There is no doubt that World War II was much more destructive and traumatic in Eastern than in Western Europe. The difference was the result of many factors, among which the Nazi plans and policies were the most important. Yet, one could point to other events within East European history that contributed to the cruelty of World War II there.

One of the most consequential of them was the unprecedented brutalization of the civilian population in the years 1917–1921. During this period, the institutions of state ceased to exist in some parts of Eastern Europe. The local population had become accustomed to violence and terror and learned how to practice them in their own interests. A vicious circle was born: not infrequently, yesterday’s victims became victimizers the next morning or waited for an opportunity to appear, and when it did, struck twice as hard as the previous perpetrators. An escalation of violence was stopped to some extent after 1921 when the Polish-Soviet war ended but, in the 1930s, East Europeans were confronted with terror and violence again and, when World War II started, savagery erupted. The region where this process was especially conspicuous is located between the Rivers Dnieper and Western Dvina to the East, the River Bug and the Carpathian Mountains to the West, the Baltic Sea to the North and the Black Sea to the South. Before World War I, these «lands in between» forgotten by most Europeans were the Western provinces of Russia and Austrian-controlled Eastern Galicia.

This article examines the proliferation of violence in the Russian and Polish Borderlands after 1914. The first section of the article is devoted to socio-economic conditions in the region before World War I; the conditions that made the future proliferation possible. The second section concentrates on the years 1914–1918, when the war and the revolution in Russia introduced unprecedented violence to the «lands in between.» The third section describes the chaotic conditions created there by the Civil War in Russia and the local wars on the borders of Poland, when the disappearance of state institutions, law, and order prompted violence. The fourth section presents briefly the continuity of latent violence in
Eastern Europe between 1921 and 1939. This article not only emphasizes that the cruelties of World War II had their roots in World War I and the Russian Civil War, but it also argues that a sudden encounter of modernity with isolated traditional societies had sometimes an explosive character, and that a new kind of violence, a «modern violence,» was introduced during 1914–1921 in Eastern Europe. This «modern violence» of the 20th century differed in many ways from the previous forms of war violence. It was of a mass character and affected not only the combatants but also the entire population of a given big geographical region. Frequently, civilian casualties were bigger than military ones and the fighting armies deliberately exterminated and terrorized civilians. On the one hand, the «modern violence» was applied in a planned, well-organized, «industrial» way. On the other hand, however, military and political leaders soon lost control over the «modern violence,» which spiraled into chaos and, eventually, threatened both victims and perpetrators. It was supported by mass propaganda, previous «educational» preparations, brain wash, and sophisticated ideologies, which were to convince the perpetrators that their cruel activities were necessary and that they served a good cause.

The «modern violence» killed millions of people, changed ethnic composition of the affected regions, destroyed social structures, economies, traditional ways of thinking, and old worldviews. It scarred mentally the involved nations for generations, developed the old hostilities, provoked new antagonisms, and, in many regions, it initiated a vicious circle of hate and «counter-hate» that proved difficult to break. It transformed both losers and winners, who were poisoned by the remembrance of their cruel acts and by an anticipation of a possible revenge.

1. Before World War I The described Borderlands knew well the meaning of violence before 1917. Even though Galicia was a quiet province until World War I, social, ethnic, and political tensions accumulated there and erupted sporadically. This happened especially in Eastern Galicia, where the Polish-led administration, political establishment, and landowners conflicted with Ukrainian peasants and the newborn Ukrainian national movement. The latter asked for full emancipation of and equal rights for the Ukrainians and developed an increasingly aggressive anti-Polish campaign.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Polish-Ukrainian tension had reached a new dimension. In 1907, during the electoral campaign to the Galician Diet, the authorities banned 132 out of 544 Ukrainian rallies due to their leftist propaganda or to their supposed instigating of national hatred. In 1908, the viceroy of Galicia, Andrzej Potocki, was shot by a Ukrainian nationalist. Polish public opinion, especially the Polish press, responded to the Ukrainian campaign with hostile or contemptuous comments, answered by an even more aggressive Ukrainian press.
Both sides moved from misguided patriotism to national chauvinism. In addition, Russia tried to influence inter-ethnic relations in Galicia.¹

From the 1880s, the Poles and the Ukrainians came out against the Jews with increasing frequency. Since neither Poles nor Ukrainians constituted an absolute majority in Galicia, Jews could hold a political balance. This, however, proved to be impossible. On the contrary, the Jews found themselves between two fighting sides. In the Ukrainian peasant tradition, the Jews, together with the Polish nobility, Jesuits, and Tatars, formed a group of the most despised enemies. The situation in Galicia was affected by the 1881–1882 pogroms in Russia. The Poles, on the other hand, believed that the Jews were obliged to support the Polish establishment against the Ukrainians. When this did not happen, antisemitic comments appeared in the Galician Diet. The populist ideology of the Polish Peasant Party, established in 1892, included antisemitic theories. In the 1890s, antisemitic booklets appeared in Galicia, imported from Austria proper and translated into Polish. Impoverished and illiterate Galician peasants directed their frustration against the Jews. After the 1898 by-elections to the Reichsrat, when Father Stanisław Stojalowski, a Polish peasant leader, received a seat after an aggressive propaganda campaign, anti-Jewish riots broke out in 33 towns of Galicia. Several months later, during the by-election to the Galician Diet, the situation became increasingly tense and violence erupted frequently. A state of emergency was introduced in the province but, in 1903, anti-Jewish violent acts took place again. In 1905, a Galician branch of the Polish National Democratic Party was established and became the main vehicle of antisemitism in the province. Both parliamentary elections of 1907 and 1911 were accompanied by antisemitic campaigns. In 1911, a crowd of Jewish voters, provoked by rumors about electoral fraud, attacked a voting station in Drohobycz. During a police intervention 20 people were shot to death. A new term appeared in the Austrian political vocabulary: «Galician elections.»²

In Western Russia the potential for violence was even more developed. In 1863, after the outbreak of the Polish January Uprising, the Russian authorities were afraid that the Empire might lose the Congress Kingdom of Poland and the


Western Territories. Therefore, the Russian authorities started severe anti-Polish persecutions after the fall of the insurrection. In addition to about 30,000 insurgents killed during the uprising, the tsarist authorities executed hundreds of Poles and deported to Siberia almost 40,000 of them. Count Mikhail N. Murav’ev, appointed governor of the North-Western provinces, gained a well-deserved nickname: the «Hanger» (Veshatel’). The Polish population was terrorized and oppressed. The tsarist administration worked hard to reduce the Polish influence and the number of Polish-speaking nobles in the Western Territories. The Roman and the Greek Catholic Churches were suppressed. The authorities forbade the use of Polish in public. The tsarist policies towards the Poles changed slightly at the beginning of the 20th century but, until 1914, the Poles and the Russians considered the Borderlands a contested territory. In addition, the Belorussian or Ukrainian peasantry of the western gubernias frequently disliked the Polish nobles, who spoke a different language, adhered to a different religion, belonged to a different cultural world, and exploited the peasants.  

