

# A Century of Selective Ignorance: Poland 1918–2018

Maciej Górny

Contrary to what most people at official academies across east central Europe in 2018 would say, none of the newly-created (in the official diction: reborn) states of the region were the direct and immediate result of a consequent political action. Rather, they came into existence out of the interplay of social, economic, political, and cultural factors that released amassed energies indispensable for a revolution. Poland is no exception from this rule. This essay addresses some of these factors while, out of necessity, leaving aside many others.

## Glorious Beginning

In 1914, east central Europe was a fully-integrated element of three empires that, to a certain extent, kept in touch with the flow of the times. As shown for the first time by Rosa Luxemburg, whose hotly debated doctoral thesis (1898) was devoted to the industrial development of partitioned Poland, the economy was the most powerful argument in favor of imperial integrity.<sup>1</sup> The industrial centers of Łódź or Warsaw were dependent on the insatiable Russian market that, in her opinion, made Polish independence obsolete or even counterproductive. So were the harbor facilities of Riga, the Ukrainian countryside, or Silesia within the German empire. Luxemburg's opponents within the socialist movement, Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz being the most sophisticated, criticized her negligence of the proletariat's national feelings, yet, even they could not ignore the macroeconomic ties that connected imperial peripheries to the centers.<sup>2</sup> The integration was not restricted to economy, however, nor to the formerly Polish-Lithuanian state. The year 1914 saw manifestations of profound loyalty to all the relevant thrones, a non-economical phenomenon that cannot be reduced to sheer tactics or opportunism. The proclamation of the "Polish" Manifesto of August 1 (14), 1914 by the Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich triggered a wave of enthusiasm; it promised to unite the Poles under the rule of the Tsar: "Under this sceptre, Poland shall be reborn, free in its religion, its language, and its self-government."<sup>3</sup> Shortly thereafter, Helena and Tadeusz Hołówko, socialist activists, were in the center of Warsaw. It promised to be a beautiful day:

My wife immediately bought a dozen gladioli as we approached the corner of Jerusalem Avenue and New World Street. All of a sudden we heard the sound of a military band and some shouting. We started to walk a little faster. And

1. A. Walicki, "Rosa Luxemburg and the Question of Nationalism in Polish Marxism (1893–1914)," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 61, no. 4 (October 1983): 565–82.

2. For the controversy between Luxemburg and Kelles-Krauz see Timothy Snyder, *Nationalism, Marxism, and Modern Central Europe: A Biography of Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz, 1872–1905*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, 2018), 53–76.

3. Cited in Kazimierz W. Kumaniecki, *Odbudowa państwowości polskiej: Najważniejsze dokumenty. 1912–styczeń 1924* (Cracow and Warsaw, 1924), 29–30.

it was then that we witnessed a scene that I shall never forget for the rest of my life. A Cossack regiment led by an orchestra was heading up New World Street. It was surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic Poles shouting “Long live our army!”; “Long live our defenders”! Impassioned ladies with burning eyes quickly bought flowers and ran in between the horses to hand them to the officers. Gentlemen emptied their cigarette cases and offered cigarettes to the Cossacks, who, sitting astride their horses, accepted this mark of admiration with a grateful smile. . . . The Cossack regiment passed by and the street returned to normal. We stood there, silently looking at each other.<sup>4</sup>

Not only socialists were astonished by the extent of the enthusiasm. The scenes that played out in Warsaw in October 1914 proved equally unacceptable for Cardinal Aleksander Kakowski, a man otherwise loyal to Russia:

The theatres, ballrooms, amusement halls, gambling dens, and brothels were filled with Russian officers. Polish patriots invited them in to their houses, while aristocratic and bourgeois ladies, even the honorable ones, danced with the Russian officers at public and private balls; it was an unheard of situation, since prior to the war an officer in Russian uniform, even a Pole, would not have been allowed to cross the threshold of a Polish home. The friendliness shown by the intelligentsia and upper echelons of Polish society towards their Russian counterparts, the fraternization of the Polish people with “our Slavic brothers” and “our” army, the marriage of Polish girls to Russians, or even Cossacks, in Orthodox churches . . . it was as if we had forgotten the hundred years or so of captivity and Russia’s oppression of the Catholic religion and the Polish nation. . . . Once the Germans had been repelled from Warsaw, Polish enthusiasm for the Russian cause had no limits.<sup>5</sup>

