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Włodzimierz Borodziej, Maciej Górny, *Nasza wojna, [Our War]* vol. 1: *Imperia 1912–1916 [Empires 1912–1916]*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo wab, 2014, 479 pp.; vol. 2: *Narody 1917–1923 [Nations, 1917–1923]*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo wab, 2018, 622 pp.

World War I occupies an important place in Polish historiography, since as a result of which Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed, Russia plunged into revolutionary chaos, and Germany ceased to be an empire. Despite many decades of the Partition era, only thanks to these events was it possible to rebuild the Polish state. However, for many years they were not reflected in the synthesis, because only Janusz Pajewski described the history of the whole conflict four decades ago¹, and also he separately presented the issue of reconstruction of the Polish state². Earlier, in the 1960s, a book by Jerzy Holzer and Jan Molenda on Poland during the war years was published³. To these can be added multi-volume publications on Polish or world history, but without a separate monograph on World War I. The authors of *Our War* – Włodzimierz Borodziej, an expert on Polish-German relations and Grzegorz Górny, a specialist in social history and history of historiography in the 20th century – in their “Commentary to the References” (vol. 1, pp. 425–436) even stated that the Polish literature on the subject causes disappointment. All the more so as one cannot complain about the multitude of different kinds of memoir sources. Poles, who gained frontal experience in the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian armies and survived the years 1914–1918 under German occupation in the Kingdom

¹ Janusz Pajewski, *Pierwsza wojna światowa 1914–1918*, Warszawa 1991.

² *Idem*, *Odbudowa państwa polskiego 1914–1918*, Warszawa 1980.

³ Jerzy Holzer, Jan Molenda, *Polska w latach pierwszej wojny światowej*, Warszawa 1967.

of Poland, willingly wrote diaries and memoirs. The reason for the lack of greater interest of historians in World War I (not only in Poland, but also in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe) the Authors connect with World War II – with all its consequences: the enormity of tragedy, political consequences and many years of influence of communist ideology on scientific research. Interestingly, the deficits in this respect continue and the participation of historians from this region in the European renaissance of research on the period 1914–1918 is not visible. Therefore, this evident gap should be filled by the monograph reviewed here.

Its title, the event caesuras of the study and the geographical scope of the authors' interest require comment. Let us start with the title. *Our War* suggests that earlier this conflict between the Powers was, from a Polish or, more broadly, Central European point of view, considered a “foreign” war, which did not affect the smaller nations in the region. Ultimately, these nations – from the Finns in the north to the Romanians and the Serbs in the south – benefited territorially from the war, or even entirely by gaining / regaining their sovereignty. Some have failed (Hungarians, Bulgarians). However, until November 1918 it was a conflict of Great Powers. Nevertheless, the Authors are in favour of recognizing this war as “ours”. What is the reason for this? Two convincing arguments have been brought up: the mass (forced) participation of individual nationalities in the armies of Central States and Russia and the fact that warfare was taking place precisely in this area, with all its consequences: “Contrary to legend”, we read, “the fighting on the Eastern front was at least as bloody as in the West. Most prisoners were taken and their mortality rate in the camps was the highest” and the civilians “were also dying, striking, getting ill and starving not for the national cause – as histographers after 1918 often explained their tragedy – but simply because they ran out of food, fuel, hygiene products and medicines” (pp. 9–10).

The year 1912 was chosen as the beginning of this world conflict, thus clearly emphasizing both the importance of the Balkan wars for later events in Europe and the need to include the events on the Balkan Peninsula in general in the picture of the situation in the entire Central and Eastern Europe after 1914. The search for links between the military activities in the Balkans and the Polish territories or in Russia raises questions. I would see the rationale for this rather in the little knowledge of the course of the war on the southern front and the possibility of comparing similar phenomena in different parts of the wider region. The end of the narrative is 1923, so again referring to events in the Balkans and Turkey (the Treaty of Lausanne ending the Greek-Turkish war).

