



## **Majorities at War: Transformation of East Central Europe**

Maciej Górny

*Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History, Polish Academy of  
Sciences*

### **Abstract**

The article begins and ends with a discussion of the censuses of East Central Europe before and after the First World War. Both the former and the latter were contested by minority activists despite the enormous changes brought about by the post-war settlement. This paradox can be explained, at least in part, through selected case studies that illustrate the asynchronicity of political, economic, and social transformations. The text discusses first the dynamics of this change: nationalist mobilization in the face of the refugee problem and local military conflicts. Second, it raises the question of the legitimacy of the consolidating national states in the region, especially the desperate and often futile appeals to the population to support the young states in their fight against the national and Bolshevik enemies. Both processes resulted in the construction of national majorities, albeit at different rates. The social and mental changes brought about by war, forced migration, and revolution proceeded much more slowly than the transformation of political discourses, and even more slowly than the language of ethnic statistics in the service of national states.

**Keywords:** *WWI; mobilization; legitimacy; Bolshevism; nationalism; national statistics; refugees*

## **Introduction**

This article attempts to identify some of the elements that constituted the major shift in thinking about national minorities and majorities in the context of the First World War and subsequent wars fought on the territories of East Central Europe that had previously belonged to one of three empires: the western guberniyas of Russia, the eastern provinces of Germany, and Austria-Hungary. These elements, all of which have been extensively studied over the past three decades, include the deprivations of war that led to the sharpening of ethnic divisions, as well as to military and paramilitary violence. The end of hostilities on the Western front did not immediately contribute to the stabilization of the social and political situation in East Central Europe. Despite their formal existence, the early state structures that filled the void left by the three empires struggled to provide their new citizens with a sense of stability, security, and confidence (Gerwarth, 2022, pp. 21-23; Leonhard, 2022). Indeed, as this article argues, in their search for legitimacy they resorted to mobilizing arguments that further deepened ethnic conflicts, even when nationality was not explicitly at the centre of such arguments. Concepts of majority (in whose name the new states operated) and minority (whose allegedly undeserved privileges or treacherous actions were criticized) were crucial in the consolidation phase of postwar East Central Europe. Of course, they were not unknown before 1914; notably, much of Austrian political life revolved around nationality issues and ethnic compromises (Kuzmany, 2024, pp. 47-54). With the dissolution of the empires, however, a higher authority capable of suppressing ethnic conflicts and mediating between a majority and a minority was gone. The state itself became a party in this political struggle.

In order to properly understand the dimension of the changes brought about by the prolonged military conflict and related political and social phenomena, it is necessary to refer to some 'hard' indicators that allow comparisons beyond the period of the First World War and subsequent border conflicts. Such indicators can be provided by professional statisticians who collected and analysed census data before and immediately after the war. It was in this context that the issues of ethnic minorities were most often discussed before 1914, with many critics among the representatives of non-dominant nationalities. The experts who participated in these debates were those who participated in or commented on the first post-1918 censuses in East Central Europe, held in 1921 in Czechoslovakia and Poland, according to roughly the same methodology as before 1914. Their contributions and interpretations of the region's ethnic composition help to characterize the impact of the social and political changes discussed above.

The combination of these two elements – the experience of war, marked by instability and violence, on the one hand; and expert discourses on nationality issues, on the other – brings to the fore the asynchronous pace of transformation in various spheres of social and political life. As the article will show, some of them (such as political discourses) underwent dramatic and very rapid changes, while others, such as identities and the sense of (national) belonging, evolved differently. Experts involved in the first post-war censuses in Czechoslovakia and Poland were best placed to analyse and comment on such elements of continuity from pre-1914 to independence.

### **1. Counting souls**

Legally, there were no minorities in the pre-war empires, only subjects. In theory, none of the ethnically defined groups of subjects enjoyed the privileged status of a state nation, although some of them, such as the Jews of the Russian Empire, were subject to painful restrictions. In reality, however, ethnic statistics had been a contentious issue long before the war. The German Empire, Austria-Hungary, and Russia differed widely in both nationality policies and census practices. In the Habsburg Monarchy, general censuses were conducted regularly every ten years, and from 1880 onward, the language spoken by the respondents was also recorded (Brix, 1981). In Germany, the interval between censuses was only five years, while the language of use was recorded for the first time in 1890 (Arel, 2001, p. 96). In Russia, on the other hand, there was only one general census (including the ‘mother tongue’ category) held before the revolution, in 1897, and it was such an unusual and exhausting undertaking for the imperial bureaucracy that most of its results were not published until 1904 (Corrsin, 1998, pp. 138-143). Despite their differences, all of these censuses were heavily criticized by minority political activists. They were accused of deliberate manipulation by overestimating the numbers of majority groups through falsification of data (Wallis, 1916). There were also structural problems related to the categories used in the census. The Russian census assumed that Ukrainians and Belarusians were merely factions of the Russian nation. It also assumed that Poles were only a minor immigrant element in the western governorates of the empire (Borzęcki, 1999). The Austrian censuses, on the other hand, permitted only nine languages (German, Czech, Polish, Ruthenian, Italian, Hungarian, Romanian, Slovene, and Serbo-Croatian), confronting a large group of subjects with the need to declare untruths. The issue was particularly relevant in Galicia, where most Jews spoke Yiddish (Göderle, 2016, pp. 193–281). In census practice, the majority was classified as having Polish as their most widely spoken language, which naturally distorted the picture of nationality relations (Corrsin, 1998,

pp. 135-138). In Germany, the censuses of the early 20th century took into account the languages of the Mazurians and Kashubs, separating these two groups from the Polish-speaking population. No other German statistics did so, which in a way proved a communication practice in which messages to these population groups were mostly formulated in Polish (Labbé, 2019, pp. 19-47). In 1917, the subdivision of these linguistic groups led to a bitter polemic between the Polish geographer Eugeniusz Romer and his German colleague and supervisor, Albrecht Penck (Wittschell, 1926, p. 28).

