The Unquiet Eastern Front:

New Work on the Great War

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Włodzimiez Borodziej and Maciej Górny, *Nasza wojna*, vol. 1, Imperia: 1912–1916 (Warsaw: Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal, 2014), 488 pp, 30,59 zl, ISBN: 978-83-280-0941-7.

Joshua A. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 300pp, £25.99, ISBN 978–0198745686.

David R Stone, *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front*, 1914–1918 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 368 pp., $34.95, ISBN ISBN 978-0-7006-2095-1.

Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 787pp., $35.00, ISBN 978–0465018727.

In the introduction to their excellent survey of the First World War in Central Europe, *Our War* (*Nasza wojna*), Polish historians Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny begin by wondering why the name of Przasnysz, a small Polish town north of Warsaw, carries today no connotations of misery or horror. In late 1914 and early 1915, they note, the Germans and Russians fought several ferocious battles in its vicinity, battles that ultimately claimed hundreds of thousands of casualties. And yet its name never became a part of the shared historical memory of the First World War. Przasnysz and its battles are long forgotten, not only, as might be expected, in Belgium, France and Great Britain, but also in Germany, Russia and the rest of Poland. This, Borodziej and Górny note, is symptomatic of the hold that the war's Western Front has exercised for generations on the imaginations of scholars and the wider public alike – even within the states that now occupy the territory on which the titanic clashes of the Russian, Austrian and German empires claimed millions of lives. To schoolchildren in Warsaw no less than to scholars in Great Britain and the United States, the First World War is synonymous with the trenches of Belgium and France, and with the haunted names

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Contemporary European History, **26**, 3 (2017), pp. 509–521. © Cambridge University Press 2017
doi:10.1017/S0960777317000194

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777317000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Ypres, Passchendaele and Verdun. But the evidence of *Nasza wojna* and the other three books under review here suggests that the Eastern Front is finally emerging as a subject of scholarly and popular interest. Moreover, these books illustrate that careful study of that Front has the potential to deepen our understanding of the war's complex dynamics and their impact on the states and societies that grappled with them. The sweeping conquests and extended occupations of ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse populations; the migration of ethnic hostilities from the front lines to the home fronts of multinational states; the profound divide between urban and rural experiences of the war; the ways in which military institutions adapted to the industrialised brutality of modern warfare and the ways that venerable but sprawling imperial state systems tried to come to grips with the war's demands are just a few of the themes addressed by the books under review here. The history of the period, and of modern European history in general, stands to be greatly enriched by a renewed interest in 'the forgotten Great War'.[1]

Exactly why and how the Eastern Front should have disappeared from the war's master narrative is unclear, but Borodziej and Górny begin their book by suggesting several reasons why this might have happened. Chief among them perhaps, at least for explaining why the war is so little known even among those who today live where it was fought, and whose ancestors were likely to have been affected by it, is that the tumultuous aftermath of war has dominated history and memory in the region. From 1918 to 1948 Russia and Central Europe became embroiled in a series of wars of national independence, the Bolshevik revolution, the establishment of new nation states and, finally, the unparalleled violence, death and destruction inflicted on the region by the Nazis and Soviets from 1938 to 1948. These successive traumas created a kind of intellectual and imaginative caesura in the region's approach to history. And even if Polish, Hungarian, Ukrainian or other historians after 1945 had wanted to tackle the complexities of the Great War, state run history projects and censorship prevented the region's scholars from roaming intellectually, since much of the region's scholarship on the war became subordinated to the ideological ends of the communist regimes that ruled over the erstwhile battlefields and the descendants of those who had fought there. The very small number of committed communists who were active during and after the war in Central Europe, as well as the complete failure of the revolution to spread into Poland and beyond, did not give communist historians much to work with as they tried to fit the region's history into a predetermined narrative of Bolshevik heroism and the historical inevitability of revolution. The end of communism, however, created room for new ideological distortions as the history of the early twentieth century became subsumed into national narratives of liberation that obscured the fact that the vast majority of Central Europeans had loyally served in imperial armies. In Poland, for example, post-communist histories of the period tended to celebrate the nationalist leader Józef Piłsudski and the very small number of men who had served in the pro-independence, Austrian-backed Polish Legions,