The most underprivileged people of the Western provinces, at least since the emancipation of the peasants, were the Jews. Concentrated in a huge «reservation», the Pale of Settlement, the Jews were oppressed and persecuted almost from the very moment when, after the Partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, they found themselves within the Russian borders. The tsarist anti-Jewish policies, particularly severe under Nicholas I (1825–1855), became milder under Alexander II (1855–1881). Yet, after Alexander’s assassination, a wave of anti-Jewish violence moved through western Russia. During the next two years, about 224 pogroms took place there. They were followed by an introduction of anti-Jewish laws and an intensification of economic exploitation. This pushed many Jews to revolutionary movements, which, in turn, convinced the political Right and the deeply religious Russian Orthodox people that the Jews were enemies of the Empire. In 1903, during a pogrom in Kishinev, a mob killed 45 Jews. While Jewish self-defense units and underground political parties were growing to participate en masse in the 1905 revolution, Russian chauvinist organizations were, at the same time, gaining strength. After the manifesto of Nicholas II in October 1905, pogroms took place in about 300 towns of the Pale of Settlement. In Odessa, about 400 Jews were killed. The tsar believed himself in an anti-Russian international Jewish conspiracy. Aggressive antisemitic propaganda appeared. In 1911, a Jew from Kiev, Menachem Beilis, was accused of ritual murder and a significant
portion of Russian public opinion believed the accusation. In the former Congress Kingdom of Poland, an anti-Jewish boycott was initiated in 1912.\footnote{P. Wróbel, «Przed odzyskaniem niepodległości,» in: J. Tomaszewski (ed.), Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce, Warsaw 1993, 13–25, 40–48.}

The violent events happened infrequently. The every-day life of the population of the described territories was peaceful and monotonous. Nevertheless, a potential for violence was there, especially given that peasants dominated local societies. Serfdom was abolished late in Russia and the peasants remained in a state of quasi-serfdom even after the emancipation decree of 1861. For example, legal restrictions continued to limit peasant mobility and peasant civil rights remained restricted well past the emancipation decree. In addition, post-emancipation peasants remained obliged to repay their redemption debts until the beginning of the 20th century. Perhaps most symbolic was that the old serf categories were still used in official documents. The peasants had, therefore, many things by which to remember serfdom; their lives were hard, backward, and brutal; their culture rough and primitive; and their thinking was permeated by hatred or at least dislike towards Jews, landowners, and townsfolk in general. The Russian provinces were governed in an autocratic harsh way, the society was militarized to a greater or lesser extent, and the Empire was sometimes called a «barracks state». The administration looked upon the peasants and treated them as a cross between savages and children. The peasants answered adequately during eruptions of violence as the 1905 revolution.\footnote{R. Pethybridge, The Social Prelude to Stalinism, London 1974, 73; Sh. Fitzpatrick, Stalin’s Peasants. Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization, New York 1994, 19–23; O. Figes, A People’s Tragedy. A History of the Russian Revolution, New York 1996, 95–98; St. P. Frank, «Popular Justice, Community, and Culture among the Russian Peasantry, 1870–1900,» in: B. Eklof/St. Frank (ed.), The World of the Russian Peasant: Post-Emancipation Culture and Society, Boston/Mass. 1990, 133–150; R. Pipes, The Russian Revolution, New York 1990, 164–165.}

In Galicia, the peasants still remembered the bloody 1846 Szela jacquerie when the peasants killed thousands of noblemen and, in the Eastern part of the province, the Polish establishment antagonized parts of the population.\footnote{H. Wereszycki, Historia Polityczna Polski, 1864–1918, Paris 1979, 172.}

\section*{2. The Impact of World War I}

all non-Russians (inorodtsy), censorship and martial law were imposed, and anybody «suspected» was deported east of the Volga River. Chaos appeared in the economic life of Russia. The military authorities acted with particular harshness towards the Jews who suffered during mobilization and the initial military operations. After the first failures of the Russian Army, its command started looking for a scapegoat and found it in the Jewish population. The tsarist authorities decided to evacuate the Jews from the «theater of war operations.» Altogether about 500,000 and 600,000 Jews were removed from their native towns and sent to the East or to bigger cities in the war zone. Numerous people were robbed and killed. Hunger and disease appeared among the displaced people. The economic crisis, the disintegration of Russian bureaucracy, brutal military requisitions, and lack of coordination among governing institutions affected everyone in Russia. In general, however, the peasants suffered far more than the urban population.8

The evacuation became really extensive in the late spring of 1915 when Russia started loosing the war and when it became clear that her army would abandon a part of the Western Territories. This time, the evacuation included mostly the non-Jewish population. From the areas located directly behind the Eastern border of the former Congress Kingdom of Poland, the Russians removed between 80 and 90 percent of all the inhabitants. From other districts of the Grodno and Vilna provinces, between 25 and 50 percent of the entire population was sent to the East. The tsarist authorities tried to evacuate first «their» people: the Russian and Belorussian Orthodox population. Some villages escaped without any pressure from the authorities, but many people did not want to go and tried to hide in the woods to wait for the Germans. The columns of the deportees were followed by Cossack detachments who burned and destroyed everything in their path. The Russian authorities also evacuated industrial facilities, financial assets, and any objects of value. The evacuation became an economic disaster for the affected territories.9

A similar tragedy happened in Eastern Galicia. Occupied by the Russians in 1914, it was ruled even more harshly than the Western Russian gubernias. The pre-war Polish establishment was removed. The status of the Galician Jews was


«equalized» with the legal position of the Russian Jewry. Almost every Russian unit, upon entering a town, harassed and robbed the local Jews, who were accused of spying or siding with the enemy. Yet, the enemy – the Austrian Army – frequently accused the Jews of the same crime and some Austrian units were no better than the Cossacks. Thousands of Jews fled, leaving behind all of their property. The exodus resembled the panic during the Khmel’nyts’kyi Uprising of 1648 when the Cossacks and Ukrainian peasants killed 10,000 of Jews. Between 200,000 and 400,000 refugees moved to Hungary, Austria proper, Bohemia or other parts of Galicia. Camps were established where the refugees received food, clothing and shelter, although usually, these were wooden huts without sanitation, where infectious diseases were frequent and the mortality rate was high. Initially, the local population helped wholeheartedly, but later, when food shortages also developed among the non-Jewish population, the previous friendly atmosphere vanished. In Vienna, antisemites became increasingly active, started talking about the «Judaization» of the Austrian capital, and demanded that refugees be removed and isolated in special camps. A concept of a Lager, the stigma of the 20th century, was born. Some of the displaced Jews tried to return home when Eastern Galicia was retaken by the Austrian and German troops. Not infrequently the return proved to be impossible because the local non-Jewish population took over abandoned real estate and did not want to return it to the legal owners. The refugees had to stay in bigger towns, impoverished and displaced.10