Such scenes were characteristic for the east central European “Spirit of 1914.” They testify to the strength of the ties that bound the region’s nationalities and individuals to the ruling houses. This was the case even in the case of Kakowski, a profoundly loyal Russophobe. Since the 2000s, historians of both western and eastern Europe have corrected the traditional image of cheering crowds by unveiling the fears, opportunism, and interethnic competition hidden behind official enthusiasm.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, in 1914 nothing suggested that this imperial loyalty would break in a matter of years. After all, the Romanovs, Hohenzollerns, and Habsburgs were the reality whereas national irredentism remained a matter of phantasy, and the fresh memories of the bloody fratricidal clashes of the 1905–7 revolution pushed middle and upper classes into the emperor’s arms. How could this loyalty disappear so quickly?

4. Cited in Leszek Moczulski, *Przerwane powstanie polskie 1914* (Warsaw, 2010), 395–96.

5. Cardinal Aleksander Kakowski, *Z niewoli do niepodległości: pamiętniki*, eds. Tadeusz Krawczak and Ryszard Świętek (Krakow, 2000), 123.

6. Jan Galandauer, “Kriegsbegeisterung in Prag,” in Luboš Velek, William D. Goodsey Jr. and Michal Svatoš, eds., *Magister noster: Sborník statí věnovaných in memoriam prof. PhDr. Janu Havránkovi, CSc* (Prague, 2005), 327–33; Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny, “Mobilisierung und Besatzung in den Großstädten Ostmitteleuropas,” in Olga Fejtová, Václav Ledvinka, Martina Maříková and Jiří Pešek, eds., *Documenta Pragensia: Nezměrné ztráty a jejich zvládnání. Obyvatelstvo evropských velkoměst a I. světová válka 1914–1918* (Prague, 2016), 49–61.

## An Empty Shell

There are at least two answers. First, empires heavily disappointed their subjects' trust. Second, they gradually abandoned them by shifting responsibilities to non-governmental bodies. The phenomenon of repression is one of the least intelligible and most fascinating aspects of the history of the Great War. There is much to suggest that the combatant states were unaware of the high level of public support that they enjoyed, and the reasons for this are unclear. Instead of trying to consolidate support and enhance their popularity, imperial military bureaucracies pursued policies that alienated everyone—from national and religious minorities to dominant national groups. Repressive measures against minorities were generally unjustified and their effect counterproductive. Instead of consolidating power and tightening control over society, they undermined trust in the state. In the Polish lands, the affected were mostly the Jews, the first victims of the Russian army's pogroms as well as Ukrainians court-martialed for the alleged treason of Austria-Hungary, but almost every repressive measure was followed by the next, typically directed against the group that was spared by the last wave of violence. Interethnic conflicts manifested themselves in denunciations for which there were plenty of opportunities when the front moved from one place to another, as in the territories of future Poland.<sup>7</sup>

The mechanism of the repression was rather uncomplicated. Unable to determine who was right, the army mainly concerned itself with ensuring that every suspect was detained. If there was no time or possibility to transport a suspect away from the front, executions were carried out on the spot. Ultimately, the involvement of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian armies in the ethnic conflicts in eastern Galicia had catastrophic consequences for all concerned. Already by the autumn of 1914, the army had begun to take control in Galicia and central Poland. Civil servants lost control over the province. Ad hoc military courts made extensive use of death sentences against all nationalities. In 1917, in the parliamentary debates of the re-opened *Reichsrat* in Vienna, the number of victims claimed by Ukrainian and Polish deputies from Galicia oscillated between thirty and sixty thousand, surely an exaggerated guess.<sup>8</sup> Suspicion was also cast upon refugees, mainly Jews and Ukrainians. Austro-Hungarian intelligence officers believed that this group contained a huge number of Russian spies.<sup>9</sup> In the end, the emperor himself had to intervene, and not for the first or last time. In September 1914, he declared: "I do not wish loyal elements to be pushed in a dangerous direction for the state on account of unjustified arrests."<sup>10</sup> Such a powerful voice of reason remained absent on the other side of the front.

7. Konrad Zieliński, "Population Displacement and Citizenship in Poland, 1918–1924," in Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell, eds., *Homelands: War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918–1924* (London, 2004), 98–118.