[1] The title of Alexandre Sumpf's excellent history of Russia in the First World War: *La Grande Guerre oubliée: Russie, 1914–1918* (Paris: Perrin, 2014).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777317000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rather than on the much larger number of Poles who had served in the regular units of the German, Russian and Austrian empires.[2]

In *Nasza Wojna*, the first of two projected volumes on the war, Borodziej and Górny seek, first and foremost, to restore the experience of the years of the Great War in Central Europe to its rightful place in the collective memory of Central Europeans, rescuing it from both ideological distortions and, worse, oblivion. While the book is aimed at a broad readership, the authors incorporate a range of archival and published sources in English, Polish and German, though the best and most extensive of their primary sources are from Austrian Poles. This reflects a broader trend within the book's structure: while the authors' intent is to cover all of the empires that fought in the east, the focus generally falls on Austria–Hungary. The authors themselves confess in the introduction a particular interest in the Empire, rooted in part in their fondness for the Good Soldier Szwajk as well as the bitter satires of Karl Kraus. This lends the book a certain uneven quality, and at times it verges on being a history of the Habsburg Empire at war, with elements of the German and Tsarist – and Serb, Bulgarian and Romanian – experiences added for context. However, Borodziej and Górny also draw extensively on the secondary literature from a variety of historiographical contexts and traditions, which goes some way toward balancing their keen and obvious interest in the Habsburg lands. The ultimate result is a concise but remarkably wide-ranging and sophisticated survey of the operational, political and social history of the Eastern Front and the empires that fought there.

Nasza wojna begins with a survey of politics and society in Russia, Austria-Hungary and Germany in the years and decades before the outbreak of the war. While there is little here that will be new to specialists, the authors include significant information on each empire's domestic political structure, foreign policy and war plans. This is followed by the section on the Balkan Wars, which even specialists in modern European history will find worth their while, as Borodziej and Górny carefully disentangle the competing domestic and international influences fuelling the Balkan flames. More than just a narrative, however, the section provides a compelling and sophisticated account of the many ways in which the wars were truly a 'Prelude' to the First World War, examining weaponry, the upheavals and displacement caused by mass conscription and population displacements and the commanders' obsession with offensive operations. Any cautionary warnings this may have held for the soldiers and statesmen who would go to war in 1914 were lost because of a European-wide presumption that the Balkans were not quite civilised, and that advanced nations could not be so barbaric.

Much of the rest of the book serves as a powerful illustration of just how horribly wrong such condescension turned out to be, as the violence and the social and economic disruptions set in motion by the war overwhelmed the subjects and states of the Central European empires in the first two years of the war. The book is divided into three parts, 'Fronts', 'The Rear' and 'Occupation', which are further divided into

[2] For a critical examination of the mythology of the Polish Legions, see Jan Snopko's outstanding *Finał epopei Legionów Polskich 1916–1918* (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777317000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

thematic sections ('Loyalty', 'The Turning Point', etc.), which themselves are broken into smaller subsections ('The Spirit of 1914', 'Prisoners', etc). One of the guiding themes that runs through the whole and binds these sections together is the way in which the First World War became a 'total war', smashing through the boundaries – be they legal, technological, moral or geographic – which might have limited its impact. No one could remain untouched by its destructive power, even if experiences differed because of one's location, class, gender, age and so on. The authors describe the profound economic hardships and massive unemployment caused by the war's disruptions in major cities like Lodz and in Russia's Baltic ports. They balance this urban analysis with examinations of the rural experience, without which no narrative of the war in Central Europe can be complete, but which frequently complicates any attempt to generalise about the war's impact. They show, for example, that in sheer economic terms rural areas suffered much less disruption from the war, and in some places made out quite well, owing to the urgent need to keep the armies and the cities fed. 'The farmer is God these days', one Czech man is said to have remarked while admiring the ample provisions he had with him (239).

