiasm for the conflict, which was in fact a tragic event. They pointed out the functioning of pro-war images and myths in Western societies at the beginning of the twentieth century. There were, for example, increasingly drastic images of the enemy and of the cult of combatants. These notions of “us” and “them,” today usually regarded as products of propaganda, affected the whole of social life, treating the ongoing war as a myth, but, most of all, legitimizing the most extreme violence at the fronts, which, in effect, could count on being justified (Beaupre 2014).

Historians from Péronne put the question, why and how did soldiers—and the whole society of that time—endure such a cruel war for so long? The answer is that if people were able to maintain the war, it is because a large part of them gave their acquiescence to it. This acceptance was a

⁴ See www.historial.org.

complex phenomenon. Its foundation consisted of a very patriotic education received before the war as well as of a common feeling among fighters that they were defending themselves against attack. In the French republican country, based on the support of various social groups, the invasion of German forces could only reinforce this feeling⁵ (Beaupre 2014).

d) Anti-war pacifist rhetoric

The ideas constructed by researchers from the abovementioned museum's council were met with protests, particularly from other French historians and veterans of war. In France these concepts were in opposition to the traditional vision of the Great War. This vision, which is a heritage of veterans' pacifism, treats them as victims of war and as victims of those who were responsible for it: politicians, generals, and industrialists. An opposing group of historians is associated as the Intergovernmental Panel on Research and Debate on the First World War (Crid1418).⁶ According to them, opposition to the armed conflict within society and among veterans was stronger than its acceptance. They emphasize that soldiers' endurance and strength could be explained by their subjection, coercion, and lack of alternatives⁷ (Beaupre 2014).

The anti-war approach—like the sentimental approach—was already present during the Great War, especially in Western Europe. This social mode was expressed through cultural products—books and films shaping both the consciousness and memory of the war. At the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, there came “a war boom.” The extremely popular novel by Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Remarque 1929), became a measure of the public mood. The book sold 2.5 million copies in twenty-two languages in its first eighteen months (Eksteins 1980, 353). Remarque's pacifist projection describes the cruel reality of the war and the deep detachment of German soldiers from civilian life. It pointedly illustrates the reality of the war. It does not show

⁵ To answer the question about the medium- and long-term impact of the war on warring societies, historians from Péronne invented new concepts such as brutalization, recovering from the war, and cultural demobilization. In particular, the question of brutalization was carefully described by George L. Mosse (Mosse 1990).

⁶ See the official website: <http://crid1418.org/>.

⁷ Researchers from Crid 1418 did not agree with the terms proposed by the historians from the Museum of the Great War, especially with the terms such as brutalization and culture of war, which they considered superficial. In their view, the culture of war mainly existed among the elites (Beaupre 2014).

a heroic and courageous struggle of the soldiers at the front but focuses on the suffering and the meaninglessness of the conflict. It highlights the tragedy of the generation “whose first profession was to make people dead” (Remarque 1929).⁸

The cinema also played a huge role in building collective memory. It could be mentioned that among its most famous productions were: *The Big Parade*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Gallipoli*, *In Love and War*, *The Flyboys*, *The Lost Battalion*, and *Merry Christmas* (Chwalba 2014). These films are primarily pieces of art and literature, preserving and gaining a wide audience today, but they also contribute to the building of a collective memory among successive generations, further supporting the sentimental narrative about the war.

e) The First World War

The term “the First World War” was used for the first time by a British officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles à Court Repington, as the title of his memoirs, published in 1920 (Repington 1920). This term reappeared as the title of another book *The First World War: A Photographic History* published in 1933 by a British writer and veteran, Laurence Stallings (Stallings 1933). It appeared once more in the *Time* magazine in its issue of June 12, 1939, in an article that described the armies and military machines of the system of the Versailles League of Nations.⁹

The phrase “the First World War” is frequently used in the countries that lost the war—Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Turkey. Consequently, in the countries that belonged to the powers that lost the war, such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Ukraine, it has also been applied universally. For example, in Poland, historians see the reason for the universality of this term in the heritage of German and Austrian invaders’ terminology. The term “the Great War” is almost unknown and is rather used in historical, professional, and intellectual circles.

