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POSTWAR REALITY: BORDERS, HUMANS, ADMINISTRATION AND POLICY IN MOTION

The Armistice of Compiègne signed on 11 November 1918 between the Allied states and the German Empire officially ended the First World War. While the symbolic meaning of that act was extremely significant not only for posterity but also for contemporary people, reality was far from stable in almost every place that had seen hostilities during the Great War. On the western front, where peace appeared to have settled, the terms of the armistice were repeatedly protracted, which compounded the inhabitants' sense of uncertainty until the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June 1919. In many other places worldwide, lack of stability was seen in ongoing fights and political revolts, such as Béla Kun's revolutionary activity in Hungary, Crimea and Germany. What added to the chaos was economic collapse, raging prices and impoverishment of society, all of which pushed desperate people towards extreme solutions. The situation was exacerbated by the pandemic of the Spanish flu which took a heavy toll mostly on young people. Therefore, November 1918 as well as the fall of former empires and emergence of young states on their ruins, gave people hopes for a better future, which would soon founder as a result of harsh reality. It was only successive months which brought humanitarian aid (among others by the American Relief Administration) that at least allowed the famine to be reduced and the supply of Central and Eastern Europe with basic medication to be improved¹.

This special section is an attempt to look at the difficult months of 1918/1919 (as well as a few years earlier and later) from a local perspective, and a continua-

¹ Ēriks Jēkabsons was one who wrote extensively about this for the area of the Baltic states. See Ēriks Jēkabsons, *Latvijas un Amerikas Savienoto Valstu at-tiecības 1918.–1922. gadā* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2018).

tion of the debate which we started in the book *Postwar Continuity and New Challenges in Central Europe, 1918–1923. The War That Never Ended*², and which editors would now like to extend to beyond Central Europe. While in the previous book particular authors presented their studies focusing on selected places, regions, and countries, or looking at an issue from an international perspective, this time we wanted to give the floor to those who created everyday life at the end of the second decade of the 20th century. *The history below* already has long research traditions. An attempt to write the history of the common people in this volume is realised as stories told by teachers, clerks, and ordinary priests, so those who were far away from decision-making in their local milieus. They were the intermediary between the elite and bourgeoisie and on the other side – workers, craftsmen, as well as various representatives of the lower classes. It allows us to capture what is seemingly inconspicuous and what usually concerns the masses, not the elites, the rulers, the elect, i.e., a straight minority, whose social, economic, and political status makes history look completely different from their perspective than from the point of view of so-called ordinary people.

What do we gain from looking from below at the history of the final months of the First World War and the first years of the post-Versailles order? First of all, it lets us grasp the specific nature of the world in a period of transformation: disintegration of the old order and attempts to create a new one. Yet it is not only from the point of view of the centres (former metropolises, decision-making cities like Paris, Vienna, Istanbul, and Berlin, as well as new capitals like Warsaw, Prague, Belgrade, Riga or Tallin), but also areas so far considered to be peripheries. Exploring the so-called provinces is also quantitative research: it was there, not in the capitals, that the majority of residents of the given countries lived. Even though such cities as Paris, London, Vienna, and Budapest (and later new capitals of new states in the years 1918–1939/1940) drained the peripheries, centralised power and aspired to control any manifestations of life, centralisation had never been fully carried out. Provincial life usually has its own pace; certain phenomena and processes happen there more slowly and when confronted with local habits or mindsets, they are often rejected or accepted as a truncated version, and the role of individuals or particular groups is far more significant there than in large centres. Moreover, it was on the outskirts of the declining empires that the situation was often much more complicated and difficult than in large cities. Hence the experience of a transition period was more intense there. That stemmed from the uncertain state affiliation of those areas, from their ethnic complexity, geographic and economic conditions, and the particular mentality of the residents, for whom the regional was often equally as important as if not more important than the central³.

² See *Postwar Continuity and New Challenges in Central Europe, 1918–1923. The War That Never Ended*, ed. Tomasz Pudłocki, Kamil Ruszała (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 461.

³ For more on that see Anna Kobylńska, Maciej Falski, Marcin Filipowicz, *Peryferyjność. Habsbursko-słowiańska historia nieoczywista* (Kraków: Libron, 2016).

The time of the end of the Great War and the first months and years of the new era, is important not only from the point of view of geopolitics or the economy, but also the emergence of a new mentality. Human experience of liminality resulted from the rapidity of the changes, handling the implementation of decisions taken, making an effort to meet the challenges of everyday life, which capital city governments found hard to manage, and a range of problems inhabitants of various areas had to face, issues often much different than in metropolises. All that led to redefining human identities. The residents of many regions, often forced to relocate and emigrate in the first months and years of the war, had nowhere to return to after the fall of the former empires; their world had collapsed, and they could not or would not want to identify with the new one. This forced them to seek their place in the new reality and answer the question of who they had been and who they finally became after the war⁴.