Certain wartime experiences transcended the urban/rural divide, however. For example, the authors examine how mass conscription fundamentally altered gender roles. In cities throughout Central Europe, women went to work in offices, trams and factories, often labouring under difficult and exhausting conditions. This was mirrored in rural areas, where women had to step in and perform the jobs around the farm that had traditionally been done by the men. Borodziej and Górny highlight how women felt the harsh edge of the war's economic impact first, in the form of long lines for food, and they explore women's key roles in volunteer organisations that sent warm clothes to the front, distributed food and cared for the displaced. Another broad impact of war was the emergence of widespread demand for public information and the boom in the circulation and consumption of newspapers, as well as shifts in the ways governments utilised film, newspapers and propaganda to influence public opinion. This links the Eastern Front more closely to the Western, where this phenomenon has long been documented. It also reinforces the 'total' nature of the war throughout Europe.

Through their emphasis on the all-encompassing nature of war, *Nasza wojna* draws from recent developments in the field of military history, in which themes such as gender and the lives of non-combatants are emphasised. However, unlike many of the historians working in that field today, this does not mean that the authors neglect the actual fighting (or what is sometimes called, somewhat dismissively, 'operational history'.) Illustrating how the fighting in the east escalated from cavalry clashes in the initial days of the war to massive engagements of men and material, the authors are adept at punctuating their accounts of the big strategic picture with eyewitness accounts of the horrors and brutality of the fighting. A particularly enlightening section deals with the little-known 1916 Romanian campaign, unusual and remarkable because it actually proceeded much as pre-war planners had imagined the battles would, with large numbers of troops moving quickly to deliver a smashing knockout blow. A multinational force, led by the German commanders

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Mackensen and Falkenhayn, and including Bulgarian and Ottoman troops, crushed the Romanians in a rapidly moving offensive that ably used railroads but also moved swiftly and in good order over challenging terrain (mountains in the north and rivers in the south). The authors' accounts of battles such as these helps remind the reader that the fighting was the primary cause of the region's disruptions, rather than a tangentially related phenomenon, and firmly embed the struggles on the home front within the horrific violence and staggering loss of life that fed them.

In addition to describing the battles, *Nasza wojna* covers such disparate but important aspects of the combatant experience as equipment, rations, morale, relations with civilians, the widespread fear of spies and seemingly ever-present disease. Nor were those who escaped death and the hardships of service by surrendering granted an easier fate, as the authors show that the lot of prisoners of war (POWs) in the east was a dismal one. For many reasons, including neglect, but also sheer lack of preparation, POW camps in the Central European theatre were ravaged by hunger and disease, and the only real hope of survival lay in the arrival of food packages from home. The lack of planning for the massive numbers of prisoners of war, rooted in an inability to imagine the magnitude of the war and its demands on the part of pre-war military men and politicians, also marked the blundering, ad hoc approach to what the authors locate as one of the defining features of the Great War in Eastern Europe: prolonged and extensive military occupations. Borodziej and Gorny note that, brutal and pernicious as they may sometimes have been, the occupation regimes set up at various points in the war by all three empires faced an unprecedented challenge: ruling, for an indeterminate time, over huge stretches of territory with populations in the millions, while the ferocious appetites of the war continued unabated. The laws and rules that were meant to govern occupations, meanwhile, were wholly inadequate to the tasks at hand. The section on occupations also powerfully illustrates how they disrupted the routines and bonds of normal, everyday life among the occupied populations, creating a scramble to get by in which peacetime restraints and norms of behaviour quickly disappeared. The result was a simmering mixture of suspicion, envy and resentment, the worst of which seemed to focus, as it so often does, on the region's Jews. The authors treatment of Jewish experience of the war is one of the most remarkable aspects of their study, as they move beyond the Central European tendency to highlight one's own national suffering to the disregard of other victims of war. Borodziej and Gorny show that *all* of the peoples of Central Europe suffered, including the Jews, who may have suffered worst of all. In a particularly compelling description, they explain how one Pole, surveying the wholesale plunder of Jewish businesses in a Galician town, noted that not only Russian troops – from whom such behaviour was routine – but also local Polish civilians were to blame, which he attributed to 'the congenital hatred of our people towards Jews' (340). The authors are to be commended for incorporating such material, without which no history of the war in Central Europe could plausibly claim to be complete.