In mid-1915, the Central Powers ejected the Russians from their Western provinces and moved the front to the Riga-Pinsk-Romanian frontier. German and Austrian army units flooded Lithuania, Western Belorussia, and Western Ukraine. Local peasants, whose way of life, technology, and education resembled 18th century standards, were exposed now to modern equipment, a large military machine, modern propaganda, and several other phenomena, which overwhelmed the peasants and could not fit into their set of mind. The occupiers supported national movements to use Poles, Lithuanians, Belorussians, Jews, and Ukrainians against each other and started unscrupulous economic exploitation of the newly conquered areas.11 The exploitation was accompanied by violence and abuses of power described by Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius in the following way:

«Central authorities could not control the behavior of subordinates in remoter areas. If the army took from the land what it needed, claiming everything as its property, the same lordly treatment was applied to natives. In the streets, natives were required to


11 Handelsman, Polska w czasie, 53 and next.
make way for German officials, saluting and bowing. Violence became increasingly routine, with reported public beatings. There were numerous complaints of German soldiers raping and mistreating native girls and women, while men trying to defend them were beaten and threatened with death. Brutality toward natives went unchecked from above, due to the imperative of preserving a unified front. This contradiction, however, drove an ever-deeper wedge between the image of the state and reality on the ground, what was happening «out there,» as the popular mood grew ugly.»  

The turning point of the war in Eastern Europe came, however, in March 1917. The revolution and the abdication of Nicholas II (1894–1917) were followed by the growing disintegration of the Russian administration and the army. The new Provisional Government was unable to stop this process and some regions, especially those close to the front, plunged into chaos. After the Bolshevik revolution in late 1917, the destructive process accelerated. Between October 1917 and the spring of 1918, almost nine million soldiers melted away from the Russian army into civilian life. Among those who did not return home were numerous soldiers who had moved to autonomous national non-Russian units, such as Polish, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Latvian, Estonian, or Czech, for example. In late 1917, three Polish corps appeared on the Eastern front. In early 1918, the largest of them, the First Corps of Gen. Józef Dowbór-Muśnicki, reached almost 30,000 soldiers and controlled a big area south of Belorussian Minsk.

At first, the Polish Corps tried to keep a neutral attitude towards the Bolsheviks. This, however, proved to be impossible. The Poles believed that since they operated in the territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth their activities were legitimate and would lead to the reconstruction of the Polish state. To the Bolsheviks, the First Corps was just a part of the counterrevolutionary forces and the Polish units were plunged into the Russian Civil War. They also tried to defend Polish estates and manors against the local peasants who understood the revolution first of all as an opportunity to obtain land. Initially after March 1917, the peasants moved cautiously, but then, when police, courts, and the army disappeared, they took full advantage of the near complete anarchy that appeared after October 1917 in the western territories. The peasants began to attack estates and to seize equipment, crops, and, finally, land. Not infrequently, local landowners were killed if they did not manage to escape. Their former servants and employees turned against them, participating in robbery and violence. In some regions, such as the provinces of Kiev, Bratslav, and Podolia, peasant attacks,

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the revolution, and the Civil War meant the end of the Polish-speaking population who had been living there for centuries.15

The appearance of national units and the disappearance of the pre-war elites were also by-products of an attempt to build national and independent states in the Western territories of Russia. The fall of the tsarist regime in March 1917 was followed by the establishment of the Ukrainian Central Rada (Council) in Kiev. Initially, the Rada asked for Ukrainian autonomy within a federated democratic Russia. In late 1917, however, the Ukrainian plans for autonomy were challenged by the centralist policies of the Bolsheviks, and as a result, the Rada moved towards a program of full independence. This provoked a Bolshevik military intervention. In January 1918, after heavy fighting, the Bolsheviks took Kiev. Similar but less developed processes started in Belorussia, Latvia, and Estonia. Everywhere national leaders tried to build new administrations and to remove White Russian, Bolshevik and, in some places, Polish control. A labyrinth of various administrative establishments, Bolshevik revolutionary committees, as well as military institutions confiscated food and conscripted people, creating an unprecedented chaos. The border between civilian and military life disappeared almost completely. Fronts were replaced by local internal campaigns moving back and forth. The civilian population was involved in these campaigns to a great degree. Frequently, people had to fight on their own doorsteps to preserve remnants of their personal estate. In late 1917, when the Bolshevik-Ukrainian military conflict began and law and order were replaced by violent anarchy, anti-Jewish pogroms started in Ukraine again. Limited in size and ultimately in effect, they were nevertheless quite numerous: about 60 of them took place in November and December 1917.16

All the stormy events of World War I, both on the German and the Russian and later Bolshevik side of the Eastern front, affected the local population, especially the peasants, a great deal. For centuries, the peasantry had lived in a closed and conservative agricultural society. The peasant daily routine was regulated by natural economy, by tradition, and by the Orthodox religion. During the war and the revolution, their old folk culture was threatened by completely different cultural patterns. These new «aggressive» patterns destroyed or, at least, compromised the traditional scales of values, beliefs, and ways of life of the peasantry.


The «old thinking» was unable to explain the events that happened after the outbreak of World War I and did not tell the peasants what to do to answer the new challenges. At the same time, however, the peasants were not able to assimilate to the new civilization, which suddenly «visited» their homeland. A cultural vacuum appeared in some spheres of life. Traditional moral authorities, represented by the tsar, the (already crumbling) Orthodox Church, the old society, and the folk culture, disintegrated. The peasants, especially the young ones, were looking for new patterns to fill the cultural vacuum. Many rejected tradition and moved towards radical political worldviews and nihilism. Such radicalism fostered anarchic and violent behavior, especially during the prolonged absence of central authorities but, even after the end of the 1914–1921 conflict, many people in Eastern Europe were still completely confused, intellectually and morally vulnerable, and open to dangerous ideas.17

Numerous well-known contemporary personalities, such as Maksim Gor’kii, despaired over a «zoological» outburst of violence and destruction in Russia. As Orlando Figes put it:

«It is difficult to say where this barbarism came from – whether it was the culture of the Russian peasants, or the harsh environment in which they lived. During the revolution and civil war the peasantry developed even more gruesome forms of killing and torture. They mutilated the bodies of their victims, cut off their heads and disgorged their internal organs. [...] The violence and cruelty which the old regime inflicted on the peasant was transformed into a peasant violence which not only disfigured daily village life, but which also rebounded against the regime in the terrible violence of the revolution.»18

In early 1918, the Germans and Austrians stopped the spiral of chaotic and violent events in the western territories of Russia. To prompt the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the armies of the Central Powers started a new military offensive and occupied most of Ukraine, Belorussia, and the Baltic countries. Berlin established its puppet governments and military occupation there. The Bolsheviks were ejected and the fighting stopped, at least for a short time. Yet, the new stabilization imposed by the Reich and Austria was shaky. The Central Powers exploited economically the newly conquered territories. The Germans arrested numerous Ukrainian political activists, officials, journalists, officers of Ukrainian military units, lawyers, and intellectuals. Some of them were sent to special concentration camps. The occupational forces were searching for arms and food,
and in doing so, harassed or even burned rebellious villages. Local people opposed the new occupiers who, eventually, were unable to control the countryside but killed many villagers during retribution operations. Already in the spring of 1918, 10,000 of peasants organized themselves in armed units and attacked German and Austrian garrisons.\textsuperscript{19} Underground or semi-legal Ukrainian, Polish, Belorussian, Bolshevik organizations were getting ready to participate in the new coming conflicts.\textsuperscript{20} It was increasingly obvious that the Germans were loosing the war. After several months, the new order established in Brest-Litovsk was over. After the armistice and the outbreak of a revolution in the Reich in November 1918, the German armies started an evacuation of the Eastern territories. This triggered a new eruption of violence.

3. The Civil War, chaos, and the proliferation of violence

The German evacuation was followed by an invasion of the Red Army. The Bolshevik government declared the Brest-Litovsk Treat null and void. The Red Army re-occupied the territories lost in early 1918 and before. In the first days of January 1919, the Bolsheviks were already in Vilna and declared there the establishment of the Soviet Lithuanian-Belorussian Republic. Polish self-defense units tried to stop the invasion but they were unable to organize any significant resistance without the help of Polish regular troops isolated from the Lithuanian theater of war operations by the German units, continuing their evacuation from the East through Brest-Litovsk, Bialystok, and East Prussia. At the same time, Leon Trotsky led the Red Army against independent Ukraine where the Rada and its Directory took over the power.

From the very beginning of this stage of the 1914–1921 conflict in Eastern Europe, the Jews were seen as allies of the Bolsheviks and as the driving force behind the Soviet movement. Radical Jews caught the attention of the world long before 1917 since they were in a disproportionate number among the theoreticians, leaders, and rank and file of the leftist movements. The 1917 Revolution was greeted by the Russian Jews as a great event, the end of their suffering, and the beginning of a new era of liberation. Most non-Jews did not know that, initially, many Jews remained mistrustful towards the Revolution. However, this distrust disappeared soon. The Soviets defended Jews against the antisemitic counter-revolution. The new regime needed educated people and the Jews were promoted from pariahs to the new elite. The Jews became prominent in the Bolshevik leadership and in the Cheka (Chrezvychainia Komissiia). In 1919, about 75 percent of the Kiev Cheka employees were Jewish. In 1927, the Jews

\textsuperscript{19} Abramson, A Prayer, 99; Pobóg-Malinowski, Najnowsza, 121; Wł. Mędrzecki, Niemiecka interwen-cja militarna na Ukrainie w 1918 roku, Warsaw 2000, 219–223.

constituted 1.8 percent of the entire Soviet population but they made up 10.3 percent of the civil servants in the Moscow public administration, 22.6 percent in Ukraine and 30 percent in Belorussia. In the Borderlands, where the Jews constituted a big part of the urban population and an even bigger segment of the educated people active in politics, Bolshevism was identified with the Jews. To many ordinary people, the sudden appearance of the Jews in governmental positions previously reserved for the non-Jews explained why the entire world turned upside-down after 1917. Orlando Figes quotes a leading Russian sociologist who described the mass Judeophobia in 1921 in the following way:

«Hatred of the Jews is one of the most prominent features of Russian life today; perhaps even the most prominent. Jews are hated everywhere – in the north, in the south, in the east, and in the west. They are hated by people regardless of their class or education, political persuasion, race, or age.»

As a consequence, the Jews were attacked everywhere in the regions of anti-Bolshevik fighting, especially in Ukraine. Pogroms started when the Germans evacuated Kiev. Initially the Directory troops committed most of the atrocities. The number of pogroms, which had risen in the winter and the early spring of 1919, suddenly dropped, and rose again in May when a local peasant warlord, Nykyfor Hryhoriv (Grigor’ev), attacked the Jews. In the summer of 1919, the White Russian Army of General Anton I. Denikin was responsible for most crimes. Later, the Red Army and the Polish Army participated in the pogroms, although, starting in December 1919, the wave of pogroms faded.

Altogether, between 50,000 and 60,000 Jews were killed in Ukraine from December 1918 to December 1919. Out of approximately 1,300 pogroms that took place at that time in Ukraine, about 90 percent happened in the provinces of Kiev, Podolia, and Volhynia. Not only Jewish communities suffered. Some other social groups, such as the pacifist Mennonites, were assaulted frequently as well. Between March 1917 and February 1919, Kiev had ten different governments: the Tsar, the Provisional Government, the Rada, the Bolsheviks, the Rada again, the Rada with the Germans, the Germans with Hetman Pavlo Skoropads’kyi, the Hetman with the Whites, the Directory, and the Bolsheviks. Some other parts of Ukraine were invaded, occupied, and taken over even more frequently. Proskuriv changed hands 16 times between March 1917 and January 1921. Every time, there was at least some «collateral damage.» Over 50 percent of the Jewish communities

22 Figes, A People’s, 676.
23 Abramson, A Prayer, 112–113.
were attacked more than once, and two communities were attacked 11 times. All regular and irregular forces operating in Ukraine were responsible for the pogroms, however, 40 percent of them were committed by Petliura’s Directory Army, which was composed of about 100,000 soldiers-volunteers who usually had no idea about policies and plans of the Ukrainian government. About 25 percent of the pogroms were started by peasant groups, 17 percent by the White Army, 9 percent by the Red Army, 4 percent by Hryhoriiv, 3 percent by the Polish Army, and 3 percent by unidentified units. Merely 12 percent of the pogroms were free of murder. Hryhoriiv’s forces initiated «only» 52 pogroms but killed 3,471 Jews – 67 persons per pogrom. Polish Army units killed «only» 4 Jews per pogrom. In the worst case, the 3rd Haidamak Regiment of the Petliura brigade of the Zaporozhian Cossacks killed 1,500 Jews in Proskuriv between the 15th and the 18th of February 1919.24