In Paris, each of the national delegations to the Peace Conference (as well as uninvited lobbyists representing aspiring states, nations, and regional groups) missed no opportunity to criticize imperial statistics. In the words of Eugeniusz Romer, the chief Polish expert: “During the entire period of the peace negotiations in Paris, the Polish delegation vigorously contested the results of the censuses conducted by the occupying powers” (Romer, 1923, p. 408). But the criticism was not only directed against the empires. At the same time, the Galician censuses came under heavy fire from Ukrainian nationalists for their pro-Polish bias, while statistical falsehoods in the Balkans were just beginning to become proverbial (Korduba, 1919, p. 5; Labbé, 2019, pp. 144-148). Moreover, when Czechoslovakia and Poland organized their first censuses in 1921, Ukrainian, Hungarian, and German minority activists predictably accused them of manipulating and overestimating the numbers of majority groups by falsifying data and intimidating respondents.

Irrespective of the nationalist critics, what surely can be said about the pre-war imperial ethnic statistics is that they were inconsistent. Half-measures such as the subdivisions within the tripartite Russian nation, the inconsequential way of dealing with the Polish-German ethnic borderlands and the restricted language selection in Austria deserved professional criticism, as they failed to adequately represent the linguistic divisions within each of the empires. At the same time, none of those measures could be interpreted as an element of a coordinated effort to denationalize an ethnic minority. Even harsh critics of the imperial linguistic statistics, such as Eugeniusz Romer, criticized what they perceived as the pathologies of the otherwise rather reliable system. Sure, there were nationalists among the imperial officials, politicians, and statisticians, but they could not impose their logic onto the existing system, nor did they control the implementation and interpretation of general censuses. Patches of territories subjected to distorted nationalist statistics coexisted with others, less biased, and all of them had to sum up within the edifice of an empire. In effect, reading nationalist criticism of ethnic censuses from before 1914 gives the impression that basically everyone felt they had been a victim of manipulation and was acutely afraid of being dominated by the aliens. In some cases, this

attitude would backfire spectacularly. In Paris, when the Germans found themselves forced to defend their territorial possessions, they could hardly rely on their own nationalist cartography which had been boosting colonial mirages while busily overestimating the Slavic peril in the German East for decades. The new maps of Germanness had to be hastily produced to face the real Slavic peril (Jureit, 2012, p. 195; Herb, 1997).

The exact linguistic distribution within Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary remained contested by nationalist experts beyond 1914. What this criticism of the imperial general censuses most clearly shows, however, is the widespread belief among experts, such as Romer or Myron Korduba, in the soundness of the procedure and the measurability of ethnic belonging. Thus, as they believed, the elimination of distortions and pathologies in imperial linguistic statistics would be possible as soon as the new national state assumes power (Górny, 2022, pp. 206-207).

## **2. Experiencing the War**

Contrary to what had been the view of most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography of the war, the prevailing atmosphere in summer 1914 was that of solemn patriotism rather than enthusiasm (Verhey, 2004, pp. 35–38). In the case of multinational empires in East Central Europe, this feeling had a particular character. Basically, all ethnic communities professed their utmost loyalty to the ruling house. However, each of them did that separately from the others. Quite pleasant to official ears at first, such manifestations soon became a nightmare for the responsible authorities as they turned into a veritable loyalty contest. Besides support for the monarchy, the crowds in Sarajevo, Trieste, Danzig, Berlin, and Prague shouted slogans against their ethnic rivals, who responded in kind. The road from there to street fights or a pogrom proved to be surprisingly short (Borodziej & Górny, 2021, pp. 219-240). Thus, the other side of the fight for imperial favour proved to be aggression towards the neighbours. In the first months of the war, mobs targeted Italians in Trieste, Serbs in Bosnia, Germans in the Baltic provinces, and also local Czechs. Later on, military violence was directed against Austrian Ruthenians and the Jews, who constituted the main target of violence throughout the whole war until the early 1920s (Prusin, 2005; Lohr, 2001; Hagen, 2018).

Ethnic violence surely contributed to the segmentation of the empires, but it mostly remained spontaneous at first. Other forms of ethnicization resulted from great migrations, mass escapes, and deportations. Within the region of East Central Europe, Austria hosted the most refugees (Ruszała, 2020, pp. 99-135). Since Hungary only accepted some refugees, the

problem of ‘others’ was concentrated in the Danubian countries and in the Czech lands. In early June 1915, over 500,000 refugees and evacuees (170,000 Poles, 266,000 Jews, and 72,000 Ukrainians) were receiving state benefits in Cisleithania (Handelsman, 1932, p. 179). And those numbers kept growing. The refugee experience read from the few personal sources (most migrants were women and children of low social status who did not leave written accounts of their escape) shows a relatively consistent picture of three stages: a panic-ridden evacuation and the hardships of the trek; a frustrating and debilitating stay in overcrowded cities or refugee camps; and finally – a return marked by new hardships and frustrations. As shown in an especially moving way by Katarzyna Sierakowska (2015), hunger, violence, and death accompanied each of these stages.