Their treatment of the Jews as (essentially) one nationality among the many that suffered during the war is also linked, however, to one of the key ways that *Nasza*

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wojna will be set apart from similar works authored by historians from Germany, France, Britain or the United States, and is marked as distinctly Central European: the way the authors treat national identity. While the authors are well aware of the limited appeal that nationalising projects held to peasants, and that national identity did not preclude other forms of political loyalty, they nonetheless see nationalism as a powerful force at work within the warring empires. Moreover, they take national identity as a given, but do not see it as inherently pathological, unlike in other historiographical traditions, where it is treated as a destructive fiction. National identity is, to the authors, at the very heart of the experience of the war in Central Europe and thus also at the core of the book's title – Our War:

> Russians, Germans, Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Jews, Poles, Byelorussians and Ukrainians fought in the uniforms of the Tsar, Germans and Poles in those of Prussia . . . [while in] the Austro-Hungarian divisions, Slovenians, Croatians, Bosnians, Serbs, Austrians, Czech Germans, Czechs, Moravians, Silesians, Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Hungarians and Romanians [served]. . . . This was our war.[9]

The authors use of 'our' quite literally refers to the war of 'our great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers' (12). This is transnational history of a particularly Central European sort; national identity is not dissolved or dismissed, but acknowledged without abandoning a search for what transcends it.

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While Austria-Hungary dominates *Nasza wojna,* the German Empire takes central stage in Alexander Watson's fine study of the Central Powers, *Ring of Steel*. Watson refers to his book as the 'first modern history' of Austria and Germany at war, a somewhat ungenerous assessment, given that Holger Herwig's 1997 *The First World War: Germany and Austria–Hungary* (republished in 2014) has long been considered the standard work on the subject.[3] Herwig's work, however, is more concerned with the traditional fields of strategy, military operations and high politics, for which it will remain indispensable, while Watson's book, like *Nasza wojna*, is focused on German and Austrian society in wartime. Like Borodziej and Górny, Watson illustrates the impact of the war on the peoples of two empires as well as the way these same people likewise influenced the manner in which the imperial states mobilised for, fought and otherwise endured the conflict. His key argument is that, in both Austria–Hungary and Imperial Germany, the war was a genuine 'people's war', fuelled in part by the voluntary support of a population that, rather than being manipulated from above, engaged in a process of popular 'self-mobilisation'. The solidarity and support that underpinned the war efforts, however, was fraught with weaknesses and cracks from the outset, cracks that were strained, tested and eventually split open. In Germany, the fundamental weakness was class antagonism, while in the Habsburg

[3] Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777317000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

lands, Watson echoes *Nasza wojna*'s contention that the stresses of the war fatally exacerbated tensions between national groups. Among the strongest chapters in the study is Chapter Two, which covers the outbreak of the war and brilliantly shows how the subjects of Franz Joseph and Wilhelm II came to support a common cause in the days and weeks before the war broke out. In a superb evocation of the July crisis, Watson illustrates how grim resolution, fear, uncertainty and, late in the month, excitement all powerfully coursed through in that fateful month. Watson argues that this inchoate and conflicting welter of emotion catalysed into mass support for the war because of a widespread belief that the coming conflict was fundamentally defensive.