It can be argued that the term “the *First* World War” is a kind of semantic indication of the continuation of the Second World War. The last is treated as a play-off, revenge, and settling of accounts for the provisions of the Versailles Treaty. Therefore, the war waged in the years 1914–18 is

⁸ At the very beginning of the book, Erich Maria Remarque writes: “This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped [its] shells, were destroyed by the war” (Remarque 1929).

⁹ “Europe: War Machines.” *Time* June 12, 1939.

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,762392,00.html>.

called “the First,” after which follows its sequel—“the Second.”¹⁰

The term “the First War” in relation to “the Second War” of 1939–45 has also been placed by some researchers in the context of broader historical events. Namely, the wars have functioned as two parts of the so-called second Thirty Years’ War. As Chwalba explains, “the Second World War was a play-off of the First World War, and they were all, in sum, what some have called the Thirty Years’ War” (Chwalba 2014, transl. M.T.). The two twentieth-century world wars were compared and related to already known past historical events, such as the Thirty Years’ War.

The narrative of the independent functioning of “the two wars,” from 1914 to 1918 and from 1939 to 1945, without reference to previous wars, regards this historical reality from a modern point of view. That “the Great War” was not connected with the war of 1870 between France and Germany—but by taking the term “first,” the war is combined with the “second,” and they are considered as two parts of one process—is an approach of the *post factum* point of view. It is interesting that the terms that we use today generally have not been included in the narratives so obviously but rather have been specified for years, successfully competing with other narratives, images of history, and, thus, with other terms.

f) The narrative about the lost peace

After the war, it was generally expected that Wilson’s viewpoint would prevail in building peace and stability in the postwar world. He wanted an agreement that would create balance and reconciliation—as the US president put it in his famous Fourteen Points, speaking to Congress in January 1918. Instead, when in May 1919 it became clear what the terms of the treaty would be, the German people realized that the Versailles Treaty imposed on them something that soon would be called *Friedensdiktat*—*peace diktat*. In their protest against the *diktat*, they became unanimous, regardless of their usual political differences (Trenkner 2009).

The thesis that the Versailles Treaty led to Hitler’s seizure of power in Germany is speculation, but the narrative about the lost peace continues not only in relation to Germany.¹¹ The treaties signed with Austria at St.

¹⁰ The term “World War” was probably established in the early twentieth century in Germany, where the writer August Wilhelm Otto Niemann used the word “Weltkrieg” in the title of his anti-British book *Der Weltkrieg: Deutsche Träume* (Niemann 1904).

¹¹ The thesis that the Versailles Treaty led to the seizure of power in Germany by Hitler is speculation. However, the Nazis used the provisions of the Versailles

Germain and with Hungary at the Grand Trianon Palace in Versailles failed to create a sustainable, peaceful order. Hungarians felt that the peace agreement was a humiliation and trauma: the state lost two-thirds of its prewar territory and more than three million Hungarians had to live in foreign countries as minorities, often persecuted. The new states, formed in Central and Southeastern Europe, were often in conflict with their neighbors—such as in the case of Czechs and Slovaks, and Romanians and Yugoslavs. Probably, this conflict was inevitable since almost all governments took advantage of ethnic issues existing in neighboring countries as an instrument of their policies. The treaties signed in 1919–20 did not solve these tensions and even increased them. Some of them lasted until the end of the twentieth century.

The narrative of the lost peace is a product of the interpretation of postwar historical consequences. They showed that the signed treaties were unstable and almost none of the countries created or confirmed by these three treaties are still within the borders set nearly a hundred years ago. The historical assessment of the narrative compares the postwar situations in the first and second half of the twentieth century, pointing to the development of measures and strategies in ensuring security after the wars such as demilitarization programs and the development of institutions for safeguarding world peace.

g) The gravediggers of empires

Another narrative, connected with the previous one, highlights the fact that the war destroyed large multinational and multiethnic empires. The war, in the estimation of many countries, the USA, Canada, France, and Great Britain, had noble goals: democracy and the struggle for the independence of nations. Contrary to these aims, it divided the former powers and countries into small, quarrelling ethnic groups, which brought disappointment to many new states. They lost their former glory, which had developed under the auspices of empires. The shape of Europe changed as well, and there were other different political systems, distribution of forces, centers of power, and influences on the whole continent. Today we tend to remember the positive aspects of the fall of the empires, therefore we share one of the most popular narratives about the memory of the war—the fight for the independence of nations. Nevertheless, the narrative of the fall of the empires raises a number of sentiments in the former powers as well as in the communities that remember having participated in their former glory.