The Jews and the civilian population were killed not only in the former Russian Ukraine. The disintegration of the German and Austrian empires and their occupational systems in the East triggered violent events in most regions of the discussed territories. Already in October 1918, the Ukrainian members of the Reichsrat and a group of Ukrainian politicians from Eastern Galicia and Bukovina proclaimed the creation of a Ukrainian state, called later the Western Ukrainian National Republic. On November 1, 1918, Ukrainian units from the former Austrian army took control over most of Eastern Galicia. In some of its towns, especially in Lwów (ukr. L’viv), the Polish population resisted and, soon, was supported by Polish military units from central Poland. The Polish-Ukrainian war started. On November 22, the Polish Army retook Lwów. After heavy fighting in the winter, the Poles gained an upper hand in the spring of 1919 even though a union was proclaimed between Western and Kiev Ukraine. In July 1919, the Poles pushed the West Ukrainian troops beyond the River Zbrucz, the pre-war Austrian-Russian border.

The Polish-West Ukrainian conflict assumed quickly a cruel character. Eastern Galicia was flooded by deserters, soldiers of the disintegrating Austrian army, criminals escaping from dysfunctional prisons, and all kinds of people who took advantage of the chaos and the crumbling apart of state institutions.25 Many of these «loose» people were true patriots and joined the fighting sides. In Lwów, a gruesome Jewish pogrom started after the Polish Army entered the city.

24 Ibid., 115–126. There are many estimates of the Jewish losses in the post-World War I pogroms in Ukraine. Henry Abramson’s book is probably not only the most recent but also the most reliable one. Originally, it was his Ph.D. thesis based on meticulous research in the Ukrainian archives.

Over 70 Jews were killed and a large amount of property was destroyed, including the main synagogue of the Lwów community. In November 1918 alone, smaller pogroms and other forms of anti-Jewish violence took place in over 100 towns of Eastern Galicia. Both Polish and Ukrainian units killed prisoners of war (POWs) and military medical personnel, terrorized and exterminated the civilian population, took hostages, burned entire villages, established inhuman internment camps, confiscated and destroyed private property, and demolished cultural and religious objects. About 25,000 Polish people went through Ukrainian internment camps and prisons before July 1919. Losing the war, the Ukrainians acted in an increasingly cruel way. After their victory, the Poles pacified Eastern Galicia with an iron hand. Over 100,000 Ukrainians found themselves in Polish camps and prisons; about 20 percent of them died of infectious diseases.26

A similar conflict to that in Eastern Galicia started in 1918 in the territories of the historical Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The Russian March Revolution awakened new hopes among Lithuanians, who acted quickly to establish the Lithuanian National Council in Petrograd. In response, the Germans, who occupied Lithuania, allowed the Lithuanians to organize the Council of Lithuania (Taryba) in Vilna. In December 1917 and in February 1918, the Taryba proclaimed the establishment of the state of Lithuania, with its capital at Vilna, and in «eternal and strong» association with Germany. In April 1918, the Taryba elected Prince Wilhelm von Urach as the King of Lithuania but, later, anticipating the German defeat, the Council started emancipating itself from Berlin's control. In early November 1918, Lithuanians, supported by the Germans who still occupied the country, started building a government and an administration. According to the Lithuanian leaders, their new state would include most of the former Russian provinces of Vilna, Kaunas, Grodno, and Suwałki. Yet, the Poles constituted a strong minority there or, like in the region of Vilna, a clear majority, and started building their own institutions. In some towns, especially in Vilna, the Polish institutions were stronger than Lithuanian ones, even though their situation was difficult because they were isolated from the newly established Polish state by the German evacuation lines. All the three players, the German, the Lithuanian,
and the Polish establishments, were pressed by the Red Army, coming from the East.  

On January 2, 1919, the Lithuanian government and the German army escaped the Bolshevik threat and evacuated Vilna. The city was taken over by the Polish self-defense units. After heavy fighting, they destroyed local communist forces and ejected the last German detachments from the suburbs. The Poles did not attack a small Lithuanian detachment, left in Vilna by the Lithuanian government, and did not manage to defend the city against the Red Army, which took Vilna on January 5, 1919. The Bolsheviks terrorized the local population and advanced slowly towards Kaunas. Small semi-partisan Lithuanian units tried to stop the conquest of their country but would not be able to do so without German help. The Bolsheviks arrived in Vilna with a previously formed Lithuanian Soviet government and, on February 27, 1919, proclaimed the establishment of the unified Soviet Republic of Lithuania and Belorussia. The Bolshevik regime was discontinued when, on April 19, 1919, a Polish military expedition re-took Vilna and, later, ejected the Red Army from the entire region.  

Unfortunately, the Polish victory over the Bolsheviks renewed local conflicts. The Lithuanian national leaders opposed the federation plan of the Polish leader, Józef Piłsudski, who tried to form a state resembling the pre-partition Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and insisted on Polish recognition of the independence of their state «with its capital in Vilna.» The Polish forces, advancing North-West against the Bolsheviks, approached the Lithuanian positions. After a number of skirmishes, several lines of demarcation were drawn, but none of them was recognized by both sides. Tension between Lithuania and Poland was growing. In August 1919, the Poles unsuccessfully tried to organize a coup d’état in Lithuania to establish a Polish-friendly government there. In the same month, when the Germans began to evacuate the Suwałki region and the Lithuanians took it over, local Polish underground organizations started an uprising and, after fierce fighting, liberated the region. Both Poles and Lithuanians arrested and harassed civilians.  

In addition, a significant portion of Jewish public opinion in the contested Polish-Lithuanian territories was against the Polish takeover. Frequently, the Jews preferred to be citizens of a democratic Russia or, since the latter did not materialize, of a multiethnic big Lithuania. Jewish press and individual figures expressed this opinion freely. Many Poles believed that the Jews supported the Bolsheviks. Ezra Mendelsohn wrote:


28 Łossowski, Konflikt, 31–46; Gerutis, Lithuania, 162–164.

On April 19, 1919, when the Polish troops entered Vilna, a pogrom started. About 80 Jews lost their lives; many were wounded, robbed, arrested, and deported from the city. During the same campaign, the Polish army initiated several pogroms, among which the atrocities in Pinsk (April 5), Lida (April 17), and Minsk (August 8) are the best known.