In Austrian, Bohemian, and Moravian towns and cities, the fear that the strangers would bring in diseases was combined with a certain resentment: the savages from the East were idle, whereas locals not only had to work on their accounts but also had to share their increasingly meagre resources with them. At the beginning of 1917, the municipal authorities in Prague banned the use of public transport by refugees from Galicia and Bukovina on the grounds that they could spread typhus. The ban was only rescinded under pressure from the state authorities and following protests by Jewish organizations (Rozenblit, 2001, pp. 78–79). In Vienna, the authorities were petitioned to remove the refugees because they were spreading not only disease but also immorality. In Warsaw, as many as 90,000 Jewish refugees overburdened the local Citizens Committee’s financial means, while the Polish nationalist press started a vicious campaign against their presence in the city. The fear of epidemics featured highly on the list of dangers generated by the refugees (Blobaum, 2017, pp. 149–152).

The widespread fear of the mass influx of ethnic aliens would not have necessarily resulted in political change in East Central Europe in the long run, had it not been for the parallel process of securitization of the minorities. Shortly before 1914 and especially during the war, several international jurists and political actors representing each of the fighting coalitions - as well as neutral parties - came up with the idea of ‘unmixing’ the populations through force in order to increase state security. In the tense atmosphere of the war and under the influence of unprecedented migrations, such ideas redefined the boundaries between majority and minority nations in terms of the reason for the state and the very existence of the nation (Barth, 2020).

In theory, mass migrations could contribute to the increased coherence of the empires. Finally, one could argue that distant co-subjects from Galicia, Bukovina, or the Slovene lands could be seen in Vienna and other places in Austria and Bohemia individually and collectively.

In reality, their presence strengthened the coherence of the national groups rather than communication between them (Zahra, 2006 & 2008). This was valid both for the host society, which was growing hostile towards the migrants, as well as with the migrants themselves, being objects of nationalist mobilization, as shown by Aija Priedite (2004) or, recently, by Dangiras Mačiulis and Darius Staliūnas (2015, pp. 56-70) - charity dressed up in national colours. Perhaps more importantly, especially in Russia, civic organizations and refugeedom were the birthplace of the new national political elites (Balkelis, 2018, pp. 35-42).

### **3. Fearing the strong**

During the Great War, emerging national statistics, ethnic cartography, the theory of law, and a set of migration-driven major social and political changes throughout East Central Europe contributed to the increased status of ethnic difference as a future-defining concept. This development did not go unnoticed by the political activists in the region, as shown by the aforementioned charity activities. They also played an often-overlooked role in the stabilization process of the postwar political order.

The last spring of the Great War on the Eastern Front bore a semblance of stability and order, though admittedly extremely far from the optimistic predictions of local nationalists. Shortly after the negotiations in Brest-Litovsk, the end of history could have seemed a real possibility (Chernev, 2017, pp. 183-220). The German future was monarchical, with German aristocrats ascending to the thrones of Finland and Lithuania, but it threatened to turn colonial on a whim (Borodziej, Kwiatkowski, & Górny, 2018, pp. 27-46). The present, in any case, was characterized by growing economic exploitation by the Germans and hardships beyond anything known to the locals. Still, universally hated as they had been, as a stabilizing factor in the face of the Bolshevik menace, with the tacit accord of the Entente the Germans remained in the area even after the armistice. The weak national governments in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, hardly capable of mustering reliable military force, also often relied on German and Scandinavian support (von Hehn, 1977, p. 22; Kuldkepp, 2023). Others, such as much stronger Polish armed forces, also hired their own warlords of different ethnic origin (Böhler, 2018, pp. 166-174). But it was the persistence of the German presence that mattered most in terms of propaganda. More than anything else, it showed how weak and unstable the new order really was.

Another factor undermining both local nationalists and the Germans was the revolution. Military and civilian archives are full of reports on what was perceived as local centres of

Bolshevism. Basically, each and every signal of social discontent could be interpreted as a form of subversive agitation, not merely the activities of armed bands, expropriation, or red propaganda. With the Soviet-created republics of Latvia, Ukraine, and, for a short period, parts of Lithuania and Belarus, local acts of disobedience in neighbouring territories were often taken for direct collaboration with the Bolshevik enemy. However, this was rarely the case. In Lithuania, the hitherto active bands of former Russian prisoners of war reacted to the news of the Bolshevik coup by assuming that name. Otherwise, their mode of operation had not undergone any change (Petronis, 2023, pp. 31–36). In early 1918, Belarusian peasants looting estates and private households were claimed to have put aside their “traditional benevolence and restraint” due to the Bolsheviks (Smalančuk, 2019, pp. 100–101). Also, simple gossip or freely exchanged critical opinions about the current state of affairs in the country could lead to pre-emptive arrests and violence (Górny, 2020, pp. 24-26). The ideological profile of those ‘Bolsheviks’ was blurred, and their affinity to Soviet Russia was occasional. In many instances, the whole construct was nothing more than another way of formulating anti-Semitic sentiments that grew considerably since the 1917 Revolution, even in the relatively stable conditions in Bohemia and Upper Hungary (and subsequently Czechoslovakia) (Frankl & Szabó, 2015, pp. 222-225).

As shown in the innovative monograph by Rudolf Kučera, the actual working class ‘Bolshevism’ was very different from the perils imagined by the ruling classes. Throughout the industrialized regions of Austria, Hungary, and Germany, worker protests were rife as early as 1917. They broke out against the backdrop of poverty, hunger, and deteriorating working conditions in factories and coal mines. The political agenda was either wholly absent or marginal, but the protesters’ determination led to violent clashes on the streets (Kučera, 2016, pp. 137–153). To the east of Germany, however, the main industrial centres were in shatters. The withdrawing Russians evacuated machinery and supplies and destroyed much of what they had not been able to transport. The Germans, on the other hand, had no interest in reviving local production. They concentrated on collecting raw materials and labour power for their own industry. In effect, Warsaw, the biggest industrial city in the territories occupied by the Central Powers, experienced catastrophic levels of unemployment. According to German statistics, by early 1916—less than a year into the occupation—no more than 19 percent of industrial workers remained professionally active (Blobsbaum, 2017, p. 42). Those numbers were even more striking given the fact that thousands of Polish professionals had already migrated to the Donbas and other industrial regions of the Russian Empire before the German offensive. In such conditions, workers’ strikes ceased to play their original function, giving the floor to



demonstrations by the unemployed accompanied by the protests of state employees (Borodziej & Górny, 2020).