In Austria–Hungary, this belief obviously stemmed from Franz Ferdinand's assassination, while in Germany, Russian mobilisation was widely perceived as a threat to all Germans and to the German state. Fears of annihilation, Watson argues, created a fund of support – not to be confused with enthusiasm – on which both states would draw support for four exhausting years. 'War enthusiasm, had it been the main drive', Watson argues, persuasively, 'would probably not have carried the German war effort beyond August 1914. . . . [But] the desire to defend the homeland, on the other hand, proved a remarkably stable base on which to mobilise a people' (73). In other words, the German and Austrian governments played crucial roles in encouraging and channelling the popular emotions that the war called forth, but they did not create them. In subsequent chapters Watson then reveals how both states lost this public support because they were unable to adequately manage the food supply (which may, in any event have been impossible). Bringing together and building upon the foundational work of Maureen Healy on Vienna and Belinda Davis on Berlin, Watson shows that disruptions in the food supply and the consequent shortages, especially in urban areas, generated widespread suspicion and resentment that corroded the social solidarity which had been forged in the face of a common threat.[4] In Germany, the middle class felt bitter towards the wealthy, while the workers resented everyone, including fellow workers with extra rations. City dwellers, meanwhile, nursed collective grudges against farmers, who they believed were driven primarily by greed and self-interest, while the farmers themselves resented government intrusions and hungry city folk. All of this was present in Austria–Hungary as well, but with the added problem that class resentments were overlaid with ethnic ones; Hungarians in particular came in for opprobrium, given Hungary's extensive control over its own agricultural products, of which it sent little to the rest of the Dual Monarchy. In both empires the disruption of food supplies fatally weakened social cohesion and eroded public trust in the state, resulting in a poisonous concoction of anger and envy and a bitter sense that so much had been sacrificed in vain. Watson concludes that this poison inexorably seeped into post-war political life, contributing to the ailments, both domestic and foreign, that made Europe so volatile and unstable in the years after 1918.

[4] Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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While social decay in Germany and Austria and its consequences for the post-war world are at the core of Watson's narrative, his book ranges far and wide, taking in the battles, occupations and political decisions that were also crucial to the history of the Empires at war. Watson is an excellent writer and has moulded all of this material into a lively and engaging narrative that will no doubt become the standard work on the subject (though Herwig's book will still remain indispensable, as it covers military operations in greater detail). Watson is also an impeccably fair-minded historian, analytically detached without being cold or indifferent to his subjects' humanity. This is evident, for example, in his treatment of Erich Ludendorff, the villain of many histories of the Great War, who comes across in Watson's book as strange and brutal, but also somewhat pathetic; it is hard not to feel a twinge of pity when reading that the exhausted General's doctor prescribed singing in order to calm his shattered nerves as the war ground to its bloody end. Nor is there a better treatment of Brest-Litovsk available in English. Watson is critical of what he sees as German expansionism, but he also notes that

> The bulk of the wealth lost by the Russian Empire [at Brest- Litovsk] was in Poland and Ukraine, lands to which Russia's rulers, regardless of ideological persuasion, had no moral claim and whose peoples, especially the Poles, had suffered more than a century of Tsarist religious and political persecution. The Germans were in no way idealistic or altruistic; pure self-interest and a desire for European hegemony shaped their policy at Brest-Litovsk. Nonetheless, for the populations of these territories, the power shift was an improvement on their previous plight (494–495).

This may seem obvious to Polish or Ukrainian historians, but such an accurate description of what actually occurred at Brest-Litovsk is seldom, if ever, to be found in German- or English-language accounts of the war, where it is brushed off as yet another example of brutal German annexation (of 'Russian' territories) that prefigure Nazi ambitions in Eastern Europe.[5]

What makes this such a compelling summary of Brest-Litovsk is that Watson situates it within the broader context of Central European history – that is, within the political and social upheavals and disruptions revealed in panoramic fashion in *Nasza wojna*. The book would be stronger if Watson took a similar approach to other elements of his analysis, for it is precisely a broad picture of Central European turbulence, and the way the two Empires were embroiled in it, that has the greatest potential to enrich our understanding of the course of the war and the decisions made while it raged. For example, it has long been established that elements within the German political–military establishment and their allies within the right-wing, nationalistic civilian population harboured dreams of sweeping annexations to follow from a German victory. These desires for annexations – which were by no means universal, and which never assumed the form of a concrete and coherent policy – are

[5] For an overview of the different ways that the treaty figures in varying national and regional historiographical traditions, see Christoph Mick, '1918: Endgame', in Jay Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War, vol. 1: Global War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 141. Work in progress by the historian Timothy Nunan on how the treaty was viewed by Persian intellectuals will, when published, add yet another layer of complexity to the question of Brest-Litovsk's place in world history.