Polish rule over the former territories of the historical Grand Duchy of Lithuania also disappointed the Belorussians who initially, after the Poles ejected the Red Army to Russia proper, seemed to support an association with Poland. The Poles, however, did not give the Belorussians any autonomy even though some Polish politicians talked about federation and partnership. Landowners were returning to their estates that had been previously seized by local peasants. The new administration did not care about Belorussian sensitivities and aspirations. Already in the summer of 1919, the first anti-Polish guerilla units appeared in Belorussia. Frequently led by local communists, they cooperated with the Bolsheviks. Later, in April 1920, an anti-Polish peasant uprising spread through the entire region of Minsk. The insurgents attacked again Polish manors and administration officials. The Poles answered with arrests of suspicious individuals, introduced martial law in some areas, and organized punitive raids against rebellious villages. At the same time, Polish guerilla units operated behind the Bolshevik lines. Some of their commanders were brave and talented military leaders but, not infrequently, they terrorized and robbed the local population.

All the violent conflicts between the Poles, the Jews, the Belorussians, the Ukrainians, the Lithuanians, the Latvians, the White Russians, and the Bolsheviks were made even more complicated by the German presence and activities in the Polish-Russian Borderlands in 1919. According to the armistice of November 11, 1918, the Germans had to evacuate all the territories occupied by them after 1914.

In the case of the Eastern front, however, the evacuation was to be postponed until the Entente would be able to control the territories of German and Austrian occupation. The Western allies wanted to avoid the infiltration of these areas by the Bolsheviks. This plan did not work because revolution also started in the German armies in the East. Many units disintegrated or returned to Germany on their own. In some other units Soldatenräte appeared and started fraternizing with the Bolsheviks. This prompted German leaders to accelerate the evacuation.

This plan was not easy to realize either. Some important German politicians believed that it would be possible to keep a part of the conquered Eastern territories and, as a result, the highest military command, the Oberste Heeresleitung, sent an instruction to the East that the evacuation of all the occupied regions was not in the best interest of Germany. Chaos was growing in the East every day. Hundreds of thousands of people moved back and forth: Russian POWs were returning home from German and Austrian camps; Central European and German POWs taken by the tsarist army; Polish, Belorussian, Lithuanian, and Jewish deportees and émigrés were escaping from Russia. In mid-November 1918, the Germans controlled only two evacuation railways: Brest-Litovsk-Białystok-East Prussia and Vilna-Kaunas-East Prussia. The Poles threatened both of them and the Germans had to send new units from the Reich to defend them. In Ukraine the evacuating armies were attacked or disarmed by various Ukrainian units and the French and British troops landing in the Black Sea ports. At the same time, additional German units evacuated from Turkey landed in these ports. In late November and December 1918, the Germans evacuated their armies from Belorussia and Estonia. In early January 1919, about 200,000 German troops moved back to the line Slonim-Grodno-Kaunas-Mitau (Jelgava) and started defending it. In January and February, the Landwehr and Landsturm soldiers were replaced by about 30,000 good and motivated volunteer units – the Freikorps. Their members were mostly fierce German patriots and professional soldiers who were unable to return to the civilian life. They participated in the local wars and revolutionary events in and out of Germany and this «post-war experience» added new elements to their «war experience,» additionally strengthened their...
Kriegsidentität – the «war identity» and, not infrequently, its important segment – the love of violence.\textsuperscript{35}

In November 1918, the German units helped to establish the Latvian Republic. Its big and influential German minority hoped that the new state would associate with the Reich. Having only small Latvian troops to fight against the Red Army, the Latvian government invited volunteers from Germany and promised them land and citizenship. Thousands of World War I veterans came to Latvia and fought in the Iron Division against the Bolsheviks in the winter and the spring of 1919. In May, the Freikorps-men and the Latvians ejected the Red Army from Riga. The fighting between the Bolsheviks and the Freikorps, almost 50,000 men strong, was so cruel that some of the toughest German veterans were horrified about the cruelty of their own colleagues and about what they described later as Bolshevik atrocities, which in turn served as legitimization for even more brutal revenge. When the Bolsheviks captured Mitau, the old capital of Courland, they took the mummified bodies of Courland 18th century princes out of their graves, stood them up against the wall, and shot the bodies as if it were an execution of living people. In early June, the Germans reached the Estonian lines and attacked them. Yet, the Freikorps-men were already exhausted; they fought against the Bolsheviks, the Estonians, and eventually conflicted with the Latvians who pushed them to the South. Under the pressure of the Entente, Berlin ordered the Freikorps-men to return to the Reich. Most Baltikumers from the Iron Division rebelled and, joined by new volunteers coming from the Reich, declared themselves soldiers of the White Russian Army of Colonel Paul Awalow-Bermond. In October, the Iron Division tried to retake Riga but was defeated by the Latvians supported by the British. In mid-November 1919, the Baltikumers decided to retreat to the Reich. Desperate and possessed by Vernichtungsfreude, they fought against the civilian population and destroyed everything in their way. In December 1919, over 20,000 Baltikumers crossed the German frontier, after they made havoc of Courland and northern Lithuania.\textsuperscript{36}

The Baltic Freikorps episode left a dangerous legacy aptly summarized by Lilevicius:

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«The bloody end of the Baltic rampage made beasts of the adventurers, producing a nihilistic identity exulting in destruction and advance. The same conflict also had decisive results for natives, as these 1919 wars of liberation were viewed as baptism of fire for independence. [...] The Freikorps saw the East as a place with no limits, where the only order was violence. While they had hoped that the adventure would produce a stable identity, honor, and settlement for German soldiers, it pitched them into unreality and madness. The rampage brutalized Baltikumer, leaving them with a greater hatred for what they saw as a monolithic, threatening East, which had first changed and then defeated them.»

At that time, in the fall of 1919, the Poles stopped their military operations against the Red Army and started negotiating peace with the Soviets. General Denikin’s White Army was quite successful and it appeared that Bolshevik power would be soon over. The Whites, supported by the West, wanted to return to the pre-war Russian borders. Their maximum concession for an independent Poland would be a small state resembling the Congress Kingdom. Therefore, Piłsudski did not help Denikin. In the spring of 1920, however, it became obvious that the Polish-Soviet negotiations were fruitless and that the Bolshevik regime would survive. In April, the Poles signed an alliance with Petliura’s Ukrainian government. Together, they started a new offensive to eject the Bolsheviks from Ukraine and to destroy their main forces. On May 7, 1920, the Polish and Ukrainian troops took Kiev but the Red Army avoided a decisive battle, regrouped, received reinforcements, attacked, and, on June 5, broke the Polish-Ukrainian front. Two months later the Bolsheviks reached Warsaw.