The special section comprises ten case studies which concern the war and postwar experience of East-Central Europe and the Middle East. While the Western world was an important reference point for the residents of those areas and it was there that the new postwar order was officially established (treaties of 28 June 1919 in Versailles, 10 September 1919 with Austria in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 27 November 1919 with Bulgaria in Neuilly-sur-Seine, 4 June 1920 with Hungary in Trianon or 10 August 1920 with the Ottoman Empire in Sèvres), in the course of passing months the interest in the general East diminished among the French, British and Americans. The number of journalists, scholars, military missions, or ordinary adventure-seekers exploring East-Central Europe and the Middle East was decreasing, even though from the western perspective those areas still seemed to be exotic, unexplored, surprising, and even savage and barbarian. The interest was, however, never as great as in the period under discussion, i.e., between the war and the stabilisation.

The impression of excessive concentration of problems and issues the inhabitants of the eastern areas of Europe and the Mediterranean Basin had to struggle with also resulted from a different experience of the war than in the West. The eastern front was much longer than the western one and what was happening there and in the south (the Italian-Austrian-Slovenian frontier, the Austrian-Serbian frontier, or the Ottoman Empire), remained inconceivable to the West. The area was too vast and too complicated, too little explored, unfamiliar, and therefore too overwhelming. Hence perhaps the gradual jadedness and decline of western interest after 1921–1923. The enormous war destruction and economic collapse, the brutalisation of the treatment of civilians, the increasing weakness of official apparatus of the declining empires and ruling through fueling conflicts among people, the growing nationalism and related large-scale ethnic purges and breaking of social bonds – these are the shared experiences of the turn of the third decade of the 20th century, which have featured more distinctly in historiography

⁴ Recently, Kamil Ruszała has discussed migration and related experiences in the case of Central Europe – see Kamil Ruszała, *Galicyski Eksodus. Uchodźcy z Galicji podczas I wojny światowej w monarchii Habsburgów* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych „Universitas”, 2020).

only in recent years. For a long time, those processes had been either denied or marginalised, as contradictory to the founding myths of nation states which emerged or were revived on the ruins of the empires. If these issues had ever come up at all, it was in the context of the difficult legacy of the previous era, not as an example of the new ruling elites being unprepared to handle new challenges. Hardly ever was it indicated it was those who ruled after 1918 that were jointly responsible for the months- and years-long crises, and societies often fondly recalled the peacetime from before 1914.

Geographically, the collected studies show the shared experience of the areas from Riga to the Polish-German frontier in Pomerania, the Polish-Ukrainian Galicia, the territories emerging after the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy, the Italian-Slovenian frontier, Istanbul, to Palestine. Meridian-wise, those areas form a straight line, despite uneven shapes and certain distortions eastwards or westwards. A certain exception here is the article by Emily Gioelli, *Women, Gender, and Political Imprisonment in the Hungarian Siberia, 1919–1924*. The researcher showed, however, the experience of Hungarian women, i.e., residents of Central Europe, who had to deal with a new, unfamiliar reality, and face the fact that before the war being a woman had been seen differently than in the face of new social and political conditions. Other studies making up this special section are: Kristīne Beķere's *Great changes at home. Latvians abroad and the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia in 1918*, Tomasz Krzemiński's *Between unification and particularism: Pomerania and independence*, Kamil Ruszała's "Unwelcome guests": *Situation of Galician Refugees in Austro-Hungary at the end of the First World War and at the time of dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, Tomasz Pudłocki's *Nationalism, violence, and education: secondary schools in Polish-Ukrainian borderlands between 1918 and 1919*, Mateusz Drozdowski's *Question of the identity of the aristocratic families in the new national states after 1918: example of Habsburg & Hochberg families in Poland*, Stipica Grgić and Ivan Hrstić's, *The creation of the state: The fate of old institutions of political power and the creation of new ones in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes from 1918–1923*, Alessio Conte's *Venezia Giulia and Dalmatia: geography and relationship with the Slavs at the University of Padua after the First World War*, Martin Bunton's, *Land Policies in Occupied Enemy Territory: the case of British rule in Ottoman Palestine, 1917–1920* and Karolina Olszowska's *On the ruins of Ottoman Empires: Female Characters Taking Part in the War of Independence in the Work of Halide Edip Adivar*. Even though the majority of the authors are Polish, thanks to the support of our colleagues from Croatia, Canada, Latvia and Italy, we have been able to look at the title issue not only through case studies of individual territories but also combining various schools, research methods and methodologies.

We hope that this special section, which is a modest suggestion of a way to look at the world emerging from the ashes of the Great War, will allow for a better understanding of the themes of transition periods, with particular reference to the period under discussion. For though the years 1918–1919 are always the turning point in national narrations as key ones in creating modern states (or like in the

cases of many ethnic groups, e.g., Ukrainians – failed attempts at nation-building), the circumstances in which particular state organisms were created, had often been discussed from the point of view of major processes rather than from the perspective of peripheral areas. We therefore believe that the studies collected in this special section will be an invitation to take up further, more profound research.

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