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commonly referred to in the scholarship as Germany's 'war aims'. Watson discusses these ambitions, and, somewhat disappointingly, does not challenge the reigning scholarly consensus that they were driven by two forces: first, a desire by German elites to defuse, by means of conquest, growing pressure from below to reform the German political system; and, second, that Germany's imperial ambitions had been thwarted abroad and so found an outlet within Europe itself.[6] As the example of Brest-Litovsk shows, however, situating Germany's strategic and political calculations within the Central European context within which they unfolded suggests alternate ways of interpreting them. Watson's treatment of the 'border strip' is a case in point. The Germans, it is well-established, intended to annex part of pre-war Russian Polish territory and, possibly, to ethnically cleanse it of its Polish and Jewish inhabitants.[7] Watson discusses these plans and roots them firmly in the established historiographical tradition of cunning elites and imperial appetites needing to be slaked, though he also gives the genuine fears stirred by Russian incursions into East Prussia their due. But what is missing from this analysis is the important fact that the border strip would have been adjacent to Prussia's Polish territories, home to a sizable Polish minority. This minority overwhelmingly supported National Democracy, a Polish political movement which proclaimed allegiance to Russia and sought to unify Prussian Poland with Russia and Austria's Polish territories. Well-founded anxieties about loyalty and fifth columns, and about the consequences for Germany should a Polish state emerge in Central Europe, also fed Germany's calculations about its border zones; but the reader will come away none the wiser about this, a particularly puzzling omission in light of the fact that Watson (judging by the bibliography) reads Polish.[8]

Picking up on this theme of borderland anxieties and violence, Joshua Sanborn's *Imperial Apocalypse* gives a broader sense of the impact of the war on Russia's border territories and illustrates the forces at work that might have encouraged states, and multinational empires in particular, to find ethnic cleansing an alluring solution to what they saw as a serious strategic threat. A welcome addition to the paltry (but growing) English-language scholarly literature on Russia in the First World War, *Imperial Apocalypse* integrates first-hand perspectives on the cataclysm from the point of view of officials, soldiers and civilians – voices that have long been absent from the broader English-language literature – and also provides short but excellent accounts of key battles. Sanborn then ambitiously situates these accounts into a broader argument on how the Russian Empire failed to master the various social, economic and political forces that threatened to destroy it from within during the war.

[6] For arguments in this vein, see Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1967) and, more recently, Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Penguin, 2009).

[7] The standard work on the 'border strip' is Imanuel Geiss, *Der polnische Grenzstreifen: ein Beitrag zur deutschen Kriegszielpolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Lübeck: Matthiesen, 1960). For a contrary take, see Jesse Kauffman, 'The Colonial U-Turn: Why Poland is not Germany's India', in Andrew Demshuk and Tobias Weger, eds., *Cultural Landscapes: Transatlantische Perspektiven auf Wirkungen und Auswirkungen deutscher Kultur und Geschichte im östlichen Europa* (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2015), 50–67.

[8] For more on Germany and the 'Polish Question' during the war, see Jesse Kauffman *Elusive Alliance: The German Occupation of Poland in World War I* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777317000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sanborn's able illustration of the Russian state's struggle against chaos and disintegration gives the book its analytical and narrative core. He begins by illustrating the often terrifying confusion and disorder that beset the Russian Empire, particularly in its western territories, from the very outset. The imposition of martial law in large swathes of the empire, for example, caused enormous bureaucratic complications that thwarted the ability of officialdom, military and civilian, to deal adequately with the numerous problems involved with maintaining a semblance of public order and basic public services. One symptom of this was a wave of looting and violence directed by Tsarist troops against their own civilians (though Sanborn singles out the Cossacks, with good reason, as the primary instigators). Another source of tension were the numerous nationalist movements within the Empire, which Sanborn shows had grown restive in the years immediately prior to the war. Still, he notes that, despite the clumsy failings of the state and the social and cultural fissures within the imperial polity, Russian society remained, for the first year and a half of the war, resilient and loyal.