Contrary to widespread fears and anti-Bolshevik hysteria, no strong and well-organized communist forces awaited the advancing Red Army. When they actually arrived, the Bolsheviks mostly had to cooperate with local middle-class nationalists in order to secure basic order in the occupied territories. More often than not, the reactions to the ‘Bolshevik menace’ were disproportionate in scale. The German and Austro-Hungarian pacification campaign during the occupation of Ukraine in 1918 put alleged Bolshevism forward as an ex-post explanation of their radical and brutal policies against various acts of disobedience (Leidinger, 2020, pp. 129–130). In some instances, most notably in Hungary, the short-lived Communist rule was followed by an extended and extremely bloody period of reaction. Yet, as claimed by the most prolific historian of this phenomenon,

“Ideology was certainly important; however, anti-Communism and even antisemitism were often as much pretexts and covers for material interests and greed, as they were the “first movers”” (Bodó, 2023, p. 157).

Those three elements shaped the early post-war situation in the region until late 1918 under the German and Austro-Hungarian occupation: the presence and – later on – evacuation of the German army, which until early 1919 was the only real military power in East Central Europe; widespread social protests, radical in their expression but without a clearly articulated political agenda; and the Bolshevik menace. Seemingly none of them were related to ethnic or religious minorities. Taken together, in reality the tensions they created generated policies that inevitably led to the deterioration of the status and well-being of minority groups in East Central Europe.

#### **4. Searching for legitimacy**

The agency of any of those actors was limited. The common denominator of political programs represented by the local nationalists, Bolsheviks, and German interventionists was a legitimacy deficit, or – to be more precise, a deficit of positive legitimacy, i.e., a reliable connection between submission and support to their rule and an increase in the wealth and security of society. None of them was able to swiftly improve the living conditions of workers and peasants, or to give them food, employment, and security. The failure to deliver on this front was partly compensated by negative arguments and fearmongering. They functioned as a perpetuum mobile wherein each of the elements propelled the remaining elements and was

itself put in motion by them. The nationalists primarily searched for legitimacy as defenders against Bolshevism and protectors against the Germans and other exploiters (such as ‘Polish lords’ or ‘Jewish speculators’). The Germans were on a crusade against the Bolsheviks and everyone suspected of pro-Bolshevik sympathies (including local nationalists); Freikorps active in the Baltic provinces were the vanguards of this fight. Finally, the Reds promised to get rid of both local and German parasites and to free the people. None of the three groups excelled in winning hearts and minds for their positive programs; each promised to defend the people from the others. Without an attempt to win popular support with populist scapegoating, they were too weak to fill the ranks of their military units and – crucially – to keep those already mobilized from leaving the army or turning it into a federation of councils, as in the case of the German imperial armed forces.

Their weaknesses came to the fore in rapid succession. Every announcement of conscription to national armies regularly pushed young men behind the state borders or to the woods, yet the Bolsheviks were no better. Whole units deserted or switched sides (Balkelis, 2020, p. 232). The armies aspiring to gain control over such unstable territories were sometimes forced to organize roundups to find new recruits whose loyalty could predictably not be trusted. Behind the highly movable frontline, villages and smaller regions refused to submit to the authority of central governments (Tolkatsch, 2016, pp. 97–112). It was a widespread phenomenon in Ukraine during 1917-1921, but independent ‘peasant-republics’ popped up in Poland and Slovakia, too. Locally, those so-called Greens were more than 10,000 strong and controlled considerable territories in Croatia, Slavonia, Moravia, and Slovakia (Beneš, 2015; 2017).

Of all the tasks faced by the newly-created states, healing the wounds of war required resources and time. Both were in short supply. What could be done quickly and cheaply was to embrace justice. Injustice, real and felt on many levels of political and social life in the region, propelled social riots and destabilized the post-war order. Only through the promise of undoing the wrongs of the *ancien régime* and of wartime could the governments win some support for the time needed to consolidate their power. Perhaps even mobilize a section of the population for more active support of the cause. A majority, perhaps?

Injustice, though felt universally, manifested itself on a variety of occasions, and each social group was affected by it variously. Peasants demanded land, workers demanded pay and progressive labour legislation, feminist organizations demanded universal suffrage, public opinion demanded a democratic order, the middle class demanded support for national trade and industry, and nationalists demanded fair national borders. The common feature of the

policies that attempted at fulfilling these expectations was the manifestation of an agency of the state. In order to win the hearts of future citizens, it was necessary to manifest eagerness and the capability to take radical decisions and enforce them. Those decisions included land reforms perceived as a means of revenge against centuries of German domination over the people. In Klaus Richter's words, this was "the most successful aspect of the 'empowerment' of the titular nations" (Richter, 2020, p. 301). Estonia is a telling example, with several moderate projects being rejected and the majority in the Constitutional Assembly voting for simple expropriation of the German landlords (Rauch, 1970, p. 88). Progressive labour law belonged to the mix together with women's rights, but not everywhere as, for example, Finland has already had women's suffrage and the victorious Whites focused on fighting the red peril. Parliamentary democracy, interpreted along the lines of Wilson's 14 points, was a prerequisite for equal representation dominated by the respective ethnic majority. On the other hand, justice could mean a territorial dispute with the neighbouring state. And in many cases, justice meant fighting Jewish (and sometimes German) speculators or eliminating Bolshevik agitators.