Treaty and in 1935 broke them, including the development of a program of mass armament towards which the world did not react (Trenkner 2009).

h) Suicide of Europe

The concept of perceiving World War I as the suicide of Europe was presented recently in Poland by historian Andrzej Chwalba. However, this idea had already been put forward before and during the war. Chwalba admits that he took over the idea from a French journalist who remarked that “Europe decided to commit suicide, which is in fact a war for the fear of death” (Chwalba 2014, transl. M.T.). Otto Bismarck had already defined the concept of a preventive war against France as a “suicide for the fear of death” (Kissinger 1994). As early as 1917, intellectuals, journalists, and diplomats were talking about the suicide of Europe, stating that it was impossible that war decision-makers had done to each other such a great disservice (Chwalba 2014).

In terms of this narrative, World War II is a consequence of the suppression of the warnings about the suicide of Europe. Moreover, besides suicides taking place on the battlefields, another meaning of this self-destruction was the notion of killing any hope that Europe after the war would be as great as before its outbreak (Histmag 2014).

Therefore, the suicide of the continent is measured by the consequences of the war. One of these is the process of marginalization of Europe in the context of its previous greatness in the areas of policy, economy, and international propaganda. World War I is seen as the beginning of this process, which World War II finally completed.

1. Economy

In Western Europe all countries paid a high price for the war not only in terms of human lives; millions were killed, handicapped, and disabled and there were many widows and orphans. These countries indebted themselves to non-European countries and that is why the real victors were overseas. The largest of them were the United States and Japan, which drastically developed their industries (Chwalba 2014).

2. Policy

Before the war, Europe was the center of the world. Colonies and other possessions on all continents belonged to the European countries. Where there was no formal submission, informal subordination existed, such as in Iran, Turkey, and China. Even independent Japan set the European countries as a model in accordance with the principle: “Learn from the West to defeat the West” (Romein 1958, 104). Only the United States was dominated by the Monroe Doctrine.

3. Culture

The cultural primacy of Europe was also obvious. Younger and older Americans came to the old continent looking for knowledge and good manners, while representatives of South American or Asian elites studied in Europe.

4. Prosperity and everyday life

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe seemed to be a lucky continent. There had been no war since the 70s of the past century. In various European countries wealth as well as living and working conditions improved. Technological development contributed to this situation and the population greatly increased: in 1800, there were 192 million people; in 1850, 266 million; and, by 1913, there were 468 million people.

According to this narrative, the primacy of Europe was lost and the continent became marginalized on the world stage. The war is described as an absurd, senseless, and murderous event.

i) War of National and Ethnic Independence

The glory of Europe was obscured by the fact that it was not a continent of free nations. In the West, the Irish nation yearned for their independence from Great Britain. National oppression was a nearly universal phenomenon in Eastern Europe. In the Austrian part of the multinational Habsburg Empire, in which the German population lived next to Czechs, Poles, Slovenes, Ukrainians, Italians, and Jews, the relations with the government were relatively calm. In the Hungarian part of the empire, dependence was more acute for Croats, Romanians, and Slovaks. Poles in the German Reich were subjected to oppression. The worst conditions prevailed in despotic regimes, like in the Russian Empire for Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians, and many others, and in the Ottoman Empire for Bulgarians, South Slavs, and Greeks.

These nations were the real winners of the war. They dreamed of independence and used the opportunity of the failure of the warring powers, which were no longer able to control the international situation. As a result of the war, new European states were created, which became a concern to the great powers since it was better to speak with one powerful actor than with a number of conflicting actors (Histmag 2014).