8. Włodzimierz Borodziej and Maciej Górny, *Nasza wojna*, vol. 1: *Imperia, 1912–1916* (Warsaw, 2014), 117–19.

9. Max Ronge, *Kriegs- und Industriespionage: Zwölf Jahre Kundschaftsdienst* (Vienna, 1930), 91.

10. Cited in Ronge, 82.

Distrust of one's own subjects, especially Jews, was the rule in Russia, too. It was fueled by the endemic antisemitism of Russian officers and, as in eastern Galicia, by other ethnic conflicts. Economic interests also played a major role. In the Kingdom of Poland, the National Democrats continued their pre-war policy of boycotting Jewish shops. Some shopkeepers used the army to successfully get rid of their Jewish competitors, as shown by the conduct of the Russians. Russian warnings to the civilian population, which threatened severe penalties for the poisoning of wells, destruction of telephone lines, or spreading of defeatism, were often formulated in such a way as to seem exclusively directed at the Jews. The impression of antisemitic persecution was heightened by the practice of expelling Jews from areas close to the front.<sup>11</sup> In 1915, this policy culminated into a humanitarian catastrophe, when thousands of Jews were forcibly driven to the east, together with thousands of Christians who evacuated voluntarily or half-voluntarily (that is, having their houses burnt by the army).<sup>12</sup>

Repressions alienated societies of east central Europe and undermined the initial loyalty to the thrones, but it was not the only field upon which empires started to lose their Great War, already in 1914. Centralization and ever-tightening control over every aspect of human existence belonged to the common experience of the major belligerent countries. Yet, with time, the empires of east central Europe proved increasingly incapable of efficiently managing a modern state. Despite centralization, price and production control, and militarization important elements of social policy were transferred from the central power to non-governmental organizations with local and/or increasingly national character. In the Russian interior, the policy of *Zemstvos* sharpened the conflict between urban and rural provinces.<sup>13</sup> In non-Russian territory, however, decentralization equaled ethnicization. Despite all efforts of various governmental bodies, the provision gap between cities and rural areas loomed large. The state proved incapable of relieving this situation substantially, contrary to the national movements of the monarchy's nationalities. Czech, Polish, or Slovene national activists in the Habsburg Empire were doing their best to avoid social conflict and to preserve a kind of a solidarity between city dwellers and peasants of the same ethnic origin. To this aim, a variety of charity actions were organized, including sending workers' children for vacations in rural areas.<sup>14</sup> This time, clearly, nationalisms contributed to the preservation of a multi-national state by trying to sooth people's

11. Eric Lohr, "The Russian Army and the Jews: Mass Deportations, Hostages, and Violence during World War I," *The Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (July 2001): 404–19; see also Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens during World War I* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).

12. Aneta Prymaka-Oniszk, *Bieżeństwo 1915: Zapomniani uchodźcy* (Wołowiec, 2016).

13. Kimitaka Matsuzato, "The Role of Zemstva in the Creation and Collapse of Tsarism's War Efforts during World War One," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 46, vol. 3 (1998): 321–37.

14. Tara Zahra, "'Each Nation Only Cares for Its Own': Empire, Nation, and Child Welfare Activism in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1918," *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 2006): 1378–1402; Małgorzata Przeniosło and Marek Przeniosło, *Rada Główna Opiekuńcza w latach I wojny światowej* (*The Central Welfare Council during the First World War*), (Kielce, 2018).

moods and uphold the functioning of social policy. This was also the incentive of the Polish Civic Committee, created in 1914 and soon playing the role of a self-governing entity in the Polish provinces of the empire parallel to that of the *Zemstvos*.

Fighting children's malnutrition and dealing with the refugee crisis were fields of social politics that were gradually transferred from the central authorities to the organizations of the nationalities. This happened both in Russia and in Austria, temporarily relieving state institutions but ultimately adding to the deterioration of the imperial powers. In both countries, help for the ones in need was heavily ethnicized.<sup>15</sup> Both empires saw relief organizations serving as a university of self-government. To a lesser extent, this could be said about Germany and the territories under German occupation. It was not by accident that many political leaders who entered national politics during the 1905–7 revolution (and, incidentally, later became dictators in the interwar period) attached their careers to such organizations. Suffice it to mention two "strong men" from the Baltic states of Lithuania and Estonia: Antanas Smetona and Konstantin Päts. Even though Austria-Hungary did not see such career trajectories, there were clear links between the wartime relief organizations and the post-war political establishment in all the successor states, both at the local and central levels of power.