This loyalty and resilience were dealt a shattering blow with the Great Retreat of 1915, when the Central Powers launched a series of attacks that managed to drive the Tsar's armies out of Habsburg Central Europe. The trauma and fear triggered by the Russian defeat and evacuation of its western territories contributed to a surge in ethnic violence, both at the front, where German and Jewish subjects of the Tsar fell victim to both spontaneous attacks and organised deportations, and on the home front, where strikes and riots frequently took on a heated anti-German character. Sanborn shows that, beginning in 1917 and continuing into the post-1918 period, the empires' subject nationalities, abandoning their earlier loyalty, began to assert themselves against the Tsarist government, which would feed into the overlapping civil wars of the so-called 'post-war' era. Sanborn also powerfully illustrates the extraordinary violence that swept through the Empire as it – and its army – collapsed. 'Robbery, murder, violence, and all kinds of other disorder became commonplace occurrences', Pavel Skoropadskii observed, with 'neither women nor small children . . . spared'. 'And this', he added, 'was amongst a population that was sympathetic to them' (222). It is helpful to have such scenes in mind when thinking about German soldiers and statesmen looking eastward and figuring out what might come of it all – and where it might end.

Against this story of instability and collapse Sanborn illustrates the ways in which the Russian state tried, and failed, to stabilise itself. Again, he sees the Great Retreat as a major turning point. Crucially, Tsar Nicholas initially responded to pressures from below by dabbling with reforms, but then changed his mind and eliminated them, a devastating blow to public confidence in his rule. Some officers in the Russian military as well as civilian professionals, such as medical doctors, recognised very early on that their government was ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of the war and threw themselves headlong into the task of remedying its shortcomings. Sanborn refers collectively to these patriotic elites as 'progressive technocrats' and shows how they utilised civil associations like the Union of Towns and Union of Zemstvos to bridge society and the military. The results were often impressive; for

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example, civilian organisations stepped in at the war's outset when the inadequate military medical system was overwhelmed by the unprecedented casualties, providing care and hospital space for the flood of wounded soldiers who arrived from the battlefields. Such efforts contained, but could not prevent, the empire's collapse, and, moreover, brought the seeds of illiberal repression with them. Sanborn argues that medical quarantines, for instance, represented a form of surveillance and state control, which would help lay the foundations for the Bolsheviks.

All of this enriches our understanding of the Russian Empire at war, and Sanborn's book should be read by specialists in both the history of the First World War as well as the history of Russia. Historiographically it fits most comfortably with works such as Peter Holquist's *Making War, Forging Revolution*, which argued for a continuum linking Russia's experience in the Great War with the events of the Revolution and Civil War.[9] It will also complement current works in progress by scholars such as Ke-Chin Hsa, Jonathan Gumz and John Deak on the Habsburg Empire's attempts to mobilise its society for total war. Sanborn has a more ambitious historiographical goal, however, as he asks us to consider the collapse of the multinational Empire as an episode in what he repeatedly calls 'decolonisation', and the war as 'a war of European decolonisation' (3). While he does not spell out precisely what this means (he defines it as a process with certain discrete steps), he argues that Europe's land empires should have been included in Erez Manela's *Wilsonian Moment*, which analyses the impact of national self-determination on Europe's overseas colonial possessions. In essence, then, Sanborn is asking us to abandon the distinction between continental European empires, like those of the Habsburgs and Romanovs, and overseas dominion in places like Africa and Asia. This would, in turn, render the First World War a variant on the wars waged in places like Kenya, Vietnam and Algeria after the Second World War. It is an intriguing idea, but the argument is not developed quite systematically enough to be convincing.

Sanborn's work is complemented by another new book on Russia's war, David Stone's *The Russian Army in the Great War*, which fills a major gap in the English-language literature by providing scholars with a thorough account of the Russian army's operations during the war, material for which most scholars have, until now, had to rely on Norman Stone's (no relation, as far as I know) *The Eastern Front*[10] or Winston Churchill's *Unknown War*.[11] Drawing on decades of Russian-language scholarship on the Imperial army's operations, Stone's book provides an excellent 'top-down' overview of the Russian army in action (though it is somewhat dispiriting that both Sanborn and Stone feel compelled to defend their decision to write about battles in what are, after all, histories of a war). In clear prose, and with the aid of good maps, Stone leads the reader through the key battles and campaigns of the Tsar's army, from the first salvoes to its collapse in 1917. Like most operational histories,

[9] Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[10] Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* (New York: Scribner, 1975).