War of National and Ethnic Independence: A paradox of remembrance based on the example of Poland

In Poland, the history and heritage of the First World War—unlike the Second—for many years did not arouse much interest in the popular historical consciousness of Poles. Associations with World War I are rather positive; they combine the regained independence and the rebirth of the sovereign state as a consequence of the collapse of the three partitioning powers. Therefore, why in Poland and in those other countries for which World War I was a liberation, do people deal with ignorance and do not regard the war as “great” (it means people do not commemorate it as they do in the West and there is no affinity between the memory of the war and independence)? There are a number of explanations for the paradox of this great and forgotten victory:

a) This is not our war: fighting in foreign ranks

Poles were in three different occupying armies that fought against each other, on the one hand, in the Prussian and Austrian armies, and on the other hand, in the Russian army. This is not specific to Poland but is rather characteristic of the war. For example, Italians fought in the Austrian army against the army of the Kingdom of Italy, and Romanians in the Hungarian and Russian armies. The war had a partially fratricidal character. This is one of the reasons for the forgetfulness and aversion towards the national remembrance of the war—it does not build a national identity but rather weakens it.

b) Fighting on the side of the losers

Regardless of the sense of national belonging at the time,¹² the fact that a greater part of the future Polish nation fought on the side of the losers, those who oppressed them, and against those who ultimately liberated them, is not worthy of national veneration and is no reason to celebrate the memory of the war.

¹² Not all Polish-speaking inhabitants of Polish lands considered themselves as Poles, as the people of the Prussian partition mostly did, while in the case of the Polish Kingdom or Galicia this was not certain. People rather identified themselves as being Catholics, Greek Catholics, or Orthodox. In all the partitions, there was a very powerful myth of a just ruler. Propaganda portrayed the war as a battle under the banner of a just emperor.

c) Memory shaped by the future political system

In Central and Eastern Europe, perhaps with the exception of Romania, the memory of the war has weakened since the 30s of the twentieth century. The reason for this was that the Soviet authorities and propaganda focused on its civil war and not on the world war. It is significant that in 1931 Churchill called the conflict “the unknown war” in the East (Kinvig 2007).

d) Further struggle for defending the borders

The First World War did not end for Poland in 1918. The epilogues that shaped the collective memory of generations were the victorious Polish-Soviet War (1919–20), the defense of Lviv (1918–19), the Wielkopolska Uprising (1918–19), and the three Silesian uprisings (1919, 1920, and 1921). These events rather than the events of the years 1914–18 constitute the national myth of the heroic struggle for the homeland.

e) Reference to World War II

In this part of Europe, the memory of World War I has faded and has been overshadowed by the terrifying and more recent images of its successor—World War II. To this day nations struggle with its aftermath and as a consequence, the achievements of World War I are obscured. Moreover, for Poland and the entire region, the real loss of independence after World War II seems to be more present in the memory of the people rather than its previous recovery.

f) Devaluation of nationalism

The idea of nationalism developed during World War I and was consolidated by its effects. The later ridiculing of nationalism resulted in the reluctance to remember the war that had fostered and confirmed the idea. Obviously, this is an inaccurate view and does not take into account the historical conditions for the creation and development of the first phase of the national idea.

Conclusion

The narratives outlined here are classified according to the assessment of the course and consequences of the First World War. On the one hand, the war provoked the fall of the former powers as well as the decline of the European strength and importance, and, on the other hand, it brought liberation to many oppressed nationalities. That is why the presented narratives are so equivocal and do not form a consistent picture. Often,

they refer to geographically and historically different communities of memory and to different experiences of European societies. Then, is it possible to talk about a common continental perspective of war memory? If we try to build such a perspective, firstly, we should not consider any of these narratives solely since they all complement each other. Therefore, a common European perspective can include two levels. The first—a regional level—constitutes the nature of various European regions and defines their experiences, receptions, and historical policies. The second—a pan-European level—includes more general effects of the war such as the collapse of the royal and imperial regime models, the fall of the importance of Europe in the world, the right of nations to self-determination, the development of human rights, and the rise of international institutions responsible for peace and safety. Only by adopting such a complex memory of World War I it is possible to open and listen to non-European war narratives, in particular, the perspectives of former colonies. Many processes that happened to them after World War II were initiated on the European scale during World War I. Knowledge of this complicated European perspective could be useful for the study of contemporary human history.

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