Most of these legitimizing tools were propelled by xenophobia: against foreign factory owners, land proprietors, tradesmen, ordinary people, refugees, and locals alike. "An Enemy alien" among us was a figure that no fresh weak government could leave unused. Thus, in the context of turbulent internal and external situations, the unstable governments reached out for the securitization of minority questions, making it perhaps the first sphere of social and political life in the region to undergo this process, leading within a decade from 1918 to a crisis of democracy in East Central Europe (Hein-Kircher & Kailitz, 2022, pp. 7–16). In effect, the new justice was not only for but equally against certain social groups.

Research on interwar minorities in East Central Europe had long focused on loyalties that – in contrast to less flexible identities – are performative acts and can be demanded irrespective of personal convictions (Haslinger & Puttkamer, 2007, pp. 4–7). Against this backdrop, a plethora of minority policies and minority responses have been analysed, resulting in a complex picture of the highly politicized and instrumentalized ethnic minorities of East Central Europe. The discursive role played by minorities in the initial phase of post-1918 statehoods supplements this picture with a new motif: a feeling of victimization resulting not only from the sheer fact of being a minority but also from the awareness of the symbolic role played by non-dominant ethnic groups in the struggle for legitimacy after the Great War.

## 5. Counting, again

When compared to the imperial order, the post-1918 national statehoods were a fundamental change, the essence of which was the constitution of majority nations through singling out minorities. One aspect of this change was the new ethnic statistics, as illustrated by the 1921 Czechoslovak and Polish censuses. The collection of appeals and documents from the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry reveals the behind-the-scenes work of the commissioners. They focus almost entirely on nationality issues. The background to most of these cases was identical: the census commissioners became doubtful about the declaration of nationality made by a citizen. Less of an issue prior to the war, in 1921 this became a matter of state stability and international politics. As a rule, the cases involved persons with a Czech mother tongue living and working in a German environment or persons with a Slovak mother tongue residing in a Hungarian environment. Providing false information was punishable, and declarations of nationality that did not correspond to the “objective” truth were considered to be such. Sometimes direct inspiration from German, Hungarian or Polish agitators was suspected. The lack of competence of the counters caused conflicts and increased the number of administrative fines imposed on respondents. They could appeal against the fines, however, which they often did. Interventions sometimes proved effective, as reality also sometimes exceeded the imagination of officials.

“One appeal states that its author felt no nationality: Yiddish was spoken in the family home while he was enrolled *ex officio* as a Pole; the office eventually decided to specify German nationality” (Tomaszewski, 1998, p. 98).<sup>i</sup>

Other more typical cases involved women who, having married, thought it natural that from then on they belonged to their husband’s nationality. The clerical imagination did not accept such a position, as it did not fit with many other instances of transnationality or rather, a-nationality (Górny, 2022, pp. 214-220).

A couple of months later, similar concerns started to trouble the Polish statisticians in their effort to interpret the results of the first postwar general census in Poland. Besides difficulties resulting from the dramatic state of public health, destruction, the displacement of population and the boycott of the census by part of the Ukrainian community, the single most challenging problem was, according to sociologist Ludwik Krzywicki, the genuine distrust of the Polish state which was manifested especially by the peasantry. An exchange in one

linguistically Polish village in central Poland in late September 1921 illustrates this fundamental problem:

“When the commissioners explained the meaning of the census, writes Krzywicki, and recalled the Russian census [of 1897–MG], when everyone who wanted and didn’t want to be counted as a Russian national, the answer was: “yes, but then it was about the nation, and today it’s about chickens, geese and flocks”” (Krzywicki, 1923, p. 8).<sup>ii</sup>

In this particular case, the sociologist explained, the counters were dealing with peasants who suspected that the census would be used to impose new tax burdens. Similar concerns were thought responsible for whole villages refusing to take part in the census. It seems that something more was at stake – a misunderstanding that went deeper. The organizers and at least some of the census takers were indeed concerned with “the people.” To an even greater extent, such political optics were adopted by later interpreters of the census results, statisticians and geographers in the service of the state. Despite the wartime mobilization and the efforts of national activists of all parties involved, the question of nationality did not occupy as prominent a place in the minds of respondents (i.e., ordinary citizens) as it did in the imagination of educated planners. Many peasants decide to opt out from the new political order. Differently than prior to 1914, though, none of the experts could pin the blame on the manipulations of imperial statisticians.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this article, nationalist experts criticized imperial general censuses, suspecting them of falsifying the actual responses to the question of language used or mother tongue and by intentional manipulation with census categories. National activists and nationalist experts believed that they would have done it better if they had been given control of the census. The last section described how it actually took place, resulting in the frustration of experts facing national indifference and/or fluid identities manifested by the population during the early postwar national censuses in Czechoslovakia and in Poland. Some of these identity manifestations resulted in fines against individuals who failed to ‘properly’ identify their nationality.

The continuity of received structures and identities beyond 1918 has been identified by scholars of East Central Europe, particularly with respect to the successor states of Austria-Hungary (Zahra, 2008; King, 2002). Pieter M. Judson’s new synthesis of the history of Austria-

Hungary (Judson, 2016) characterizes the Monarchy's unique way of squaring imperial ideology with nationalisms, a model that itself became an object of historical debate (Szívós et al., 2019). Some elements of these continuities have been analysed in great detail, to mention the pioneering study by Jan Surman on the history of universities in imperial Austria (2018, pp. 243-266) or, more importantly in the context of this paper, Gábor Egry's studies on imperial leftovers in the everyday life of the successor states (Egry, 2021; 2022). Expressions of non-national or transnational identities resulting in ambiguous reactions to the results of the postwar censuses belong to this collection of legacies from the past that survived through the process of wartime radicalization and ethnicization. These latter phenomena also abound in literature, a selection of which has been referred to in the first section of this article, convincingly illustrating the unprecedented levels of violence and the depth of societal change experienced by the inhabitants of East Central Europe during the First World War and subsequent military conflicts. As aptly noted by Lawrence Rosenthal and Vesna Rodic,

“The agitation for war and the four long years of the First World War moved revolution in the name of the nation from the fringes of political culture to its center. ... War's patriotic fevers moved masses for whom the 'nation' had previously been abstract, had never figured into their sense of identity” (Rosenthal & Rodic, 2015, p. 13).