A weakening grip over society by the government was a thing common to Russia and Austria-Hungary. Yet the February Revolution changed the equilibrium, pushing Russia towards even more regional and national(ist) decentralization. With the ethnic division of the imperial army followed by the creation of new national units, the main pillar of the Tsarist government was lost. The state, so powerful in 1914, turned into an empty shell. It was a matter of time before Austria-Hungary would follow.

## Conflicts

Another effect of the democratization besides imperial decline was reproducing and sharpening of the new and old ethnic conflicts. In cities, notably Warsaw, this meant the rise of political antisemitism and the consequent discrimination against Jewish inhabitants in need. The Civic Committees of Polish cities only rarely included representatives of the Jewish population, while the latter were typically members of the assimilated elite rather than the Orthodox majority; Jews were mostly absent in the local Civic Guards whose tasks included control of the local tradesmen (themselves mostly Jewish). The German-organized elections only partly changed this situation: while now Jews had their political representations at least in Warsaw and their parties flourished, they were still kept at a distance from municipal posts. In 1917, after the US entry into the war had put an end to foreign subsidies for the

15. See Tomas Balkelis, "Nation-Building and World War I Refugees in Lithuania, 1918–1924," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 34, no. 4 (2003): 432–56, and Aija Priedite, "Latvian Refugees and the Latvian Nation State during and after World War One," in Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell, eds., *Homelands: War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918–1924* (London, 2004), 35–52.

Jewish poor, the Polish majority in the city council refused to share the scarce resources. The words of Piotr Drzewiecki, the Warsaw mayor, illustrate the attitude of the Polish political elite towards their non-Christian co-citizens well: “We Poles have to take care of ourselves, since the entire world is taking care of the Jews.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet, the conflicts along ethnic lines were not a Polish-Jewish specialty. Nor were ethnicity-motivated hostilities the only frontline dividing the societies of the hinterland from the occupied territories. The other war was fought between the hungry city-dwellers and the peasantry, that is the food producers. Perhaps most dangerous for the war effort, however, were the workers’ protests.

Mobilization of the working class was common to all three empires of east central Europe, as was workers’ growing discontent with working conditions, pay, and nutrition. The overworked and underpaid laborers increasingly frequently went on strike. Most often, the response was violent: militarization of workplaces, forced recruitment of protesters, imprisonment, and corporal punishment. This policy towards the working class began to change in the second half of the war, especially from the beginning of 1918. At that time, in parallel with the protests across German and Austro-Hungarian industry, a wave of strikes and demonstrations swept through the Polish lands, including Galicia, Posen, and the occupied Kingdom of Poland. The wave no longer subsided.

The fact that the territories under German occupation (most of former Russian Poland) do fit into this scheme may come as a surprise. Contrary to Vienna, Silesia, or Bohemia, central Poland actually had lost most of its industry due to the Russian evacuation in 1915, followed by the disastrous German policy aimed at exploiting raw materials and human resources rather than restoring local production. In Warsaw, the city of the unemployed, no workers’ protest could reveal real strength, nor could it seriously endanger military production as much as, say, the 1917 strike at Škoda in Pilsen.<sup>17</sup> Yet, even though hardly disastrous to the military effort of the Central Powers, manifestations of unemployed men and women, at times turning into riots, were dangerous to the increasingly fragile political order. The occupiers’ reaction, which in 1915–17 had been violent, thus grew much milder in the final year of the war. The empires felt too weak to keep protests at bay.

The fall of the three emperors changed surprisingly little in this balance of power. Ethnic conflicts multiplied and so did social protests in all the countries of central and eastern Europe and the Balkans. Social groups, sometimes even narrower interest groups, used these weapons with such frequency that strikes became almost the norm. This phenomenon also encompassed areas that the police and imperial armies had previously had under control, particularly in the countryside. This was despite the fact that wealthier farmers had no reason to complain about these hard times, since they benefited from

16. Quoted in Robert Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse: Warsaw during the First World War* (Ithaca, 2017), 157.

