Introduction: 1918, A Sharp Rupture or a Period of Transition?

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A large crowd had gathered at Vilnius Airport (Lithuania) on March 31, 2017 and appeared to be waiting for something. Among the gathered was the government chancellor, three ministers, and many other well-known public figures. The scene at the airport was being shown on the national broadcaster, and later on news reports on all the channels. Readers would be amiss thinking that this crowd was waiting for a sports team (more likely a Lithuanian basketball team than a Lithuanian football team, alas), which had just won top position at a championship. They were in fact waiting for a little-known scientist at the time, Liudas Mažylis, who, as was announced, had found the declaration of Lithuanian independence from 1918 in a German archive. Until then, the Lithuanian state did not have its own original "birth certificate." No one cared about the opinion of professional historians that the discovered document should be called differently and more precisely. Mažylis became a national hero and a TV star, while the document's exposition turned it into a mass pilgrimage object.

All of this happened while central and east European states were marking the centenaries of their independence, and as a rule highlighting 1917 (Finland) or 1918 (the rest of east central Europe) as a fundamental turning-point, a time of liberation from the imperial "prison of nations"; also accentuating the bonds between today's states and their continuity with the states established post-World War I. Both national government institutions and the public joined in the commemoration of the centenary, especially in the Baltic states and Poland. An additional stimulus for the sincere involvement of society in marking the anniversary in these countries was undoubtedly the Russian annexation of Crimea and its support for east Ukrainian separatists. The mentioned events in Ukraine exposed the insecurity of other states in the "shatterzones of empires" (Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz), thus, the celebration of the centenaries was meant to testify the longevity of these countries.[1]

The interwar period is certainly important in the cultural memory of these countries, not only because it allows elites to legitimize the continuity of their states, but also because of the influence on political decisions. As Andres Kasekamp claims in this forum, the failure of central and east European states to create stable inter-state alliances in the interwar years of 1918–39, and to resist the Nazi and Soviet aggressions that followed was the

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[1] For the term "shatterzones of empires," see Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, eds., *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington, 2013).

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fundamental lesson that convinced Baltic state leaders of the necessity to join the EU and NATO after 1990.

It should not come as a surprise that in official and unofficial state centenary celebrations in 2017–18, primary attention was focused on the "fathers of the nation": on their conscious and consistent activities. And indeed, there is no doubt that the actions of nationalists representing various nations were critical factors allowing for the creation of new states, just as in those places where national movements were weaker (the case of Belarusians and to an extent, Ukrainians), new nation states did not form after 1918, regardless of all the declarations about the creation of new states (Belarus is a case in point). A good illustration of this thesis could be the Baltic states (see Kasekamp in this forum) where, to varying degrees, the Russian Bolsheviks, White Russian paramilitaries, together with the German *Freikorps* and Polish troops threatened the aspiring nation states. The Entente powers prioritized Russia; and in 1921 during the voting at the League of Nations, the Baltic states received less support than Georgia, which was quickly incorporated by Soviet Russia.

Those centenary celebrations in 2017–18 rarely left much space for non-titular nations, and if they were mentioned at all then it was usually in a manner similar to the Soviet "friendship of nations" concept, alleging that the creation of nation states was the merit of various national groups. In the case of Lithuania, for example, the addition of Belarusian and Jewish (Zionist) representatives to the Lithuanian state council at the end of 1918 was an outcome of geopolitical conjuncture, a temporary pragmatic union, and one that did not mean that representatives from the two mentioned national groups agreed with the concept of Lithuanian nation state at all.[2] Similarly, leaders of Czechoslovakia, as Michael Laurence Miller writes in his essay, were looking for Jewish support because they believed that it would help the new state in the international arena. Miller goes further in dismantling this kind of idyllic picture, correcting the image of interwar Czechoslovakia as a "welcoming and tolerant place for Jews." Miller states that the long-forgotten outbursts of anti-Jewish violence in 1918 were "part of the state-building process, or at least part of an effort to define the terms of membership in the newly-established states."[3] The message being sent by the offenders (and not just them) was that theoretically speaking, Jews could become equal citizens if they behaved loyally to the nation state, yet the absurdity of the accusations against them showed that Jews could never become a constituent part of the national body. As Miller has shown, anti-Jewish violence erupted in "victorious" states as well as "defeated" ones. Something that was mentioned even less at official commemorations was that it was not just national identifications that led to grassroots loyalty and activism, but many other social and economic factors. Maciej Górny argues in this forum that the loyalty of imperial subjects to current regimes demonstrated in 1914 had evaporated by the war's end due to the governments' repressive policies, ineffective governance, and the transfer of certain state functions to national organizations. In addition, the war provoked an unprecedented scale of social protests and ethnic conflicts, all of which combined to result in an exhausted population among whom the feeling of insecurity was rife. The nationalists turned out to be the best at exploiting this accumulated social energy. In turn, Dominique Kirchner Reill, in her essay about the city-state Fiume (now—Rijeka), shows how after the Great War, alongside various collective identifications, pragmatic calculation, or specifically—a stable currency, was also an important factor determining collective loyalty. In 1920, that currency was still the Habsburg krona (only with the stamps of new states). The episode that Reill analyzed is one of the many examples given in recent historiography about the reverberations of the Habsburg monarchy still felt after 1918.[4]

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[2] Vladas Sirutavičius and Darius Staliūnas, eds., *A Pragmatic Alliance: Jewish-Lithuanian Political Cooperation at the Beginning of the 20th Century* (Budapest, 2011).

[3] See Michael Miller later in this cluster, (7). Change page number in Miller to match.

Thus, the texts from this forum show that 1918 can be looked at as a "sharp rupture" (Kasekamp), or at least a period when phenomena like anti-Jewish pogroms, which existed before, assumed new characteristics (becoming one of tools of self-liberation used by nationalistically-inclined activists, as shown in this forum by Miller). At the same time, 1918 can be seen as a period of transition (Reill, Górny) that left behind many of the structures, behavior models, and other phenomena that formed in the "age of empires."[5] Both of these approaches can be backed by serious arguments. For example, if we were to compare the nationalizing nation states just being formed on the shores of the Baltic in 1918 with the situation in the Russian Empire, we would find some fundamental differences not just in the situation of pre-World War I peasant cultures turning into dominant ones in the post-World War I period, but also in the creation of democratic institutions (incidentally, later, autocratic regimes became established across almost the entire region), the extension of suffrage rights to women, the reduction of social exclusion, and the introduction of national personal autonomy, which was in stark contrast to the policy of assimilation or acculturation of non-dominant ethnic groups implemented in the Russian Empire. Yet, it would be just as difficult to argue with those who allege that there was a proliferation of empires in central Europe in 1918: even though new states did reject the imperial legacies, they did adopt certain institutions, administrative practices, legal codes, and memory cultures that operated as small empires.[6] Obviously, one or another assessment of 1918 will be related to the approach a historian selects, yet it can be presumed that in the post-Habsburg space, there were considerably more of those imperial reverberations than in the post-tsarist space. Taking into account the obvious differences between these two empires, in terms of the penetration of democracy, nationality policy, level of literacy, and other criteria, there are grounds for this kind of hypothesis. In any case, comparative research of empires could well be supplemented with a comparative analysis of imperial legacies.

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[4] Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016); Philipp Ther, "Czechosłowacja jako państwo pohabsburskie. Rozważania o ciągłości dziejów przed i po 1918 roku," *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 125, no. 2 (2018): 529–37.

[5] Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2014), 392.

[6] Judson, *The Habsburg Empire*, 521.