This time, it appeared that Polish independence was over. The Soviets started imposing their system on the conquered territories. On July 8, 1920, the Galician Revolutionary Committee (Galrevkom) was established, on July 16, the Belorussian Revolutionary Committee (Belrevkom) and, on July 30, the Temporary Revolutionary Committee of Poland (Polrevkom) was organized. The Polrevkom coordinated the activities of 65 local revkoms. True communists were not numerous in East Polish towns and villages so the revkoms were staffed by people from Russia and by local opportunistic individuals. Russian, Polish, and Yiddish ought to be the official languages of communist Poland. The Polrevkom initiated a communist propaganda campaign, began to organize a Polish Red Army, and proclaimed, among others, that it «(a) has removed the previous gentry-bourgeois government; (b) is constructing factory and farm committees; (c) is creating municipal revolutionary committees; (d) is declaring all factories, land and forests to be national property administered by municipal and rural workers’ committees.»

37 Liulevicius, War Land, 243.
Those who opposed this program faced a militia recruited exclusively from workers and peasants and revolutionary tribunals created «to counter political and economic crimes and banditry.» Peasant committees were encouraged to take over and to divide estates, monthly food rations were declared, and the communist authorities planned to confiscate food surpluses. Some *revkoms* started arresting «capitalists» and ordered «property owners» to register. During the last two weeks of July, the *revkom* of Grodno managed to put 124 people to prison. In Vilna, the Bolsheviks arrested and executed a number of people and robbed the city. Everywhere in the occupied territories, the new authorities confiscated church property, planned to introduce a new type of school system, removed Polish national symbols from public places, levied contributions on rich entrepreneurs, and redirected former officials to physical work. In addition, the *Belrevkom* and *Galrevkom* announced the Red Army invasion as the liberation of the Belorussians and the Ukrainians from «the Polish yoke». Interethnic relations in the Borderlands also deteriorated because the Jews constituted a majority in many if not most *revkoms.*

The *Galrevkom* survived only two months and the Temporary Revolutionary Committee of Poland – only two weeks. During the battle of Warsaw (August 15–18, 1920) and the battle of Niemen (September 20–28, 1920), the Poles defeated the Red Army, recovered the Borderlands, and forced the Bolsheviks to negotiate. On October 12, 1920, an armistice was signed and the fighting stopped. Now the Poles settled their scores. Numerous people suspected of collaborating with the Bolsheviks were arrested. To an average Pole, a person supporting the Soviets was a traitor of the worst kind. A wave of denunciations went through Eastern Poland. State propaganda strengthened stereotypes of «Judeo-communism» (*żydokomuna*) and of a «Soviet Fifth Column» (*agentura sowiecka*). The Communist Workers’ Party of Poland was destroyed and most of its members were arrested. Many people escaped from the Borderlands. The left-oriented Jewish parties, such as the Bund, were persecuted as well.

Before the Polish-Soviet Peace Treaty of March 18, 1921 was signed in Riga, Poland participated in another war in the East. During their anti-Polish offensive, the Bolsheviks occupied Vilna again on July 15, 1920. Soviet Russia was looking for

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allies or, at least, neutral neighbours and, on August 25, 1920, it handed over Vilna and its region to Lithuania. Her government started moving to the new capital. The Poles did not accept the Moscow-Kaunas deal and attacked the Lithuanians. However, the diplomatic contact between Warsaw and Kaunas was not broken. Neither Poland nor Lithuania wanted this war. Both sides started negotiating a demarcation line. Prompted by the League of Nations, they signed an agreement on October 7, 1920 in Suwałki. The region of Vilna came under the jurisdiction of Lithuania.

Poland could not afford another war. The West was already convinced that she was an aggressive, unmanageable state, grabbing too much land from her neighbors. Yet, the region of Vilna was populated mostly by Poles. Several important Polish politicians and military leaders, including Piłsudski, were natives of this area. They did not accept the Suwałki agreement. Piłsudski encouraged another man from the Vilna region, General Lucjan Żeligowski, to «rebel». Żeligowski and his Lithuanian-Belorussian Division, recruited in the territories taken by Lithuania, announced that they left the Polish Army and decided to recover their motherland on their own. After several days of heavy fighting, the Lithuanians were ejected from the region, which remained in Polish hands. Kaunas did not recognize this and officially, until 1938, Poland and Lithuania were in the state of war. Threatened by the Poles and the Soviets, Lithuanian society became more and more nationalistic.42

The Żeligowski «revolt» closed a series of wars in the Borderlands. On March 18, 1921, the Polish and the Soviet governments signed a peace treaty. This was the real end of World War I in Eastern Europe. After over six years of conflicts and destruction, a peaceful era started. The Borderlands were devastated. Some regions and some branches of economy did not recover during the entire inter-war period. The middle class was destroyed. Even on the Polish side of the border many people were starving.43 The war brought not only economic destruction, but also psychological damage. People became more inclined towards physical violence. Most leaders tolerated lawlessness and violence when this suited them. Social terror, especially in Soviet Russia, was institutionalized, and scarcity of food was used as a political weapon. Entire ethnic groups were angry about the outcome of the war.43 Probably about 13 million people died in Europe between 1914 and the


early 1920s. Yet, those who survived were deeply affected too. Eric Hobsbawm described the veterans’ «sense of incommunicable and savage superiority» towards most people and asked: «Why should men who had killed and seen their friends killed and mangled, hesitate to kill and brutalize the enemies of a good cause?»

Historian Mark Mazower wrote about dysfunctional families and 500,000 war widows in Germany and concluded:

«To millions of other women, the men who came home from the war carried the physical and mental scars of their experience. They were «destroyed men» (in a contemporary phrase) and «wounded patriarchs.» Incapable of reintegration into civilian life, haunted by wartime memories, many committed suicide – rates rose fast at the end of the war – drank themselves into oblivion or tried to reassert their authority by beating their wives and children.»

All these phenomena applied well to Eastern Europe. There, the war destroyed the old safe world, old values, and social structures and pushed the people towards violence, nationalism, and hatred. A new scale of values and a new price of human life were introduced. Eastern and Central Europe became dominated by the veterans of World War I, post-1918 local wars and revolutions to a greater extent than France, Great Britain, or the United States.

4. The interwar period The unprecedented potential for violence, built up in the Borderlands during and after World War I, was difficult to discharge, because the inter-war period was not quite peaceful there. Historian George L. Mosse wrote:

«To many all over Europe it seemed as if the First World War had never ended but was being continued during the interwar years. The vocabulary of political battle, the desire to utterly destroy the political enemy, and the way in which these adversaries were pictured, all seemed to continue the First World War mostly against a set of different, international foes.»