17. Rudolf Kučera, *Rationed Life: Science, Everyday Life, and Working-Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands, 1914–1918* (New York, 2016).

the rise in food prices. The “rural proletariat” was much worse off, however, and they were on strike. Sometimes, as in Mazovia at the turn of 1918 and 1919, the strike was a “black” one, which meant that farm workers stopped feeding cattle and swine. In any case, sooner or later every employee in Poland had been on some kind of strike. In the absence of giant factories, such as Škoda, this weapon served, for instance, the bakers of Kielce, the prisoners of Montelupich prison in Cracow, the doorkeepers in Łódź, or the tram drivers of the same city. State workers, even the armed and uniformed ones, resorted to the same method of negotiation, as did the health service. In January 1919, socialist trade unions organized a protest in the mental hospital at Tworki in the proximity of Warsaw, during which they stopped looking after patients. The surprised authorities were unable to respond immediately to the strikers’ demands, so they had to resort to emergency measures by sending in troops to temporarily serve as nurses.<sup>18</sup>

In the first years of Poland’s independence, strikes—and the mild responses to them—became routine. The response was to make concessions, especially in terms of wages. This strategy fueled inflation and hyperinflation. Economic historians see this as the embodiment of evil and most eminent economists of the interwar period held the same view.<sup>19</sup>

All these conflicts hardened frontlines between social groups, as had been noticed already in the classical historiography of the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, they also contributed to the unparalleled mobilization around the themes of nation (due to ethnicization) and class (due to workers’ protests). Political activism was the driving force behind the great political change. It was especially crucial in face of the conservatism of the numerically dominant social class.

## Exhaustion

Most of the phenomena mentioned above, even though not restricted to towns, manifested themselves in urban areas. Peasants were, obviously, involved in the repressions and ethnic fighting; as food producers they were also part of the growingly inefficient supply chain and thus the object of scorn of urban dwellers.<sup>21</sup> In none of these spheres did they occupy the central position, however. What was their place in the social landscape of early independence?

In a region where the overwhelming majority of the population lived in the countryside, there are at least as many answers to that question as there

18. Ludwik Hass, “Robotniczy Pruszków w latach 1918–1920,” in Stanisław Herbst, ed., *Odgłosy Rewolucji Październikowej na Mazowszu i Podlasiu. Praca zbiorowa* (Warsaw, 1970): 155–81, 172.

19. See E. Dana Durand, “Currency Inflation in Eastern Europe with Special Reference to Poland,” *The American Economic Review* 13, no. 4 (December 1923): 593–608.

20. Jürgen Kocka, *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg: Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1914–1918*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen, 1978).

21. Claire Morelon, “A Threat to National Unity? The Urban-Rural Antagonism in Prague during the First World War in a Comparative Perspective,” in Wolfram Dornik, Julia Walleczek-Fritz and Stefan Wedrac, eds., *Frontwechsel. Österreich-Ungarns “Großer Krieg” im Vergleich* (Vienna, 2014), 325–43.

were villages. Some of the latter resembled Ukrainian village-republics: independent, well-armed, and determined not to let themselves be put under control.<sup>22</sup> In late 1918 and early 1919, such local semi-independence (in the wording of army officials: demoralization) was observed even in central regions with a Polish ethnic majority.<sup>23</sup> In proximity of any of the many frontlines, some areas turned into scorched earth zones while in others the remaining population lived in provisory shelters for years, or were evacuated, in some cases never to return. Few villages remained calm and peaceful places spared by wars and requisitions. Most experienced a mix of war's blessings (resulting from rising food prices) and calamities. Access to their wartime experience and post-war attitudes is hard to obtain, but nonetheless available. One such rare occasion was documented by the Polish Parliamentary Commission on Ukrainian atrocities, designed to gather data and publish reports on eastern Galicia, both for the Polish mass readership and for the international audience, if possible also for the Paris Peace Conference.<sup>24</sup>

