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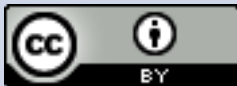
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Book Review: The Shaken Lands: Violence and the Crisis of Governance in East Central Europe, 1914–1923

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*The Shaken Lands: Violence and the Crisis of Governance in
East Central Europe, 1914–1923*

Edited by Tomas Balkelis and Andrea Griffante

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That – at least in Central and Eastern Europe – the ‘Great War’ did not end in November 1918 but rather continued and evolved into a violent carnage over the succession of three empires (often described as the ‘Greater War’) is by now largely established among historians. In recent years, the study of this period has produced some of the most dynamic and productive scholarship on violence, war, empire, nation, and other aspects central not only to this moment in history. The volume edited by Tomas Balkelis and Andrea Griffante contributes greatly to this recent

scholarship, bringing together a series of detailed case studies that are informed by conceptual questions and theories. Historians have debated the causes of violence in the supposed aftermath of the First World War, with explanations ranging from the brutalisation of soldiers during the war, the supposedly fundamental nature of the conflicts between national groups or between revolution and counterrevolution, to the blurring of lines between civilians and combatants. The contributions in this volume centre on “how the Great War transformed itself into a ‘Greater War’ by focusing on the relationship between violence and the crisis of state governance” (p. 1). This crucial perspective, while building on much previous scholarship, centres the actors, particularly the perpetrators of violence, in a variety of settings.

In his chapter on wartime criminality in Lithuania, Vytautas Petronis analyses the phenomenon of “banditry”, an “integral part of the overall violence during WW1” (p. 15) which has hitherto not received much attention, despite it being crucial in the experience of many civilians and soldiers alike, especially in rural areas of Eastern and Central Europe. Closely connected to this, Vasilijus Safronovas, Vyngantas Vareikis, and Hektoras Vitkus study civilians’ experiences of violence in the brutally contested Russian-German borderlands. They show how the categories of civilians and soldiers, victims and perpetrators fell apart in the mayhem of the First World War as localities repeatedly changed hands. Crucially, they also analyse the interpretation of violence and plunder during the war and in its aftermath, showing how “the victim was depicted in national terms; the violent experiences were narrated as the experiences of the whole community” (p. 54), highlighting the centrality of these experiences of violence in imagining the newly constituted (national) communities after the war.

While large-scale violence against civilians was one of the distinctive features of the ‘Greater War’, it was Jewish communities that were particularly targeted throughout the region. In his chapter, Darius Staliūnas analyses the 1919/20 military pogroms in Lithuania, perpetrated by the army of a state which – at least nominally – granted full rights to Jews, including having Jewish representation in government. He argues that the violence was “characterized by the symbolic elimination of Jews from the new political body” (p. 86), thereby pointing to parallels between the relatively isolated cases of pogroms in Lithuania and the much broader wave of the murder of Jews in the wider region.

In their three contributions, Mart Kuldkepp, Béla Bodó, and Jochen Böhrer centre on paramilitary perpetrators of violence in three different settings: Scandinavian volunteers in Estonia; Freikorps, civic, and student militias in Hungary; and Polish paramilitaries in the contested Western borderlands. All three highlight the contingency and contextual nature of

the violence and its perpetrators by exploring the fighters' background and motivations, their relations with state authorities, their ideology and decisions of whom to target. Such detailed studies are of great importance, not only for our understanding of the dynamics of violence and perpetrators' motivations, but also because they challenge established categories of analysis, which often revolve around nation states, governments, and communities, highlighting the complexities of this 'Greater War'.

Maciej Górny then proposes another possibility for reading the events: rather than looking at specific regions or social groups, he takes the railways as sites of and instruments in the violence of the period. They, he argues, "reflect the wider picture of the bloodlands in miniature" (p. 207). This approach is not only extremely productive given the centrality of the railways in warfare, economics, and in the daily lives of soldiers and civilians alike, but it should serve as an impulse to move our perspective away from supposedly 'natural' categories to new angles.

Finally, Julia Eichenberg re-approaches the 'big' questions at the centre of studying the 'Greater War', asking whether we can find explanations for this violence through a comparative lens. The chapter centres on structural aspects (such as the state and the role or absence of a monopoly on violence), the identities and ideologies of the actors involved, and on the practices of violence and what they meant to perpetrators, victims, and observers. Clearly, such comparative approaches allow for a deeper understanding of the wars that followed the First World War – and arguably other settings of violence – as evidenced by the chapters collected in this volume. Analysing this brutal period in European history, whether in comparative form, through local case studies, or in broad strokes will remain a dynamic field of historical enquiry – not least because of the events' ramifications for the later history of the twentieth century and for their centrality in shaping collective imaginations about the past. This volume and its chapters make a vitally important contribution to this field.

Reference

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