This statement fully applies to the Borderlands. On the Polish side of the Riga Treaty frontier, the army ruled during the first years after the war. The military exploited and terrorized the local people but did not manage to bring the situation under control. A plague of banditry appeared in the Eastern provinces of Poland. Arms were available everywhere. New armed groups constantly crossed the border from Soviet Russia to Poland. The Polish authorities fought against Belorussian

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46 Pawluczuk, Światopogląd, 139–145.
47 Mosse, Fallen Soldiers, 160.
guerillas that operated in the North-West until 1923. The local population was antagonized by Polish military settlers who took land, jobs, and state positions in the East. The government in Warsaw considered an introduction of martial law in the Borderlands still flooded by refugees from Soviet Russia. Some stabilization was reached in 1924, when the Corps of Border Defense (KOP) was established to protect the Polish-Soviet frontier. Yet, throughout the entire inter-war period, the Polish authorities did not have a consistent and reasonable policy towards the Eastern national minorities.49

This was especially visible in Eastern Galicia. The Polish authorities there tried to divide Ukrainians into smaller groups and denationalize them, refused to give them any autonomy, banned or censored their newspapers, isolated Volhynia from Eastern Galicia, which had been renamed Eastern Little Poland (Małopolska Wschodnia), removed Ukrainian inscriptions from official buildings, dismissed numerous officials of Ukrainian origin, supervised Ukrainian schools, and turned the University of Lwów into a purely Polish institution, abolishing all Ukrainian chairs. The Ukrainians considered Polish rule a hostile occupation, boycotted censuses and parliamentary elections, and committed acts of sabotage. Most Ukrainian political parties collaborated with the exiled government of the Western Ukrainian National Republic, which coordinated anti-Polish resistance and helped to establish the underground nationalist Ukrainian Military Organization. Its members were involved in numerous terrorist activities against Polish administration and landowners and against Ukrainian «collaborators». In the 1930s, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists continued the anti-Polish activities. The Poles responded with the abolition of municipal self-government, the imprisonment of hundreds of Ukrainian politicians, and the so-called pacification of Ukrainian villages and towns. Eastern Galicia was approaching the edge of civil war.

A potential for violence was growing on the Soviet side of the border too. Between January 1918 and July 1920, about seven million people died in Russia from hunger and disease. In early 1919, the first concentration camps appeared in the territories controlled by the Bolsheviks. Trotskii believed that the rigours of the Civil War demanded cruelty. Soviet leaders triggered deliberately ruthless fanaticism. In the last phase of the Civil War, draconian military rules were transferred to the Labor Army. Deserters from work and malingerers were to be shot. The veterans of the Civil War moved to the Soviet administration and applied there the methods they had learned in the Red Army. During the period of the New Economic Policy between 1921 and 1928, the Civil War methods were partially

forgotten, but the climate of universal violence returned after 1928 under Stalin. The peasant population of the Western territories of the Soviet Union was mercilessly exploited and terrorized. Hundreds of thousands of people, including almost the entire Polish national minority, which had been left on the Soviet side of the Riga Treaty, were deported to the Northern and Eastern parts of the Soviet Union. The First Five-Year Plan, the collectivization, the organized hunger in Ukraine, as well as the Great Purge killed millions of people, deepened the antagonism between cities and the countryside and cemented the hatred towards communism.  

Historian Sheila Fitzpatrick has written:

«Banditry, which died down during the 1920s after flourishing during the Civil War, revived again as a result of collectivization. Expropriated kulaks often led the new bandit groups, which were said to be smaller than those of the Civil War, generally numbering two to five persons. They were armed mainly with revolvers, sawed-off shotguns, and hunting rifles, according to a 1934 police report from the Western oblast, but the average band in this region had only one or two firearms. Collective farms and kolkhoz activists were the main targets of their attacks, which included «savage murders» of kolkhoz leaders and physical assaults on kolkhozniks as well as arson and other forms of destruction of kolkhoz property.»

The German invasions of Poland in 1939 and the Soviet Union in 1941 unleashed all the violence gathered in the Borderlands. World War II became a continuation of World War I and the Russian Civil War not only in terms of German policies. All the conflicts born or developed in the years 1914–1917–1921 and, then, partially frozen in the period 1921–1939, blew up again. World War II in Eastern Europe was, in fact, a collection of many conflicts: Polish-German, Polish-Soviet, German-Soviet, Polish-Ukrainian, Soviet-Ukrainian, Soviet-Lithuanian, and Polish-Lithuanian. The events of the years 1914–1917–1921 were also crucial to the history of the Holocaust. In fact, it is difficult to understand the 20th century without a good knowledge of this dark period when the modern type of violence was born.
Saat der Gewalt. Die Brutalisierung einer osteuropäischen Region, 1917–1921

Im polnisch-russischen Grenzland führten schon vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg die Unterdrückung der polnischen Nationalbewegung durch das zaristische Regime und die sozialen und nationalen Spannungen zwischen ukrainischen Bauern und polnischem Adel zu Gewaltauflösungen. In ihnen geriet die jüdische Bevölkerung schnell zwischen die Fronten. Als sich die staatlichen Ordnungen nach dem Ausbruch des russischen Bürgerkriegs ganz auflösten und die Grenzen zwischen Front und Hinterland verschwanden, erreichte die Gewalt in der Region eine neue Stufe. Bis zum März 1921 versank die Region in einer Reihe von grausam geführten Auseinandersetzungen, in denen es um das Überleben des bolschewistischen Regimes und konfligierende Gebietsansprüche der polnischen, ukrainischen und baltischen Nationalbewegungen ging. Ihr Erbe war eine verfestigte Gewaltbereitschaft, die sich im Zweiten Weltkrieg erneut in furchtbarer Weise entlud.

Graines de Violence. La brutalisation d’une région de l’Europe de l’est, 1917–1921

Dans les régions situées entre l’Est de Pologne et la Russie la répression du Mouvement National Polonais par le régime tsariste et les tensions sociales et nationales entre les paysans ukrainiens et les nobles polonais ont conduit, déjà avant la Première Guerre Mondiale, à des déchaînements de violence. Le peuple juif de ces régions se retrouva rapidement pris entre les fronts. Lorsque, après l’éclatement de la guerre civile russe, l’ordre public s’écroula complètement et les limites entre le front et l’arrière pays disparurent, la violence atteignit un niveau encore supérieur. Ces régions furent submergées jusqu’au mois de mars 1921 par une succession de conflits horribles au cours desquelles se jouaient la survie du régime bolcheviste et la prise de possession des territoires par les mouvements nationaux polonais, ukrainiens et baltiques. Leur héritage fut une consolidation de la disposition à la violence qui éclatera de nouveau de façon atroce pendant la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale.

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