As has been shown, references to wartime suffering and resentment towards ethnic aliens were instrumentalized by the new national regimes to gather support in their fight against the national and Bolshevik enemies. This strategy seemed the only one available, given how limited the new governments' potential for positive national mobilization was (i.e., positive meaning in the name of something and not solely against someone). None of the nascent republics in East Central Europe, even relatively well-off Czechoslovakia, was able to quickly solve the mounting economic and health problems; what they could do, however, was to redirect frustrations towards someone else. More often than not, it was the minorities who served as a negative point of reference for this nationalist mobilization.

The abovementioned lines of research suggest very different views on East Central Europe's entry into the interwar period. Research on ethnicization, violence, and cultures of defeat (and of victory) leads historians to emphasize the instability and radical character of the region's parting with the imperial order. Historians focusing on elites (Szeghy-Gayer, 2019, p. 357), academic networks, and local communities point to elements of continuity that survived deep into the interwar period. Both perspectives of the region's history are well justified and

supported by rich evidence. In the present article, they have been illustrated specifically by references to general censuses that, against the hope of nationalist experts, did not prove their claims about fraudulent imperial statisticians and by invoking the concept of negative legitimacy. On each of these parallel lines of development, we find the opposition of ethnic majority and minority takes centre stage. What represents a challenge is to try to harmonize these two lines of interpretation within the frame of one historical process.

The tentative answer, based on elements present in both traditions, could be the different temporal characteristics of each of the indicators of change or stability referred to by historians. Obviously, ethnic identities do not immediately follow changes in borders and regimes. As shown in the postwar censuses in Czechoslovakia and in Poland, they can both stubbornly retain old cultural codes and be open to renegotiation. Wartime nationalist mobilization catalysed such a process of renegotiation, yet, in early 1921, it was still not perceptible enough for the national census to be identified. A realistic view of the legitimization strategies of most post-1918 governments in East Central Europe supports this view of a transformation that lags behind the expectations of nationalists and remains slow to fully absorb the effects of wartime violence. While local identities proved particularly slow in ‘catching up’ to the new realities, the professional discourse of geographers and statisticians responsible for the census could be situated on another end of the scale. Already before 1914, they saw their nations as fully formed and ready to blossom as soon as they were freed from the oppressor’s yoke.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>ii</sup> Translated by the author.

## References

- Arel, D. (2002). Language categories in censuses: Backward- or forward-looking? In D. I. Kertzer & D. Arel (Eds.), *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses* (pp. 92-120). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511606045.005>
- Balkelis, T. (2018). *War, Revolution, and Nation-Making in Lithuania, 1914-1923*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199668021.001.0001>
- Balkelis, T. (2020). A dirty war: The armed Polish-Lithuanian conflict and its impact on nation-making in Lithuania, 1919-23, *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 121(2020), 227-259. <https://doi.org/10.12775/APH.2020.121.11>
- Baron, N. & Gatrell, P. (2004). *War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918-1924*. Anthem Press.
- Barth, A. (2020). The securitization of minorities as a bedrock of population policy. In C. Pschichholz (Ed.), *The First World War as a Caesura? Demographic Concepts, Population Policy, and Genocide in the Late Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg Spheres* (pp. 49-63). Duncker & Humblot. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1zvc7qq.6>
- Beneš, J. (2015). ‘Zelené kádry’ jako radikální alternativa pro venkov na západním Slovensku a ve středovýchodní Evropě 1917–1920. *Forum Historiae*, 2, 20–34.
- Beneš, J. (2017). The Green Cadres and the collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918. *Past & Present*, 236(1), 207-241. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtx028>
- Blobaum, R. (2017). *A Minor Apocalypse: Warsaw During the First World War*. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9781501705236.001.0001>
- Bodó, B. (2023). The rich and the (in)famous: Social conflicts and paramilitary violence in Hungary during the Counterrevolution, 1921-1923. In T. Balkelis & A. Griffante (Eds.), *The Shaken Lands: Violence and the Crisis of Governance in East Central Europe, 1914-1923* (pp. 136-160). Academic Studies Press.
- Borodziej, W. & Górny, M. (2021). *Forgotten Wars: Central and Eastern Europe, 1912–1916*, Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108938495>
- Borodziej W. & Górny M. (2020). Arbeiterprotest und Volksjustiz. Ostmitteleuropa im Übergang vom Großen Krieg zum Bürgerkrieg. In J. Böhler, W. Borodziej & J. von Puttkamer (Eds.), *Dimensionen der Gewalt. Ostmitteleuropa zwischen Weltkrieg und Bürgerkrieg 1918-1921* (pp. 110-140). Metropol Verlag.
- Borodziej, W., Górny, M., & Kwiatkowski, P. T. (2018). *11.11.1918. Niepodległość i pamięć w Europie Środkowej*. Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury.