[11] Winston Churchill, *The Unknown War; the Eastern Front* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1931).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777317000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Stone's is a bit bloodless and mainly concerned with the movements of large numbers of men and material; but it is also invaluable, for despite what recent trends in the history of warfare might suggest, it is neither possible nor desirable to write about wars and to leave the armies and the fighting out. Anyone writing about the Eastern Front will want – in fact need – to have Stone's book at hand, as there is no equal.

Despite his focus on operational history, Stone has broader ambitions for his book. He wishes to dispel the notion that Russia suffered from any particular disadvantages vis-à-vis the other warring powers, and that the problems it wrestled with differed only in degree, not kind, from those faced by its allies and enemies. This is only somewhat convincing. He makes a good case for parity in terms of weapons, equipment and training, and he further argues that one of Russia's supposed liabilities – its army of illiterate peasants – also had its advantages, given that these same peasants were tough and loyal soldiers. At other times, however, he pushes the argument too far. Stone would have us believe, for example, that the Russian officer corps was not, on the whole, less competent than the officers corps of other states. But as his own narrative (and many others) make clear, the Russian steamroller was driven by an appallingly inept group of commanders. While no country may have fielded truly great generals, it is hard to match, for example, the dismal spectacle of Rennenkampf and Samsonov's nominally joint invasion of East Prussia in August 1914. The two commanders operated independently of one another, refused to cooperate and ignored the operational plans of their superior, Northwestern Front commander, Yakov Zhilinskii, (who was manifestly not up to the task of leading them). Stone argues that the incursion into East Prussia, despite these problems, could have turned out differently than it did, had the Russians not split their armies and gone around the Masurian lakes. He concludes, on this basis, that 'the inherent weakness in the Russian plan was geographic' (61). But geography cannot be in and of itself a weakness; failure to take it into account, however, and plan accordingly, is a strategic failure of the first order. Perhaps if this were a singular occurrence, it could be written off as a product of the commanders' temperaments rather than of some deeply rooted structural factor.[12] But as the horrifying story of Alexei Brusilov's 1916 offensive shows – the commander to Brusilov's north, Alexei Evert, refused to launch the attack that was supposed to accompany Brusilov's assault on the Austrian lines, condemning Brusilov's men to die in great numbers for nothing – the ineptitude of Rennenkamp, Samsonov and Zhilinskii were quite typical of Russian officers as a whole. Throughout his book, Stone stresses the role of contingency in history, and rightly so. But when events repeatedly produce the same outcomes, for what seems to be the same reason, then perhaps the actors involved are creating their own contingency.

Ultimately, Stone concludes that 'one key way in which Russia did *not* share the experience of other powers was . . . its failure to systematically and comprehensively

[12] Brusilov himself blamed a number of factors for the number of inept officers in command positions, including a none-too-rigorous promotion process as well as the malign influence of the Imperial Guard. General A. A. Brussilov [sic], *A Soldier's Note-Book 1914–1918* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 20–1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777317000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reorganise its society for war' (emphasis in original; 5). But this begs the question. As the experience of Europe's land empires strongly suggests, victory in the Great War went to those societies that were best able to muster the economic, human and psychological resources needed to win a war of attrition. For many reasons – from separatist ethnic nationalism within their polities to the complex and sprawling structures of their states – Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany failed to meet that demand. This should provoke new questions about how and why states such as Britain and France were better able to fight this kind of war. And, given the consequences that resulted when the empires collapsed and fragmented (it is frequently overlooked that Germany did indeed, as its political leaders had worried, lose its Polish provinces after the war), historians of modern Europe would do well to re-examine the Great War's Eastern Front and the role it played in shaping the course of twentieth-century European history.

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