Volume 1 was divided into three parts: *Fronts*, *Rears* and *Occupation*. Already the titles of the individual parts indicate that the narrative's focus is primarily on social issues. Military history and international relations are only a (not very extensive) background. The war breaks out as a result of decisions made by politicians, but "Feedback is being created: the masses are easily aroused, and politicians and journalists calling for a crackdown on the enemy treat the result of their efforts as further proof that they are acting in accordance with the interests and views of the people". (vol. 1, p. 41). The Authors are sure that if the politicians at the head of the Empires knew what would happen next, the war would never happen. They could have observed the atrocities of the Balkan Wars, but ignored them because – as Borodziej and Górny write – it was about the conflicts in the Balkans, treated as an area with a lower level of civilisation.

The authors used primarily the output of European historiography. The catalogue of references includes works in English, German, French, Russian, Polish and also Czech, Croatian, Ukrainian and Hungarian. The most recent literature dominates among the works, which testify to the value of the book. Right away, it should be pointed out that the Authors abundantly quote diaries and memoirs of the military, intellectuals, doctors and nurses, which makes the picture more colourful, gives it reality and is attractive to the reader. Pictures appear in moderation, rather as a supplement to the text (photographs from trenches, ruins of bombed cities, corpses, the sick and wounded in hospitals, prisoners in camps, civilians in towns and villages, caricatures from newspapers). They discussed a whole spectrum of issues related to everyday life during the war years. Among them were: the control of society and rationing of goods, the power of war and occupation gossip, propaganda, repressions and the life between loyalty and collaboration, as well as the growing role of self-governments trying to remedy the growing problems of victualling. The Authors follow the emotions of soldiers and civilians of that time – from enthusiasm, through anxiety, to fear and resignation.

Volume 2, like the previous one, was divided into three parts, this time with more mysterious titles: *Giants and Pygmies*, *Kaleidoscope* and *Mafias*. Part 1 develops the topic of ethnicisation of the Russian army, which in fact led to its disintegration. The Authors also drew attention to the growing aversion between soldiers of the Allied armies. In any case, it is shown here the process of transition from the War of Empires (Giants) to the War of Nations (Pygmies), when the region of Central and Eastern Europe turns "into a field of chaotic battles of everyone with everyone"

(vol. 2, p. 80). The wars for independence and borders were also reviewed according to the key of the emerging countries: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, a transforming Hungary, a resurgent Poland. The Authors penetrated the everyday life of new armies (which were the emanation of new statehoods) exposing fatal supplies and “widespread exhaustion” (vol. 2, p. 155). The contrast between the peaceful coexistence of soldiers and civilians captured in the photographs and the much more gloomy reality in which “the difference between requisitioning and robbery became fluid” was emphasized. (vol. 2, p. 158). At the same time, the Authors showed that the conflicts after 1917 were about attracting and not terrorizing the civilian population. It was different for the Jewish population, because the violence against Jews in Central and Eastern Europe remained a constant, obstinately recurring ritual that spread over more and more areas (vol. 2, p. 209). They also challenged the myth of the general mobilization of Polish society during the war with the Bolsheviks. The analysis of sources shows that the news about the announced conscription to the army “almost always” induced young men to migrate (vol. 2, p. 169). They took into account the importance of railways in conducting military campaigns and spreading the activities of local warlords (*watażkas*). Part 2 refers to social conflicts, the source of which should be seen in malnutrition or even starvation: “Common misery – the Authors state (vol. 2, p. 263) – did not consolidate the societies of the fighting countries. On the contrary, it has exacerbated already deteriorating relations between particular groups”. Strikes, demonstrations, riots have become a common phenomenon. A problem has become a mass of refugees, treated as a threat to the local population. The Authors stress that the level of lawlessness has increased during this time, they write about the “gigantic wave of crime” and the “serious wave of robbery” (vol. 2, p. 329). New countries tried to control the situation through monetary and agricultural reforms. Part 3 focuses on the problem of delimiting borders, and then the supporters of the principle of self-determination of nations found out that it “creates new conflicts without closing the old ones” (vol. 2, p. 500).

All in all, *Our War* is an interesting, innovative study that brings back the memory of World War I from the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe. It presents its image in an individualised way, using many personal sources and thus capturing the human dimension of the dramatic events of the time. It confronts the experiences of individual nations of the Central European region, pointing out, nevertheless, more similarities than differences.