- Borzęcki, J. (1999). Issues of language and national identity in the population censuses of the Polish-Russian borderlands: Reexaminations and comments. *The Polish Review*, 44(1), 29-46.
- Böhler, J. (2018). *Civil War in Central Europe: The Reconstruction of Poland*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198794486.001.0001>
- Böhler, J., Konrád, O., & Kučera, R. (Eds.) (2021). *In the Shadow of the Great War: Physical Violence in East-Central Europe, 1917-1923*. Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2tsxj6g>
- Brix, E. (1981). *Die Umgangssprachen in Altösterreich zwischen Agitation und Assimilation. Die Sprachenstatistik in den zisleithanischen Volkszählung 1880 bis 1910*. Böhlau Verlag.
- Chernev, B. (2017). *Twilight of Empire: The Brest-Litovsk Conference and the Remaking of East-Central Europe, 1917–1918*. University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487513344>
- Corrsin, S. D. (1998). Literacy rates and questions of language, faith and ethnic identity in population censuses in the partitioned Polish lands and interwar Poland (1880s-1930s). *The Polish Review*, 43(2), 131-160.
- Egry, G. (2021). The leftover empire? Imperial legacies and statehood in the successor states of Austria-Hungary. In T. Pudłocki & K. Ruszała (Eds.), *Postwar Continuity and New Challenges in Central Europe, 1918–1923: The War That Never Ended* (pp. 81-102). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003185017-8>
- Egry, G. (2022). Nationale Selbstbestimmung – ohne Nationen? Territoriale Neugliederung und nationalstaatliche Legitimation in Westungarn/Burgenland 1918-1922. In J. O. Schmitt & R. Stauber (Eds.), *Frieden durch Volksabstimmungen? Selbstbestimmungsrecht und Gebietsreferenden nach den Ersten Weltkrieg* (pp. 221-247). Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.3919369.11>
- Frankl, M. & Szabó, M. (2015). *Budování státu bez antisemitismu? Násilí, diskurz lojality a vznik Československa (Židé – dějiny – paměť, vol. 2)*. Nakladatelství Lidové Noviny.
- Gerwarth, R. (2016). *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923*. Allen Lane.
- Gerwarth, R. (2022). An age of revolutions: Eastern and Central Europe at the end of the First World War. In B. Dziewanowski-Stefańczyk & J. Winter (Eds.), *A New Europe, 1918-1923: Instability, Innovation, Recovery* (pp. 19-31). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003266174-4>

- Górny, M. (2020). In search of a 'red'. East Central Europe's responses to the Russian Revolutions. In G. Besier & K. Stokłosa (Eds.), *1917 and the Consequences* (pp. 19-31). Routledge.
- Górny, M. (2022). Oberschlesien und die Grenzen der Selbstbestimmung. In J. O. Schmitt & R. Stauber (Eds.), *Frieden durch Volksabstimmungen? Selbstbestimmungsrecht und Gebietsreferenden nach den Ersten Weltkrieg* (pp. 197-220). Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.3919369.10>
- Göderle, W. (2016). *Zensus und Ethnizität. Zur Herstellung von Wissen über soziale Wirklichkeiten im Habsburgerreich zwischen 1848 und 1910*. Wallstein.
- Hagen, W. W. (2018). *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland 1914–1920*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139025737>
- Handelsman, M. (Ed.) (1932). *Polska w czasie wielkiej wojny (1914–1918), t. 2: Historia społeczna*, Towarzystwo Badania Zagadnień Międzynarodowych.
- Haslinger, P. & von Puttkamer, J. (2007). Staatsmacht, Minderheit, Loyalität – konzeptionelle Grundlagen am Beispiel Ostmittel- und Südosteuropas in der Zwischenkriegszeit. In P. Haslinger & J. von Puttkamer (Eds.), *Staat, Loyalität und Minderheiten in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa 1918-1941* (pp. 1-16). R. Oldenbourg Verlag.
- von Hehn, J. (1977). Der baltische Freiheitskrieg – Umriss und Probleme. In J. von Hehn, H. von Rimscha, & H. Weiss (Eds.), *Von den baltischen Provinzen zu den baltischen Staaten. Beiträge zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Republiken Estland und Lettland 1918–1920* (pp. 1-42). Herder Institut.
- Hein-Kircher, H. & Kailitz, S. (2022). Verflochtene Herausforderungen politischer und gesellschaftlicher Demokratisierung: Ostmitteleuropas Demokratien zwischen den Kriegen. In H. Hein-Kircher & S. Kailitz. (Eds.), *Verflochtene Herausforderungen politischer und gesellschaftlicher Demokratisierung. Ostmitteleuropas Demokratien zwischen den Kriegen* (pp. 1-19). Herder Institut.
- Herb, G. H. (1997). *Under the Map of Germany: Nationalism and Propaganda 1918–1945*. Routledge
- Holquist, P. (2003). *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis 1914-1921*. Harvard University Press.
- Judson, P. M. (2016). *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674969346>
- Jureit, U. (2012). *Das Ordnen von Räumen. Territorium und Lebensraum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Hamburger Edition.