Though the whole concept was biased to say the least, the documents collected (and never used) by the commission tell a fascinating and polyphonic story. Although focused on individual claims, they represent the attitudes of the inhabitants of south-eastern Poland in what to them was the sixth year of the war. What do they say? Understandably enough, peasants preferred to talk about requisitioning and military violence instead of focusing on their own growing income and social standing. In general, peasant victims and witnesses to military violence, Catholic and Uniate, were very reserved in their accounts of requisitions, theft, violence, and robbery, tending not to distinguish between the deeds of the Ukrainian and Polish units. For some, this distinction seemed unimportant. As someone in Sarnki Dolne (Sarnky) observed, for the inhabitants of the ethnically mixed territory, national identity was not a stable concept: "The local Polish inhabitants suffered less because they are mixed with Ruthenians [Ukrainians]. Consequently, a peasant, and particularly a peasant woman in fear would claim to be Ukrainian when faced by Ukrainians and Polish to a Polish soldier."<sup>25</sup>

22. Dimitri Tolkatsch, "Lokale Ordnungsentwürfe am Übergang vom Russischen Reich zur Sowjetmacht: Bauernaufstände und Dorfrepubliken in der Ukraine, 1917–1921," in Tim Buchen and Frank Grelka, eds., *Akteure der Neuordnung. Ostmitteleuropa und das Erbe der Imperien, 1917–1924 / W poszukiwaniu nowego ładu. Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia wobec upadku imperiów, 1917–1924* (Berlin, 2016), 93–111.

23. "Raport polityczno-informacyjny Sztabu Generalnego Wojska Polskiego o sytuacji w okęgach: warszawskim, krakowskim, łódzkim i kieleckim," in Marek Jabłonowski, Piotr Stawiecki, and Tadeusz Wawrzyński, eds., *O niepodległą i granice*, vol. 2: *Raporty i komunikaty naczelnych władz wojskowych o sytuacji wewnętrznej Polski 1919–1920* (Warsaw, 2000), 76–80.

24. Archiwum Akt Nowych [Central Archive of Modern Records] (Warsaw), Biuro Sejmu RP, 1919–1938, sygn. 56a, Działalność Komisji Sejmowej dla Badania Okrucieństw Ukraińskich. Protokoły o postępowaniu z ludnością podczas inwazji ukraińskiej XI 1918–V 1919.

25. "Pismo ks. Stanisława Cembrucha do Kurii Metropolitalnej obrządku łacińskiego we Lwowie o sytuacji w parafii Sarnki Dolne podczas inwazji ukraińskiej 1918–1919, Sarnki Dolne 16 IX 1919," in Józef Wolczański, ed., *Kościół rzymskokatolicki i Polacy w Małopolsce Wschodniej podczas wojny ukraińsko-polskiej 1918–1919. Źródła*, vol. 1 (L'viv, 2012), 598–99.



Many reports speak to a universal longing for a functioning state; for law and order. Some of the interviewed peasants seemed to have been inclined to welcome anybody capable of pacifying the region—in other words, of filling the space left by the dissolved empire. Many victims had already offered testimony in Ukrainian military courts, obviously not seeing them as a farce intended to mask the “barbaric character” of the Ukrainian state, as they were repeatedly accused of by Polish propaganda. Moreover, in some cases they succeeded in asserting their rights. They applied for an additional financial compensation in front of the Polish investigators. In such cases, the demand for justice seemed to ignore the national identity of the ever-changing police and court officials: they were equally interested or disinterested in being citizens of any of the competing nation states.

The feeling that permeates such testimonies seems to be that of physical and mental exhaustion rather than a nationalist mobilization. Better-off than workers and other city-dwellers, free from the trauma characteristic for minority groups such as the Jews, the peasants could form the social foundation of the new state, the nature of which seemed to be of secondary importance. What mattered was that it finally put an end to the insecurity of the war, or rather, many wars that tormented the region in the aftermath of the imperial war.

Poland, as well as other states of east central Europe, came about not as the product of conscious political action with which a majority of society could identify. In reality, there were many political and social phenomena, including the activities of pro-Austrian and pro-Russian political camps, as well as workers’ protests or the women rights movement that shaped the country’s future, thanks to the catalyzing and cataclysmic experience of the Great War. The estrangement between the empires and their subjects was one such experience, others included the development of self-government and the empowerment of workers. Finally, the sharpening of social and ethnic conflicts, although destructive to peaceful coexistence in a time of peace, contributed to the mobilization of society by pushing previously apolitical groups (such as the Orthodox Jewry in the Polish case) towards building their own political representations. These in turn took over the programs of the national movements and formed the basis on which state structures could develop. All the above-listed phenomena generated social energy. Where this energy would flow was an open question. In any case, it brought about a revolutionary change.