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Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland, by Jochen Böhler, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2018, $45.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9780198794486

In his latest book, the German historian Jochen Böhler has decided to take a look at how the Second Polish Republic was created. Although hundreds of works have already been written on this subject, Böhler argues that they are dominated by an idealized story about the heroic deeds of the united Polish nation. A lacquered narrative about a heroic nation, which is reborn after years of captivity, also prevails in public discourse and has captured the Polish social imagination. Obviously, many researchers have written more critically about the events of 1918–1921, but, as Böhler aptly points out, their studies are scattered and known mainly to specialists. Critical works did not significantly change the overall image of the construction of the Second Polish Republic, nor did they have much influence on popular social imagination. As Böhler aptly observes, this is partly due to the fact that these studies did not provide any alternative comprehensive narrative. Böhler promises that his book will remedy this omission.

Thus, the book actually undermines the idealized patriotic story of courageous and united Poles who dreamed of nothing else but to give their lives for independence. Above all, the author takes seriously the findings of contemporary nationalism studies, rejecting the conviction that national identity is natural, obvious, and self-evident; that everyone has a clearly defined nationality; and that nations are distinct and easily distinguishable groups. Such a conviction, stemming from nationalist ideology, is still typical for many Polish historians, not to mention the authors of school textbooks or popular books. Following contemporary nationalism studies, Böhler assumes that the nation is a dynamic process of social construction rather than a static demographic fact. Thanks to this assumption, he avoids telling a schematic story about the struggle between nations, but shows that conflicts were also fought about the criteria of national belonging, which were far from being unambiguous. Nor does he assume unreflexively, as some nationalist historians do, that the nation-state is a praiseworthy thing and by definition better than earlier multinational empires. This allows him to see the scale of the violence accompanying the process of the creation of the Polish state, which he does not justify and does not ignore, unlike many Polish historians who seem blinded by the allegedly higher national *raisons d'être* of the independence activists.

Böhler argues that the border wars did not resemble conventional clashes between regular armies. His description of these conflicts evokes rather the Hobbesian state of nature: *bellum omnia contra omnes.* Paramilitary troops played a major role and became famous for their robbery and murder of civilians, although the Polish army "bravely" kept up with them, for example by terrorizing and robbing Jews. The author shows that despite the wars and threats, the Polish society, contrary to popular belief, was far from being united. On the contrary, the book gives a picture of the lack of unity, and contradictory goals and interests of various Polish power centers and parties, which sometimes fought each other more energetically than the partitioning powers. Conflicts between various parties and political groupings also translated into clashes in the newly created Polish army. As the author argues, the situation was often threatened with the outbreak of civil war among Poles. Even in the face of the Bolshevik threat, Poles were not able to cooperate with

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each other efficiently. Böhler is very critical of the social scope of Polish national identity. He reminds us that the majority of potential Poles were peasants who generally did not think in national terms. As a result, the Polish authorities had problems with mobilizing the peasant population to fight for borders. Even the situation threatening the existence of the state did not provoke patriotic enthusiasm among the peasants.

The narrative is bound together by the concept of Central European civil war. However, I am not entirely convinced by this argument. I would rather say that the conflicts described were of a different nature: some resembled regular war, others partisan fighting, an uprising, or a civil war. I do not see any sense in looking for a single label blurring the differences between conflicts, while in addition referring to the poorly justified, in this context, category of "Central European." It is not entirely clear how the author defines the concept of Central Europe (the book also refers to Central and Eastern Europe and East-Central Europe, but they are left undefined). And the involvement of paramilitary organizations, characteristic of the conflicts described in the book, is a wider phenomenon, not limited to Central Europe (consider, for example, the Anglo-Irish War, 1919–1921, to name but one).

The author also has a rather traditional approach to the history of Poland, emphasizing, first of all, its continuity. He writes routinely about Poland's loss of independence as a consequence of the partitions and its 123 years of absence from the map of Europe. He does not consider the issue of continuity in the context of differences between the early modern nobleman state of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Polish nation-state, or the historical meaning of the notion of independence. Moreover, it is surprising that Böhler, who argues with such energy that wars over borders were actually civil wars, stubbornly calls conflicts in Upper Silesia "uprisings" (even some Polish historians use the term "civil war" here). A mistake also needs to be corrected: the author of the distinction between "private homeland" and "ideological homeland" is not Jan Molenda, but Stanisław Ossowski, who treated it as a typology and not as a developmental scheme.

To sum up, I expected a little bit more criticism from this book. However, the book is definitely very important and valuable: it shows the formation of the Polish state in a new light that undermines traditional nationalist historiography and popular ideas. Traditionalist professional historians will probably turn their noses up at the book: they will find few new facts as Böhler rarely reaches for previously unexplored sources. However, this does not mean that they cannot benefit from his work. New interpretations often say more about reality (and require more knowledge, ingenuity, and analytical skills) than further allegedly new analyses of novel sources, which bring only detailed corrections to the well-known and familiar overall picture, which only reflects popular and common-sense beliefs. The book allows us to go beyond nationalist conventional wisdom.

Krzysztof Jaskulowski
SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities
krzysztofja@interia.pl
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Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan, by Mathijs Pelkmans, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 2017, 232 pages, $89.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9781501705137, $26.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781501705144

During the course of 20 years, the sculptural centerpiece of Kyrgyzstan's Ala-Too Square has been, until 2003, Vladimir Lenin, followed by the Erkindek (Freedom) statue symbolizing the country's aspirations for a liberal post-Soviet economic and political path, and, finally, the statue of Manas, hero of a Kyrgyz epic poem and a symbol of the historic Kyrgyz nation. Mathijs Pelkmans posits that this succession of monuments purportedly symbolizing core values of the Kyrgyzstani state and society is intricately tied to the country's struggle to discover a unifying idea or set of ideas in the