- King, J. (2002). *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691186382>
- Korduba, M. (1919). *Territorium und Bevölkerung der Ukraine (Ein geographisch-statistischer Beitrag)*. Wistnyk Żytia.
- Krzywicki, L. (1923). *Rozbiór krytyczny wyników spisu. Tablice. Kartogramy; Spis ludności i zwierząt gospodarskich z dnia 30 września 1921 roku. Wyniki tymczasowe*. Główny Urząd Statystyczny.
- Kučera, R. (2016). *Rationed Life: Science, Everyday Life and Working-Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands 1914-1918*. Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj7gzw>
- Kuldkepp, M. (2023). Scandinavian volunteers as perpetrators of violence and crime in the Estonian War of Independence. In T. Balkelis & A. Griffante (Eds.), *The Shaken Lands: Violence and the Crisis of Governance in East Central Europe, 1914-1923* (pp. 103-134) Academic Studies Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9798887191744-006>
- Kuzmany, B. (2024). *Vom Umgang mit nationaler Vielfalt. Eine Geschichte der nicht-territorialen Autonomie in Europa*. De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111320830>
- Labbé, M. (2019). *La nationalité, une histoire de chiffres. Politique et statistiques en Europe centrale (1848-1919)*. Les Presses de Sciences Po. <https://doi.org/10.3917/scpo.labbe.2019.01>
- Leidinger, H. (2020). Systematization of hatred: Dangers of escalation and genocidal violence in Habsburg warfare, 1914-1918. In C. Pschichholz (Ed.), *The First World War as a Caesura? Demographic Concepts, Population Policy, and Genocide in the Late Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg Spheres* (pp. 125-134). Duncker & Humblot. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1zvc7qq.10>
- Leonhard, J. (2022). Imperial collapse, state-building and attempts at stabilisation: East Central Europe after the Great War. In B. Dziewanowski-Stefańczyk & J. Winter (Eds.), *A New Europe, 1918-1923: Instability, Innovation, Recovery* (pp. 7-18). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003266174-3>
- Lieven, D. (2015). *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia*. Allen Lane.
- Liulevicius, V. J. (2000). *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511497186>

- Lohr, E. (2001). The Russian army and the Jews: Mass deportations, hostages, and violence during World War I. *The Russian Review*, 60(3), 404–419. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0036-0341.00177>
- Mačiulis, D. & Staliūnas, D. (2015). *Lithuanian Nationalism and Vilnius Question, 1883-1940*. Herder Institut.
- Petronis, V. (2023). The evolution of wartime criminality in Lithuania, 1914-1920. In T. Balkelis & A. Griffante (Eds.), *The Shaken Lands: Violence and the Crisis of Governance in East Central Europe, 1914-1923* (pp. 15-40). Academic Studies Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9798887191744-003>
- Priedite, A. (2004). Latvian refugees and the Latvian nation state during and after World War One. In N. Baron & P. Gatrell (Eds.), *Homelands: War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia, 1918-1924* (pp. 35-52). Anthem Press.
- Prusin, A. V. (2005). *Nationalizing a Borderland. War, Ethnicity and Anti-Jewish Violence in East Galicia, 1914–1920*. Alabama University Press.
- Prusin, A. (2010). *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870-1992*. Oxford University Press.
- von Rauch, G. (1970). Die nationale Frage in den russischen Ostseeprovinzen im 19. Jahrhundert. In *Der Ostseeraum im Blickfeld der deutschen Geschichte* (Studien zum Deutschtum im Osten, H. 6) (pp. 165-181). Böhlau.
- Richter, K. (2020). *Fragmentation in East Central Europe Poland and the Baltics: 1915–29*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198843559.001.0001>
- Romer, E. (1923). The population of Poland according to the census of 1921. *Geographical Review*, 13(3), 398-412. <https://doi.org/10.2307/208278>
- Rosenthal, L. & Rodic, V. (2015). A storm before the Great Storm: New faces of a distinctly twentieth-century nationalism. In L. Rosenthal & V. Rodic (Eds.), *The New Nationalism and the First World War* (pp. 1-18). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137462787\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137462787_1)
- Roshwald, A. (2001). *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, 1914-1923*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203187722>
- Rozenblit, M. L. (2001). *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195134650.001.0001>
- Sierakowska, K. (2015). *Śmierć – wygnanie – głód w dokumentach osobistych. Ziemia polskie w latach Wielkiej Wojny 1914-1918*. Instytut Historii PAN.

- Smalančuk, A. (2019) The 1917 Russian Revolution and Belarusian National Movement. In Ł. Adamski & B. Gajos (Eds.), *Circles of the Russian Revolution: Internal and International Consequences of the Year 1917 in Russia* (pp. 94-108). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429427329-7>
- Surman J. (2018). *Universities in Imperial Austria, 1848-1918: A Social History of a Multilingual Space*. Purdue University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2x00vh0>
- Szeghy-Gayer, V. (2019). Mešťanostovia na rázcestí. Stratégie, rozhodnutia a adaptácie najvyšších predstaviteľov miest na nové politické pomery po roku 1918. In A. Hudek, P. Šoltés, P. & collective (Eds.) *Elity a kontraelity na Slovensku v 19. a 20. storočí. Kontinuity a discontinuity* (pp. 334-360). VEDA.
- Szívós, E., Surman, J., Beneš, J., Medved, M., Scheer, T., Healy, M., & Judson, P. M. (2019) Debate on Pieter M. Judson's *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. *East Central Europe*, 46(2-3), 343–384. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763308-04602009>
- Tolkatsch, D. (2016). Lokale Ordnungsentwürfe am Übergang vom Russischen Reich zur Sowjetmacht: Bauernaufstände und Dorfrepubliken in der Ukraine, 1917-1921. In T. Buchen & F. 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* (pp. 93-112). Epubli.
- Tomaszewski J. (1998). Spisy ludności w Czechosłowacji w 1921 i 1930 r. jako źródło do badania stosunków narodowościowych. *Slezský sborník* 96(2), 95-105.
- Verhey J. (2004). *The Spirit of 1914. Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wallis, B. C. (1916). Distribution of nationalities in Hungary. *The Geographical Journal*, 47(3), 177-187. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1779298>
- Wittschell, L. (1926). *Die völkischen Verhältnisse in Masuren und dem südlichen Ermland*. L. Friederichsen
- Zahra, T. (2006). “Each nation only cares for its own”: Empire, nation, and child welfare activism in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1918. *The American Historical Review*, 111, 1378-1402. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.5.1378>
- Zahra, T. (2008). *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948*. Cornell University Press.