

Introduction

A survey of publications on the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War may give the impression that the experience of events in the West of the continent is more vivid in European cultural memory than in Eastern-Central Europe. The great battles of the Western Front, fought on the fields of Flanders, near Verdun, or by the Somme, cost thousands of lives and, along with terrifying images of hopeless four-year-long trench warfare, have for long dominated the narrative of the Great War in the mass media and in school textbooks. We shall not discuss here the reasons for the very limited representation of the war fought in Central and Eastern Europe. Scholars from this part of the continent are not entirely blameless in this respect, as for some 50 years, they treated the Great War as if it were simply a prelude to the Great October Revolution. Language barriers, and the apparent poverty of sources, are also likely to have played a role in the marginalisation of events in the East. However, the war in Central and Eastern Europe differed significantly from clashes in the West in its dynamic movements and manoeuvres. The Central Powers, when occupying vast areas in the East, forced themselves and the conquered communities to face new challenges, not only in living conditions and food supplies, but also in political and social matters.

The purpose of our large-scale, inter-disciplinary project, was to examine local perspectives, and study the Great War through the prism of archival resources stored in modern-day Poland, a country which was not even on the map of Europe when the war broke out, and which was only re-established in 1918. The citizens of this future state were often forced to fight against their compatriots, such as Jews, Ukrainians and Czechs, who were conscripted to foreign armies, along with other inhabitants of Eastern and Central Europe. The war in the East had a direct impact on the daily lives of civilians, who went through the terror of occupation, the changes in the frontline, and the passage of armies. The conduct of allied armies also added to the ordeals suffered by local communities.

In their research, the authors of the articles in this book have made extensive use of archival materials and other sources from a number of regions of Poland, Austria, Israel, Germany, Russia and Romania, in order to investigate the impact of the Great War in these areas. Our focus was also on the question of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity in the face of war, particularly in regard to the city of Łódź. The book also covers topics such as the development of museums dedicated to the war between Austria and Italy, and the image of Russia in the propaganda

of the Central Powers, adding more perspectives to our understanding of the issue of cultural memory.

The project was coordinated by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Research on the Multicultural and Multinational City of Łódź and Its Region (Ośrodek Badań nad Wielokulturową i Wielonarodową Łodzią i Regionem) of the University of Łódź in collaboration with two other academic institutions: The Department of Literature and Culture of Germany, Austria and Switzerland (Katedra Literatury i Kultury Niemiec, Austrii i Szwajcarii) and the Institute of History (Instytut Historyczny). Our special gratitude is due to the historian, Prof. Dr hab. Przemysław Waingartner. We are planning two further publications, in German and Polish, in which other project participants (philologists, historians, archivists, political scientists and cultural experts) will present the results of their studies of the Great War.

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