



## INTRODUCTION

‘World War I killed fewer victims than World War II, destroyed fewer buildings, and uprooted millions instead of tens of millions, but in many ways it left even deeper scars both on the mind and on the map of Europe. The Old World never recovered from the shock.’<sup>1</sup>

These words, written more than 50 years ago by the American journalist Edmond Taylor (1908–1998), are better than ever suitable for understanding the enormous, but in many cases still too-little-understood, impact of the First World War. The one hundred years that have passed since the conflict, once called the Great War, encourage us to turn back and look at the long-forgotten past, and to reflect on the meaning of the conflict. This is particularly relevant to societies where the Great War has not been discussed or written about much, and in which the war was for a long time pushed to the sidelines, between memory and oblivion, by other more relevant experiences.

Such societies undoubtedly include the majority of those whose home is considered to be East-Central Europe, a region traditionally perceived as stretching between Germany and Russia. There are few regions in the world where the Great War stimulated such revolutionary and fundamental changes. Three empires that stood on foundations of monarchical traditions, fostered for hundreds of years, were destroyed in a few years by ‘modern’ nationalisms that were enabled and provided with an arena to manifest themselves by the ambitions of those very empires, trying to expand their influence on the basis of the national idea. The nationalisms nurtured new leaders, mobilised societies to the extreme, and transformed the political map of the region;<sup>2</sup> however, they eventually involved the region in unending political experiments and conflicts. The new postwar elites of Germany and the USSR, who inherited if not the old empires, then at least their ambitions, by experiments and quarrels over overlapping national territories, were given a chance to regain their lost control over the region, and provided with the tool to destabilise the situation. Thus, the clash between imperial ambitions and the principles of nationalities mar-

<sup>1</sup> TAYLOR, Edmond. *The Fall of the Dynasties. The Collapse of the Old Order, 1905–1922*. New York, 1963, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> ROSHWALD, Aviel. *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, 1914–1923*. London, 2001; LOHR, Eric. *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens during World War I*. Cambridge, MA, 2003; SANBORN, Joshua A. *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire*. Oxford, 2014; *The Empire and Nationalism at War*. Ed. by Eric LOHR, Vera TOLZ, Alexander SEMYONOV, and Mark von HAGEN. Bloomington, IN, 2014.

ked processes which manifested themselves in that region of Europe, and directly affected millions of people, for several decades.

By devoting this collection of papers to the clash between the principle of nationalities and imperial ambitions in East-Central Europe during the First World War, in no way do we mean to say that the war became the caesura of the beginning or the end of the clash. The latest research in relations between empires and nations before the First World War shows that, if we thought that nations simply replaced empires, we would be oversimplifying the situation. Two different forms of political consolidation actually interacted throughout the 19th century, and formed very diverse variations on the interaction.<sup>3</sup> We are confident that it makes sense to look for both transformations and continuities of that interaction in the period after the First World War.

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However, we believe simultaneously that there is still something new to be said about the clash between imperial ambitions and the principle of nationalities in East-Central Europe during the Great War. The thesis that the First World War was fought under the flag of national liberation has become axiomatic in most historiography. Declarations by warring countries were permeated with statements like 'unification of the nation', 'national autonomy' and 'right to national self-determination'. It is obvious, however, that the meanings of these statements were interpreted in rather different ways. Historiography still lacks clarity in the analysis and assessment of the genesis and manifestations of the national factor, and the changes it brought.

First of all, the area of war strategies is obscure. It is obvious that the alliances between warring countries raised issues regarding nationalities that were usually part of the opposing alliance. This would in itself question the essence of the national principle, and pose the question whether national principles were raised as values *per se*, or as mere strategic measures employed in the war to undermine the enemy's authority.

The genesis of the national factor is also problematic. On the macro level, the issue may be associated with the phenomenon of nationalism. Patriotism and (or) nationalism in the warring countries was at its greatest, and this factor is listed among the key reasons why a halfway peace was impossible, why the war became a 'total war', lasting for four long years, thus resulting in unseen numbers of casualties. However, in analysing this phenomenon, we may find it difficult to distinguish the manifestation of large power patriotism/nationalism from the nationalism/patriotism of small new ethno-social formations, which, as a matter of fact, found its expression in the context of the patriotism/nationalism of the great 'parent' states. On the micro level,

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance: *Nationalizing Empires* (Historical studies in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, Vol. III). Ed. by Alexei MILLER, Stefan BERGER. Budapest, New York, 2015.

it is equally difficult to identify the motivation behind the national factor. As investigations suggest, the scale of national motives ranged from lofty ideals and political interests to petty ambitions and corruption.

The genesis of the new international order determined by the system of new nation-states is also worth discussing. Different perspectives were envisioned for the nations, from administrative autonomies to federations comprising democratic states. However, in the actual framing of the new states of East-Central Europe, the implementation of democratic principles was small, and in the majority of them the 'principle of country' prevailed, usually based on the integration of nationalism and the administrative traditions of the former empires.

The present collection of articles seeks to touch on at least some of the above issues, focusing primarily on the space of the clash between Germany and Russia. However, the research is not limited to this space. Recognising the value of a comparative perspective, we also publish texts that reveal the interactions between the imperial order and the national factor in other conflict zones of the Great War, primarily between Austria and Russia, and also between Russia and the Ottoman Empire.

The articles in the volume are divided into three sections, which reveal 1) the imperial war year plans and strategies, and the role of the principle of nationalities in these plans and strategies; 2) the diversity of the roles played by the expression of the principle of nationalities; and 3) the mental and social changes that were impacted by the clash of the imperial and the national order. The assignment of specific articles to one or another section should be seen as relative, revealing the prevailing direction of the article. Basically, all the papers in the collection are more or less united by the aspiration to reveal different variations in the interaction between imperial ambitions and principles of nationalities, whose manifestation in East-Central Europe was enabled by the First World War.

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